“MY LOGO IS BRANDED ON YOUR SKIN”: THE WU-TANG CLAN, AUTHENTICITY, BLACK MASCULINITY, AND THE RAP MUSIC INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT

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The rap group, the Wu-Tang Clan came out of a turbulent period of time in both the rap music industry and American society in the early 1990s. Lawsuits over sampling in rap music forced producers to rethink the ways they made music while crack cocaine and the War on Drugs wreaked havoc in urban communities across the nation, as it did in the Clan's home borough of Staten Island, New York. Before the formation of the group, Gary "GZA" Grice, had managed to land a recording contract as a solo artist, but his marketing was mismanaged and his career stagnated. He returned in 1992 as one of the nine member collective, who billed themselves as kung fu movie buffs melding low-fi, eerie productions with realistic raps about ghetto life. Drawing from the vibrant underground rap scene of New York City in the 1970s and 1980s, Brooklyn's rich African American chess tradition, the teachings of the Five Percenters, and the cult following for Hong Kong action cinema, the Clan became a huge hit across the country. Each member fashioned a unique masculine identity for himself, bolstering their hardcore underground image while pushing the boundaries of acceptable expressions of manhood in rap music. Their avant-garde approach and business acumen turned the group into 'underground superstars' who sold millions of records worldwide. Despite their success as a multinational corporation, the Clan still managed to maintain their authentic image as underground devotees from the tough streets of Staten Island.

For my family and friends.

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PREFACE

This project began as a quest to understand why the Wu-Tang Clan became multimillion record-selling, global icons. For the most part, this remains a central focus. I did not become truly familiar with the Wu-Tang Clan's music until around 2008, when I purchased a used copy of *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)*. I was a sophomore at Central Michigan University at the time, and the album soon became my soundtrack for whenever I needed to get into a focused state of mind. I had to pay close attention to the lyrics to sort out the bombardment of references and slang being thrown into each verse. I discovered a new layer to RZA's production upon every listen, which left me in awe of the intricacy with which he assembled his beats. I was hooked. I purchased the first wave of Wu solo projects, the group's second album *Wu-Tang Forever*, and continued to expand my collection of Wu-Tang music exponentially each year.

Thus, I approached my initial research from the perspective of a fan; one who did not question the artistic merits of the Clan's work and their significance to the history of rap music. It took time to modify some of my preconceived notions about the Clan, but once I came to appreciate them as businessmen as much as artists, it became much easier for me to view them critically. I still hold that the Wu-Tang Clan pushed the artistic boundaries of rap to new frontiers, but their ability to sell themselves to the listening public and build a powerful multinational brand from scratch was perhaps their more enduring legacy.

With this in mind, the ensuing narrative primarily documents a shift in how rap music was marketed. No doubt, the artistry of their music cannot be discarded as

irrelevant to their success, and I do elaborate upon why their sound was desirable. However, this does not diminish the Clan's innovations in marketing such a sound as 'authentic' cultural expression. In the rap music industry of the early 1990s, marketing authenticity increasingly became an exercise in selling racialized masculinity. To craft their own public masculine identities, the members of the Clan drew from historical sources of manly virtues available to African Americans in New York City—ranging from Hong Kong action cinema, to chess, mobsters, hip hop, and self-owned business ventures.

The story told here is about cultural producers and consumers. While my work focuses on how the Clan appropriated culture, packaged it, and marketed it, I also touch upon the socio-political context and consumption trends that help explain the widespread appeal of their music. I approach the Clan from the perspective of a cultural historian, examining the process whereby culture becomes commodity. In this case, the music industry served as the backdrop for the transformation of culture into a commercially viable brand identity. In the complicated world of entertainment, the Wu-Tang Clan sat in a strange middle ground. They bridged the Afrocentric eclecticism of New York's Native Tongues rap collective and the West Coast's grim spectacle of ghetto violence. "Keeping it real" was their slogan. It exuded neither optimism nor nihilism, but authenticity.

Authenticity, certainly, is a slippery term negotiated between an artist and their audience. What follows is not an attempt to measure the Clan's authenticity, but to examine the ways they constructed an image of authenticity by stringing together various strands of culture and portraying them in a new light. Much like the process of digital sampling that characterized rap music production by the early 1990s, the Clan

appropriated snippets of useful cultural products, re-contextualized their meaning, and made the past relevant (and profitable) in the present. In their group image, the Wu-Tang Clan reflected the desires and anxieties of many young American consumers in the postmodern age: the pursuit of authenticity in a world of deceptive or misinformed media; the craving for non-stereotypical portrayals of lower class black men in the public sphere; and the search for a sense of humanity in a culture fixated upon computerized efficiency.

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INTRODUCTION

Inside the pavilion at the National Orange Events Center in San Bernadino, California, a crowd made up of dehydrated, intoxicated, and adrenaline-charged young people eagerly awaited some kind of sign. It was late Saturday on an oppressively hot July 17th day at the first Rock the Bells Festival in 2004. Up to this point, the long lines, technical difficulties, and fights plaguing the event had been offset by the creative energy of the all-star lineup of rappers, and DJs. While waiting for the headline act, however, the crowd grew irritated and rowdy, adding to the already high level of anxiety among the concert organizers. Many of those in attendance came solely to see this beloved group perform as a complete unit, for it had been a decade since this last occurred. People had come from thousands of miles away and the delayed start time indicated that perhaps they had made this sacrifice only to witness another botched reunion for which the group had become infamous.

Standing in front of a large black curtain on the stage, several hype men occupied the noticeably restless audience with generic call-and-response chants. The leader of the chants, MTV News host Sway, called out to the crowd to "throw your muthafuckin' double-ues [W's] in the air for the realest crew in hip hop that kept it hip hop." Despite the transparency of Sway's stalling tactic, his request was complied with almost unanimously. As chants of "WU, TANG, WU, TANG," resound, each pair of hands are raised in the air, palms face outward with interlocked thumbs, and the remaining fingers of both hands rest side by side to form a shape resembling the iconic 'W' logo.[1]

Over the sound system, a voice is heard saying "Shaolin shadowboxing, and the Wu-Tang sword style…" from the 1983 Shaw Brothers martial arts film, *Shaolin and Wu Tang*. These words might ring meaningless were it not for the RZA, who sampled this dialogue to kick off the first song on their famous 1993 debut album, *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)*. Upon hearing this snippet of speech, the crowd erupts in screams, affirming how much this album meant to them. As soon as the curtains part, revealing all nine original members of the Wu-Tang Clan along with the unofficial tenth member, Cappadonna (Darryl Hill), the close affiliate and concert DJ, Mathematics (Ronald Bean), and a cast of supporting figures in the background, the audience goes wild.[2]

The image of the Clan onstage is a visual representation of the music—managed mayhem.[3] There are no discernible choreographed moves, each member judges for himself when to add backing vocals to emphasize certain words or phrases, Mathematics keeps the show moving at a frenetic pace by switching songs after one or two verses, and each member wears a different outfit to display their individual taste. All of this takes place underneath a massive 'W' logo that looms above the stage, behind the Clan; the 'W' is what brings order to the chaos. In essence, they are performing the 'W'. The 'W' represents "the realest crew in hip hop." The ability of the Clan to associate their brand with realness by performing authentic identities was perhaps their greatest asset.

I deconstruct these collective and individual masculine identities, because they were so crucial to the success of their music and brand. I do this by uncovering the deep cultural reservoirs from which the Clan assembled their image. Tracing the multiple strands of historical memory in their marketing strategy lends greater understanding to how artists like the Clan drew from cultural traditions, new and old, to fashion unique

identities in the rap music industry. In essence, the Clan performed authenticity by assembling a bricolage brand identity based on dynamic threads of African American culture in New York City during the 1970s and 1980s. Stated otherwise, the group drew from commercial and underground rap, Hong Kong action cinema, Five Percenter ideology, mafia films, and chess culture to fashion a male-centered "Wu-world" that fans could inhabit whether they were able to crack the group's coded language or not.[4] A secondary intention of mine is to contribute to the growing body of scholarly literature that explicates further the connections between the business of rap music and the culture of hip hop.[5] Typically, these spheres are portrayed as warring entities, with the culture in a constant struggle to avoid the co-optation efforts of business interests. In reality, the boundaries between culture and commercialism in hip hop were much more fluid, if not completely intertwined from the start.

In *The Conquest of Cool: Hip Consumerism*, Thomas Frank documents the development of hip consumerism in the U.S. as a countercultural resistance against the outdated advertising techniques of Madison Avenue businessmen in the 1940s and 1950s. In doing so, he upset the generally held notion that the counterculture was the complete antithesis of corporate America, when, in fact, there was considerable overlap. However, a significant limitation to Frank's analysis was his lack of engagement with issues of race, class, and gender in American business culture. My narrative, on the other hand, places these categories of analysis in the very center. Marketing takes advantage of very specific texts that appeal to a very specific demographic, or it can take advantage of multiple texts that appeal to a variety of people for a variety of reasons. Simply put, marketing is too wrapped up in racial, class, and gendered scripts to ignore them.

I argue that the Wu-Tang Clan sold themselves to hip consumers within the rap music industry by marketing themselves as underground artists—a resistive counterculture within the genre. Underground rappers supposedly refused to compromise their style or their message to appease mainstream audience, whereas commercial artists did just the opposite. Rappers identifying with the underground often railed against the bureaucratized structure of major recording labels, especially their tendency to standardize and rationalize the production of music to reach a broad audience. However, many of these artists still quantified their success through the number of albums they sold or the amount of people they were able to draw at concerts. They were 'underground' because they did not have corporate financial backing to launch advertising campaigns and widely distribute their records, but they still measured their influence in terms of the mainstream.

Success as a self-proclaimed underground artist, then, was a testament to one's sincere dedication to their craft, or, in other words, their authenticity. Rappers who could gain a following through their own entrepreneurial initiative and artistic talent achieved the "American Dream" without playing by the rules of those in charge (and often, through a critique of traditional notions of the American Dream). This ethic was closely tied to the ideal male gender role for American men as self-made and breadwinners. Thus, their subversion of the recording industry rarely upset the fundamental structure of the business, but it appealed to those who shared a similar disdain for the way this seemingly unchangeable structure operated and read their subversion as an assertion of manhood. Following the failure of RZA and GZA to make it as mainstream rap artists, the Wu-Tang Clan aligned themselves with this masculine underground sentiment,

achieving commercial and corporate success in the process. In doing so, they almost completely blurred the lines between underground and mainstream rap, demonstrating the mutual reliance each approach had on the functioning of capitalism.

Brief Overview of the Clan

Formed in late 1992, Wu-Tang Clan originally consisted of nine MCs but added a tenth member, Ronald Bean (aka Cappadonna) in 1995.[6] Cousins Robert Diggs (aka RZA—pronounced 'Rizza': \'ri-zə\), Gary Grice (aka GZA—pronounced 'Jizza': \'ji-zə\), and Russell Jones (aka Ol' Dirty Bastard) joined up with childhood and teenage friends Dennis Coles (aka Ghostface Killah—taken from the character Ghostface Killer from the film *The Mystery of Chessboxing*), Clifford Smith (aka Method Man), Jason Hunter (Inspectah Deck—a derivative of 'Inspector' Deck), Corey Woods (aka Raekwon the Chef), Lamont Hawkins (U-God—pronounced \'yü gȯd\), and Jamal Turner (Masta Killa—a derivative of Master Killer, taken from the motion picture of the same name). The Clan made a splash in the music industry when they released a single called "Protect Ya Neck," which featured eight of the nine MCs rapping over a lo-fi beat.[7] The single was circulated first as a tape, then a 12" record; the Clan and their friends personally delivered the single to hip hop and college radio stations in New York City, Rhode Island, Maryland, and Virginia, in addition to shopping it to record labels. Their plan was to obtain a record deal as a group, but allow their individual members to sign solo contracts with any label.

Steve Rifkind of the independent label, Loud Records (distributed by RCA), agreed to the Clan's terms and released the group's first album, *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)*, on November 9, 1993. The album was lauded by critics as an instant classic. A review appearing in the April 7, 1994, issue of *Rolling Stone* celebrated it as an achievement for "underground rap," the kind of music, "you won't find creeping up the Billboard charts but you will hear booming out of Jeep stereos in all the right neighborhoods."[8] However, *Enter the Wu-Tang* did creep up the Billboard charts, reaching number forty-one on the list of the top 200 albums in the country. Although this position was not extremely high on the charts, the fact that the album stayed in the top 200 for forty-three weeks indicated there was significant pop appeal for the group's underground sounds.[9] Bolstered by the March 1994 release of a "clean" version of the album that cut out potentially offensive language, it easily sold over one million copies by 1996.[10] RZA oversaw the editing of the original album so that they could, in the words of an executive at RCA, "satisfy the masses without tampering with the integrity of the music."[11] Wu-Tang executive producer, Oli 'Power' Grant, recalled that the Clan "had a level of creativity that was profitable."[12] And to maximize this profit, Grant understood that a brand associated with black urban youth had to "sell different ways to different sets of people to reach middle America.[13] Clearly, the Clan were consciously tapping into pop audiences while claiming allegiance to the 'realness' of the underground scene.

Several of the most prominent individual members were quickly signed by major record labels for solo deals, while the ones believed to have less market appeal struggled to find suitors. The first wave of Wu-Tang solo records were released from 1994-1996, and each were considered commercial and critical successes, though the former was not

to the level the group expected. Method Man's album *Tical* reached number four on the Billboard 200, Ol' Dirty Bastard's *Return to the 36 Chambers: the Dirty Version* made it to number seven, Raekwon's *Only Built for Cuban Linx…* peaked at number four, GZA/Genius' *Liquid Swords* just cracked the top ten at number nine, while Ghostface Killah's *Ironman* made it all the way to number two.[14] Only with the release of the group's second studio album on the third of June in 1997 did the Clan achieve a number one record on the Billboard charts. The double LP, *Wu-Tang Forever*, departed significantly from the sound of the Clan's earlier work, incorporating fewer samples in favor of keyboard-created orchestral arrangements composed by RZA. In response to both RZA's newfound interest in learning music theory as well as the high price tag necessary to clear samples because of transformations in U.S. copyright law, this change signaled the Clan's departure from their sonic formula.

Moreover, the content of the album was directed at a younger audience. On *Enter the Wu-Tang*, they were rowdy and hungry for fame so their music appealed to adolescents of a similar mindset; on *Wu-Tang Forever*, they had achieved their goals, and they felt inspired to instruct a younger generation on how to do the same. Even more importantly, the Clan hoped to market themselves to a youth demographic in order to make lifetime fans. Walt Disney revolutionized strategic marketing to children in the 1930s by creating a "Disney Universe" that crossed national borders through culturally meaningful products and aggressive merchandising.[15] RZA recalled consciously trying to imitate Disney's approach, by making the Wu-Tang logo like "the Mickey Mouse ears."[16] On the outro of the track "Bells of War" from *Wu-Tang Forever*, RZA explicitly stated "Yo Shorty, you don't even gotta go to summer school, pick up the Wu-Tang double CD

and you'll get all the education you need this year."[17] Therefore, the sound and content of *Wu-Tang Forever* reflected the Clan's emphasis on cultivating a 'Wu-Tang Universe' that was kid-friendly.

RZA's production never recaptured the gritty amateurism of his earlier work, he no longer oversaw production for the other members' solo albums, their concerts rarely boasted a full lineup, and the market was inundated with projects from Wu-Tang affiliates—such as Sunz of Man and Killer Army—who received little acclaim from critics and fans alike. Perhaps more importantly, the Clan's business model splintered. Only a couple months into the concert tour in support of *Wu-Tang Forever*, internal arguments over the direction of the group brought the tour to an abrupt end. RZA's brother, Mitchell Diggs (aka Divine), noted that individuals "went out and hired their own lawyers and their own accountants and their own agents."[18] This, in effect, marked a major turning point in how the Wu-Tang Clan marketed their brand. Their connections to the underground were becoming tenuous; they were now international superstars with hits on pop music charts while receiving nominations and even awards at the Grammy's, the pinnacle of pop music achievement.

Since then, the group has faced many challenges. Ghostface Killah went on to enjoy the most commercially successful career, releasing ten solo albums between 1996 and 2013. Despite spending four months in jail in 1999 stemming from an attempted robbery charge, Ghostface's second studio album *Supreme Clientele*, was a major success commercially and critically.[19] Though he often clashed with his label, Def Jam, Method Man also went on to have a successful solo career, which, then, allowed him to act, write, and produce television and movies. GZA maintained a consistent and devoted following,

as did Inspectah Deck on a much smaller scale. Raekwon never repeated the success of *Only Built for Cuban Linx…* and he became the most vocal critic of RZA's changing approach to Wu-Tang's sound and business affairs in the late 1990s. Masta Killa and Cappadonna garnered mild acclaim for their solo work, yet largely flew under the radar when not working within the Clan. In 2008, U-God sued Wu-Tang Music Group over unpaid salaries as his own production company struggled to find its feet.[20] Tragically, Ol' Dirty Bastard died from a drug overdose in 2004 after struggling with addiction for years. In the decade prior, he had been shot three times, arrested over a dozen times, and spent almost two years in federal prison, yet, he sustained a commercially viable career throughout.

The clothing line launched by the Clan in 1995, Wu Wear, declined after 1999. Under the direction of Oli 'Power' Grant, Wu Wear began as a side business to exploit the popularity of the Wu-Tang logo, but it quickly expanded to meet demand. They controlled the design and manufacture of the clothing, even opening retail stores in Staten Island, Manhattan, Philadelphia, Virginia, and Atlanta.[21] Although it eventually folded, the Wu Wear enterprise was but one facet of a larger corporate plan to diversify the Wu-Tang brand into various business ventures. On top of the clothing, Wu-Tang Corp. tried to capitalize on the group's success as rappers by releasing products such as the "Wu-Tang: Shaolin Style" video game and the "Nine Rings of Wu-Tang" comic book series. Wu-Tang Corp. was the umbrella organization for over a dozen subsidiaries including Wu-Tang Management, Wu-Tang Productions, Wu-Tang Records, Wu Manufacturing Company, Wu-Tang Publishing, as well as a handful of record labels and other various enterprises.[22]

In August 1999, the FBI began compiling a file on the Wu-Tang Clan, describing the "legitimate business [sic] operated by the WTC" as fronts for a criminal organization involved in weapons trafficking, money laundering, gang violence, and even murder.[23] None of these allegations ever materialized into criminal charges, but—notwithstanding the role of racial profiling in the investigation—they are suggestive of the difficulties the Clan experienced in overseeing the details of their bloated bureaucratic corporation. Their brand was stretched thin by market saturation and a change in how some fans perceived the Clan's unabashedly corporate capitalist approach. The Clan's two post-ODB albums, *The W* (2000) and *Iron Flag* (2001), did respectably on the charts, but were criticized from within the group and from without as significant departures from their underground roots. Based upon this confluence of events, cries of "sell out" from fans pressured the Clan to reinvent their brand image to recapture their image of authenticity. It is within this context of brand reinvention—the need to keep watch over the "integrity of the 'W'" so as to establish Wu-Tang as a "heritage brand"—that research for my project began.[24] In 2000, Mitchell 'Divine' Diggs broke down the corporate strategy for Wu-Tang in the new millennium,

> RZA and other members of the family basically [focus] on constantly reinventing and finding new ways to market the logo. Because it's a logo at the end of the day. We do have a lot of praise for the artist, but the artist is part of a brand. And the brand must be allowed to fly like the United States flag. You know, we go through different presidents and different administrations but the logo remains the same. This is the same thing.[25]

This study concentrates on the Wu-Tang Clan's career prior to *Wu-Tang Forever* in order to zero in on the group's marketing strategy during RZA's self-described "Five-Year Plan," in which each member followed the marketing guidelines of the Wu-Tang Corp. executive board.[26] This strategy involved cultivating authentic identities by drawing upon

historically rooted sources of masculinity from African American culture in New York City.

Sources

I rely heavily on interviews in print, audio, and video format from members within the Clan, but also from close affiliates in order to corroborate details. RZA's two book-length publications (ghostwritten by Chris Norris), *The Wu-Tang Manual* (2005) and *The Tao of Wu* (2009) offer useful insider viewpoints and a surprisingly accurate chronology of events in RZA's career.[27] However, these sources must be read as documents intended to establish firm links between Wu-Tang and ghetto authenticity. In turn, this ensured the Clan secured a place in the historical narrative of hip hop culture and rap music on their own terms. Interviews with Clan members, especially those conducted later in their careers, must also be scrutinized with the understanding that they are a type of publicity. The Clan used interviews as a way to assert their authenticity as artists and promote a certain image or message. This does not mean they were dishonest, but there were numerous spiritual, cultural, and (mostly) business motives behind the information each individual provided. Since the overriding force that united each member of the Clan was the desire to create a successful and sustainable business, I prioritize these concerns in my analysis of their interviews.

Scholarship

Given the magnitude of the Wu-Tang Clan's influence on the music industry as artists and businessmen, there is a paucity of scholarly works on them. There are a handful of full-length books devoted to the Clan but none were written with a strictly scholarly audience in mind. The most comprehensive work is journalist Alvin Blanco's *The Wu-Tang Clan and RZA: A Trip through Hip Hop's 36 Chambers (Hip Hop in America),* but it reads like an encyclopedic recounting of Wu-Tang's career, avoiding in-depth analysis for the most part.[28] Dan Charnas, also a hip hop journalist, published *The Big Payback: The History of the Business of Hip-Hop* in 2010.[29] This work contains a number of valuable insights into how the Clan conceived of their business model while also detailing the background and rise of Wu Wear, which had yet to be done. However, Charnas' complete omission of footnotes is frustrating, making it difficult to trust his interpretations of the events. The only two biographies on individual members are both written on Ol' Dirty Bastard.[30]

A documentary film billing itself as *Dirty: The Official ODB Biography*, was released under the auspices of Wu-Tang Corp. in 2009.[31] Though it did romanticize ODB's behavior, the documentary provided viewpoints on Dirty and the Clan from family, friends, and other Wu associates that rarely appear in interviews concerning the group. Five years earlier, Gerard Barclay, a Staten Island native, released a Wu documentary that benefitted from his unmatched access to the Clan around the time the Clan formed in 1992.[32] Since filming for the project coincided with ODB's death in the fall of 2004, the second half of *Wu: The Story of the Wu-Tang Clan,* focused heavily on

the moments leading up to and immediately following his passing. However, these films reflect a marked tendency among chroniclers of the Clan to zero in on ODB—easily the most eccentric and visible member—leaving a conspicuous void of analyses about other personalities in the group who had just as much, if not more influence than ODB on the perception and direction of the Clan.[33] My work consciously looks to members other than Ol' Dirty to tell a more complete narrative of the group.

There are only several scholarly articles that critically examine the Wu-Tang Clan, and most were written by contemporary cultural and literary scholars.[34] None of these make an attempt to situate the Clan within historical context in any systematic fashion. My work fills this void in the scholarship by putting cultural history at the forefront of my discussion of the Clan's gendered marketing strategy. By approaching such a contemporary topic from the perspective of an historian, I demonstrate the centrality of historical precedents to the brand image of the Clan. Additionally, using the Clan as an historical lens allows me to unearth relatively uncharted areas of cultural history such as African American chess in New York City, the transformation of collage music initiated by artists using digital samplers, the nuances of the rap recording industry in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and the influence of Hong Kong action cinema on black culture. This not only contributes to scholarship on hip hop culture, but also to the cultural history of New York City from the 1960s-1990s as well as the process of cultural commodification that increasingly characterized marketing schemes in the United States after World War II.

This study grounds itself in scholarship concerned with the relationship between business and consumer culture, focusing especially on how perceptions of 'authenticity'

defined this relationship. Tricia Rose saw "authenticity" in rap music as a code word for "ghetto blackness," using the case of white rapper Vanilla Ice to illustrate her point.[35] Robert Van Winkle (aka Vanilla Ice) scored a major hit with his 1989 single "Ice, Ice, Baby." Ice's label, SBK Records, marketed him as an artist with deep roots in violent black inner city neighborhoods, with the intention of conferring credibility upon him. Considering "Ice, Ice, Baby" told a story of Ice and his friend committing a drive-by shooting and evading the police, it was clear Ice did little to dissuade the public from this story, even thought it was fabricated. The fact that "Ice, Ice, Baby" was the first rap song to reach number one on the Billboard Hot 100 charts irked many in the rap industry (of all races), who decried the exploitation of black culture by inauthentic opportunists. This, Rose argued, was pivotal moment in rap music, causing rappers in the 1990s to become increasingly concerned with demonstrating their 'authentic' connections with ghetto blackness. Although Rose correctly evaluated the importance of 'the ghetto' in affirming one's racial and class identity in rap music, she did not explore the gendered ways in which rappers construct the ghetto. To prove one's authenticity, one's ghetto blackness, often involved proving one's manhood.

Case in point was the Compton-based rap group N.W.A.'s rise to fame in the late 1980s, whom Jeff Chang credits (more so than Vanilla Ice) with "decentering hip-hop from New York forever," (321) and ushering in "hip-hop's obsession with 'The Real'."[36] Made up of former World Class Wreckin' Crew DJs Andre "Dr. Dre" Young and Antoine Carraby (aka DJ Yella), in addition to small-time drug dealer Eric "Eazy-E" Wright, lyricist O'Shea Jackson (aka Ice Cube), producer Mik Lezan (aka Arabian Prince), and later, rapper Lorenzo "MC Ren" Patterson, N.W.A.—an acronym for Niggaz

With Attitude—made a splash in the music industry with their 1987 single, "Boyz-n-the-Hood." In his characteristic high-pitched voice, Eazy-E rapped words written by Ice Cube that mostly depicted over the top scenes of ghetto violence and resistance against authority figures. Intentionally crude and confrontational, the lyrics described beating a woman, getting drunk with friends, killing a drug addict, experiencing police brutality, rioting in prison, and an attempted revenge fantasy against the justice system that involved shooting up a courtroom. With the release of their 1988 album *Straight Outta Compton*, which largely followed the thematic formula of "Boyz-n-the-Hood," N.W.A. established themselves as a nationwide phenomenon and pioneers of 'gangsta rap' (a loose category used to encompass artists who rapped about gang-related topics). Due in large part to their heavy rotation on Yo! MTV Raps, a nationally broadcasted television program dedicated to rap music videos, N.W.A.'s controversial image became a model for rappers around the country. "NWA conflated myth and place," Chang observed, they "made the narratives root themselves on the corner of every 'hood. And now every 'hood could be Compton, everyone had a story to tell."[37]

However, Chang does not thoroughly explain that N.W.A.'s vision of the ghetto described undeniably male-centered activities, even though they were portrayed the essential elements of a holistic ghetto experience. A diversity of women's voices were conspicuously absent from N.W.A's ghetto narratives, as were positive characterizations of women. Nonetheless, this masculine construction of the ghetto resonated with many people. It tapped into Americans' fascination with hypermasculine outlaws who used violence to serve justice, who use women for sex rather than companionship, and who made a living outside the realm of legitimate business. Such characters asserted fiercely

resistive identities to protest the unfair rules governing American society; rules that seemed only to serve the interests of those in power.

bell hooks viewed N.W.A.'s brand of rap music as an extension of values espoused by a society that was a "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy." Using law professor, Duncan Kennedy's characterization of mainstream American values as "individual ([represented by] cowboys), material ([represented by] gangsters), and philistine," hooks convincingly argued that artists such as N.W.A. do not reside "on the margins of what this society is about but at the center."[38] Enterprising artists and executives, seized upon N.W.A's concept—that is, crafting ghetto authenticity through the performance of hypremasculine identities—often reaping massive profits as a result. T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting noted that such "public celebration and commercial trafficking" of black male misogyny and violence came to appear "normal, acceptable, and entertaining."[39]

The Wu-Tang Clan come into focus when viewed from the perspective of gendered authenticity. Some members, such as GZA, respected gangsta rap but wished to take his own art in a different direction, one that more closely adhered to 'authentic' cultural expression. He condemned music that glorified "bitches shakin' they ass, or you just talkin' about goin' out shootin' people for the fun of it, where… there's no story behind what you're sayin'," because when "that shit goes triple platinum" it encourages people to passively accept the messages as common and acceptable.[40] GZA explained that Wu-Tang was different because their lyrics more accurately reflected reality. "We don't glorify all that negativity, we glorify the positiveness, and we come with the realness in our music."[41] GZA believed this method conferred "weight," "depth,"

"substance," to their lyrics, which made them more meaningful to listeners and ensured the Clan's music would not be an ephemeral sensation, but a lasting contribution to the art of rap.[42]

More specific to how GZA viewed authenticity in terms of gender, he denounced male rappers who degraded women for no reason. "I'm not one to say women are ho's or bitches, I'm not down with that. I'm not comin' with that point of view." He continued, "If you grow up thinkin' all women are bitches then you're gonna think your mother's a bitch, and if you thinkin' like that, then you're fucked up."[43] Yet, GZA defended rappers' rights to free speech, attacking critics of gangsta rap who unfairly scapegoated rap music for problems that were endemic to American culture at large. Method Man expressed concern with how rap lyrics can affect young men's perceptions of women, but ultimately concluded that actions were more powerful than words:

> See, little kids don't learn by you tellin' 'em, they learn by example… Like if a little boy sees his moms getting' her ass whipped all the time by his pops, it's either gonna make him not put his hands on women, or it's gonna make him beat the shit out of women. Myself, seein' my pops do that shit, I don't even touch women. That's my word. I'd rather just walk away.[44]

Thus, the Wu-Tang Clan, as a group and as individuals, positioned themselves not in opposition to gangsta rappers' expressions of masculinity, but in conversation with it. Like N.W.A., the Clan used the 'hood as the starting point for how they conceived of "The Real," and this reality was a male-centered space. However, their notion of what constituted authentic masculine "ghetto blackness" did not involve exaggerated tales of committing murders, slapping bitches, and punishing corrupt policemen. It was still a violent, dangerous space, but the Clan claimed to present more realistic ways to negotiate these perils. "We never told anybody to put their shooters down," clarified Method Man,

but to survive in the ghetto, "we utilise tongues instead of guns. We are humble warriors. We come in peace."[45]

Murray Forman's *The 'Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop* provides an extremely useful model for investigating how rappers negotiate authenticity within an art form driven largely by commercial interests. Forman described rappers' obsession with authenticity as a reaction against the process of commercialization that hastened in the late 1980s. He argued, "rap posses continually strive to reaffirm their connections to the 'hood in an attempt to mitigate the negative accusations that they have sold out in the event of commercial or crossover success."[46] This analysis highlighted a crucial tension within rap music relevant to the Wu-Tang Clan: How did artists claiming that they 'keep it real', or that they are representatives of the 'underground' establish and maintain 'hood authenticity? The following pages provide the answer to this question, arguing that one's perceived authenticity was inextricably linked to one's perceived masculinity.

Chapter Outlines

By placing the Wu-Tang Clan's claims of authenticity into the national political context as well as the local context on Staten Island, chapter one attempts to uncover the exigent motivations and influential events that shaped the Clan members' worldviews.

In chapter two, I trace GZA's association with Cold Chillin' Records from around 1988-1991, since this experience was the most important influence on the Clan's image and sound. In the process, the line between commercial rap and underground rap appears

blurred, demonstrating the subjectivity imbedded within the dichotomy. Unlike the image cultivated by the Clan that posed themselves as the antithesis for what the rap music industry stood, they actually adopted basically the same formula for success that major labels prescribed: create a distinct and coherent image, create a logo, hire professional engineers and mixers for the album, release singles with music videos, saturate markets to build buzz and sell records. The Clan's major business innovation, then, was the way in which they marketed themselves as 'underground' artists to garner authenticity; all the while retaining the mainstream appeal that they never lost sight of despite GZA and RZA's disheartening experiences as mainstream artists.

The third chapter deals with the overarching concept binding the Clan's individual members to a cohesive image: martial arts. The Clan adopted martial arts themes in their name, image, sound, and philosophy because of the history of Hong Kong action cinema in New York City theaters in the 1970s and 1980s. Their strategic use of kung fu mostly exploited nostalgic Orientalist enjoyments of the films for African Americans who were drawn to the anti-Hollywood, masculine, non-European themes in the movies when they were younger.

An exploration of the Wu-Tang sound takes place in chapter four, in which RZA's production style is situated within a longer history of sampling and collage music. Then, I analyze the group's most recognizable song, "C.R.E.A.M.," from *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)* to explain the elements that constituted the Wu-Tang sound in more concrete terms.

Chapter five looks at varying demonstrations of public masculinity to survey the Clan's switch from a cohesive group to a loose collection of solo artists. Each member

who branched off to record a solo album following the success of *Enter the Wu-Tang* ended up distinguishing their personal identity from that of the group primarily through their performance of masculinity. Since masculinity conferred authenticity, this was a crucial process, and each member drew from different historical sources of masculine identity.

I zero in on the history of African American chess in New York City in the sixth chapter in order to demonstrate how GZA took advantage of a unique cultural heritage to construct his own public masculinity. The nuances of masculinity, as refracted through the lens of chess, reveals how naturally the game seemed to fit within the context of hip hop culture. Concomitantly, this history shows how the process of cultural commodification took a vibrant culture, boiled it down to basics for mass consumption, and recontextualized its meaning to consumers. I conclude with a brief discussion about the efforts of the Wu-Tang Clan to re-brand themselves for a new generation of fans in the 2010s.

ENDNOTES

ENDNOTES

[1] For a detailed look at the organization of the festival, the event-day problems, and the efforts it took to bring together the entire Wu-Tang Clan, see *Rock the Bells*, directed by Denis Hennelly & Casey Suchan (2006; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2006), DVD. This opening vignette is based on interviews, images, and live reactions captured in the documentary. The film portrays the Wu-Tang Clan as *the* draw for fans attending the festival, and while it is impossible to know the reasoning behind concertgoers' attendance, the high level of publicity concerned with the Clan's reunion, the massive ad campaign for the festival (the posters and flyers featured a massive Wu-Tang logo), as well as the prevalence of Wu-Tang attire and shout outs caught on camera from fans all strongly suggest that the Clan were the main reason for the high turnout. *Wu-Tang Clan: Disciples of the 36 Chambers, Chapter 2,* directed by Christopher Salzgeber (2004; London: 3DD Entertainment, 2004), DVD.

[2] Ibid.; The Wu-Tang Clan consist of the Robert Diggs (aka RZA or Prince Rakeem), Gary Grice (GZA, the Genius), Russell Jones (Ol' Dirty Bastard, Ol' Dirty, ODB), Corey Woods (Raekwon, Rae), Dennis Coles (Ghostface Killah, Ghostface, Ghost), Clifford Smith (Method Man), Jason Hunter (Inspectah Deck), Lamont Hawkins (U-God), and Jamal Turner (Masta Killa). While each member has multiple nicknames not listed here, those in parentheses indicate the names used in this study.

[3] RZA refers to this aesthetic as "organized confusion," borrowing the phrase from the name of the influential Queens rap duo, Organized Konfusion, made up of Prince Po and Pharoahe Monch. RZA with Chris Norris, *The Tao of Wu* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 116.

[4] Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* (Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press, 2004), 69.

[5] For a foundational work in this field, see Murray Forman, *The 'Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002).

[6] MC stands for Master of Ceremony. In the early years of hip hop during the 1970s, DJs were the main draw for hip hop parties. MC's emerged to accompany the DJs, creating chants to involve the crowd or praise the skills of the DJ. As rap music evolved, the terms 'rapper' and 'MC' were somewhat interchangeable, yet to be called an MC, carried a certain amount of cultural capital. It distinguished between rhymesayers who participated heavily in hip hop culture—by engaging in rhyme battles, rapping over loudspeakers at parties, practicing routines with a DJ—from those who did not take rhyming seriously. In short, it was (and continues to be) a marker for authenticity. Yet, to determine whether one is an MC or a rapper, or both, is a needlessly subjective undertaking. For the

purposes of this study, the terms MC and rapper will be used interchangeably, though I try to remain sensitive to the cultural connotations of each.

[7] Lo-fi is shorthand for 'low-fidelity', which refers to the substandard sound quality achieved by sampling at a lower rate.

[8] Toure, "Rap up -- Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers) by Wu-Tang Clan / Enta da Stage by Black Moon / Constipated Monkey by Kurious Jorge," *Rolling Stone*, April 7, 1994.

[9] "Chart History – Billboard 200," artist search "Wu-Tang Clan," *Billboard*, accessed April 12, 2014, http://www.billboard.com/artist/431539/wu-tang-clan/chart?f=305.

[10] For information about the "clean" version of *Enter the Wu-Tang*, see Paul Verna, "Wu-Tang Clan Readies 'Clean' Version of Album," *Billboard*, March 12, 1994. *Enter The Wu-Tang* was certified platinum on May 15, 1995. Searchable Database: "Wu-Tang Clan," under "Gold & Platinum," *RIAA*, 2014, accessed April 11, 2014, http://www.riaa.com/goldandplatinumdata.php?table=SEARCH_RESULTS&artist=Wu-Tang%20Clan&format=ALBUM&go=Search&perPage=50.

[11] Verna, "Clan Readies 'Clean' Version."

[12] Oli 'Power' Grant, interview by Frank the Butcher, "Power of Wu-Tang," *The Butcher's Block*, December 19, 2012, accessed August 22, 2013, http://butchersblocktv.com/2012/12/19/7238/.

[13] Oli 'Power' Grant, interview by Jeff Weiss "Question in the Form of an Answer: Oli 'Power' Grant of the Wu-Tang Clan," *Passion of the Weiss*, February 28, 2011, accessed August 22, 2013, http://passionweiss.com/2011/02/28/question-in-the-form-of-an-answer-oli-power-grant-of-wu-tang-clan/.

[14] "Chart History – Billboard 200," (artist search dependent on the individual), *Billboard*, accessed April 12, 2014, http://www.billboard.com/.

[15] Michael Real, "The Disney Universe: Morality Play," *Mass-Mediated Culture* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973), 44-89.

[16] RZA with Chris Norris, *The Wu-Tang Manual* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 82.

[17] RZA, "Bells of War," *Wu-Tang Forever*, Loud/RCA, June 3, 1997.

[18] Mike Eskenazi, "Interview: Mitchell Diggs, a.k.a. Divine," *Time,* November 16, 2000, accessed August 22, 2013, http://www.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,88545,00.html.

[19] Christopher O'Connor, "Ghostface Killah Says Prison Had Its Benefits," *MTV News*, January 31, 2000, accessed April 13, 2014, http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/620829/ghostface-killah-prison-had-benefits.jhtml.

[20] Allen Jacobs, "U-God Sues Wu-Tang Music Group for $170,000," *HipHop DX*, January 13, 2014, accessed April 12, 2014, http://www.hiphopdx.com/index/news/id.6214/title.u-god-sues-wu-tang-music-group-for-170-000.

[21] Jian Deleon, "Wu-Tang Forever: The History of Wu Wear," *Complex*, October 12, 2011, accessed August 22, 2013, http://www.complex.com/style/2011/10/wu-tang-forever-the-history-of-wu-wear/growth-of-wu-wear.

[22] U.S. Department of Justice, *Russell Tyrone Jones*, prepared by Federal Bureau of Investigation, Washington, D.C., August 4, 1999-July 12, 2004, accessed February 19, 2014, http://vault.fbi.gov/russell-tyrone-jones/russell-tyrone-jones/view

[23] Ibid.

[24] ("integrity"), Eskenazi, "Interview: Robert Diggs, a.k.a. the RZA," *Time*; ("heritage"), Oli 'Power' Grant, quoted in Deleon, "The History of Wu Wear," *Complex.*

[25] Eskenazi, "Interview: Mitchell Diggs, a.k.a. Divine," *Time*.

[26] The Wu-Tang executive board consisted of RZA, Ghostface Killah, Mitchell 'Divine' Diggs, and Oli 'Power' Grant.

[27] For a critical and thorough review of *The Tao of Wu*, see Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah, "a B-Boy's Guide to the Galaxy: A Review of RZA's The Tao of Wu (2009)," *Transition,* no. 104 (2011): 122-136.

[28] Alvin Blanco, *The Wu-Tang Clan and RZA: A Trip Through Hip Hop's 36 Chambers* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011).

[29] Dan Charnas*, The Big Payback: The History of the Business of Hip Hop* (New York: New American Library, 2010).

[30] Jamie Lowe, *Digging for Dirt: The Life and Death of ODB* (New York: Faber and Faber, Inc., 2008); Spencer Sadler, *God Made Dirt: The Life & Times of Ol' Dirty Bastard* (Phoenix, AZ: Amber Communications Group, Inc., 2011).

[31] *Dirty: The Official ODB Biography*, directed by Raison Allah & Stephon Turner (Miami, FL: Synkronized USA, 2009), DVD.

[32] *Wu: The Story of the Wu-Tang Clan*, directed by Gerald Barclay (2007; Hollywood, CA: Paramount, 2008), DVD.

[33] There are two documentaries of note that begin to fill this void. One chronicles U-God and his struggles to establish his own record company and gain the respect in the industry that he has yet to obtain. See, *U-God: Rise of a Fallen Soldier*, directed by Jagwar (2004; city unknown: Ground Zero, 2004), DVD. The other documentary focuses heavily on touring experiences of the unofficial tenth member of the Wu-Tang Clan, Cappadonna. *Wu-Tang Saga*, directed by Jeremy Mack (2010; Los Angeles, CA: Celebrity Video Distribution, 2010), DVD.

[34] Christopher Holmes Smith, "Method in the Madness: Exploring the Boundaries of Identity in Hip-Hop Performativity," *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture* 3, no. 3 (1997): 345-374; Amy L. Chasteen, "Rap and Resistance: A Social Movement Analysis of the Wu-Tang Clan," *Challenge: A Journal of Research on African American Men* 9, no. 2 (Summer-Fall 1998): 1-24; Ellie M. Hisama, "'We're All Asian Really': Hip Hop's Afro-Asian Crossings," in *Critical Minded: New Approaches to Hip Hop Studies*, eds. Ellie M. Hisama & Evan Rapport (Brooklyn, NY: Institute for Studies in American Music, 2005); Mickey Hess, "Metal Faces, Rap Masks: Identity and Resistance in Hip Hop's Persona Artist," *Popular Music and Society* 28, no. 3 (2005): 297-311; Scott Heath, "True Heads: Historicizing the Hip-Hop 'Nation' in Context," *Callaloo* 29, no. 3 (Summer 2006): 846-866; Paul Watkins, "Disruptive Dialogics: Improvised Dissonance in Thelonius Monk and Wu-Tang Clan's *36 Chambers*," *Critical Studies in Improvisation* 7, no. 2 (2011); Greg Tate, "In Praise of Shadow Boxers," *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society* 5, no.1 (2003): 128-136.

[35] Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 11.

[36] Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martins Press, 2005), 321 & 328.

[37] Ibid., 321.

[38] bell hooks, *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 137.

[39] T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Pimp's Up, Ho's Down: Hip Hop's Hold on Young Black Women* (New York; London: New York University Press, 2007), 12.

[40] GZA, report and interview by Agnus Batey, "Hurling Expletives, Dropping Rhymes: A Classic Interview With The Wu-Tang Clan," *Quietus*, October 19, 2010. http://thequietus.com/articles/05122-rock-s-backpages-wu-tang-clan-interview-36-chambers. Originally published in *Hip Hop Connection*, September 1994.

[41] GZA, interview by Agnus Batey, *Quietus*.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Method Man, interview by Agnus Batey, *Quietus*.

[45] Method Man, quoted in Simon Price, "Fear of a Black Belt Planet," *Melody Maker* 72, no. 32, August 12, 1995, 11.

[46] Forman, *The 'Hood Comes First*, 180.

CHAPTER 1
"TIMES IS CHANGED AND LIFE IS STRANGE, THE GLORIOUS DAYS IS GONE AND EVERYBODY'S DOIN' BAD: AUTHENTICITY IN THE HIP HOP GENERATION AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF BLACK MASCULINITY ON STATEN ISLAND

> Kickin' the fly clichés/Doin' duets with Rae and A
> Happens to make my day
> Though I'm tired of bustin' off shots/havin' 'a rock knots
> Runnin' up in spots and makin' shit hot
> I'd rather flip shows instead of those/hangin' on my livin' room wall,
> My first joint, and it went gold
> I wanna lamp, I wanna be in the shade/plus the spotlight
> Getting' my dick rode all night
> I wanna have me a fat yacht/and enough land to go and plant my own sess crop
> But for now it's just a big dream/'cause I find myself in the place where I'm last seen
> My thoughts must be relaxed/be able to maintain
> 'Cause times is changed and life is strange
> The glorious days is gone/and everybody's doin' bad
> Yo mad lives is up for grabs
> Brothers passin' away/I gotta make wakes
> Receivin' all types of calls from upstate
> Yo I can't cope with the pressure/settlin' for lesser
> The God left the lessons on my dresser
> So I can bloom and blossom/find a new way
> To continue to make more hits with Rae and A

Ghostface Killah's verse on "Can it Be All So Simple," from *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)* encapsulated the concerns, tensions, dreams, and values of many young black men who grew up poor in the 1970s and 1980s. Ghostface describes having to commit crimes to make ends meet even though he would rather make music for a living. He tries to stay positive by reading the lessons of the Nation of Gods and Earths, but it is difficult because people he grew up with are involved in dangerous activities that result in either their imprisonment or their death. Though Ghostface's narrative reflected the exigencies of life in the notorious Stapleton housing projects on Staten Island, many black men of

his generation could relate to his depictions of desperately poor people turning to crime to get out of the ghetto, where friends and relatives were murdered by criminals or police on a regular basis. To those black men in urban centers who disproportionately felt the consequences of the crack trade and the ensuing escalation of the War on Drugs, music that confronted these issues represented an authentic expression of what it meant to be an adolescent African American male in the 1980s. But one did not have to be a black man to appreciate the Clan's music nor to consider them authentic. Audiences could essentially delve as shallow or as deep into the Clan's music as they pleased. But for those who took the time to thoroughly unravel and contextualize the Clan's art, it was clear that they were very consciously trying to realistically represent what it was like for poor black men living in Staten Island's ghettos.

Authenticity

The concept of authenticity, especially when applied to the realm of popular music, is very difficult to pin down and define. This is so because authenticity lies in the eyes of the beholder. What one person considers an authentic gesture, emotion, or image, could be perceived as wholly inauthentic by another. In 1989, when Ice Cube rapped, "when I'm in your neighborhood, you better duck/cuz Ice Cube is crazy as fuck," white adults were outraged that their kids reveled in tales of senseless violence told by criminals.[47]

The rhymes tended to be interpreted literally by white fans and detractors alike. While black leaders and organizations also expressed concern or outright opposition to

such lyrics, there was a greater understanding that such statements were exaggerations meant to shock. Also, black youth were much more likely to know of Ice Cube's middle class, educated background and understand that he was intentionally utilizing violent stereotypes of young black men to simultaneously scare and poke fun at white America. Such characterizations of 'white' and 'black' interpretations obviously oversimplify the complexity and the assortment of reactions people felt towards controversial artists such as Ice Cube and N.W.A. Indeed, the uproar over the lyrical content of rap was probably fought primarily across generational lines, but one's race, class, and gender were essential in determining one's perspective on the subject.

When the Wu-Tang Clan burst onto the music scene, however, they rarely exaggerated their first person narratives about ghetto life. This rehashed the standard set by Melle Mel's "The Message" (1982), which realistically described the conditions and characters within the destitute American ghetto.[48] The Clan, however, posed themselves as agents within this environment, unlike Melle Mel's objective-observer perspective. Thus, authenticity reflected one's personal connection to life in the ghetto, but it increasingly entailed one's involvement in criminal activity, especially drug dealing. This trend developed in tandem with the explosion of crack dealers, the overreaction by police forces against drug users and dealers, and the resulting inflation of the U.S. prison population with disproportionate numbers of black people. Each member of the Clan had been directly affected by these large processes in one way or the other, giving their tales of ghetto life an intensely personal weight that fans could emotionally connect with, even if they had not been through similar situations.

In addition, the concept of authenticity for African Americans is inseparable from the history of black cultural appropriation and commodification by whites. Imani Perry linked rappers' obsession with "keeping it real" to this historical trend, stating that keeping it real

> demands that artists maintain or use symbols asserting their allegiance to black youth populations, or subgroups within that community… it is an explicitly ideological stand against selling one's soul to the devils of capitalism or assimilation as one sells the art form and lives life… [it] require[s] the maintenance of an authentic black urban identity; they also constitute a theoretical space that functions as a living testimony to African American experience.[49]

Obviously, keeping it real is a concept borne of the hypercapitalist environment in post-World War II America, whereby counterculture was easily commodified and decontextualized for audiences who were completely detached from the culture's roots. Keeping it real, a concept pioneered by the Wu-Tang Clan, attempted to speak to multiple audiences (white and black and beyond) without losing touch with the black cultural origins of the art that brought them success. When the Clan spoke about "the real," they were talking about "the location where an individual remains committed to his or her community, professes that allegiance, and remains honestly and organically rooted in his or her position in the world."[50]

So how did the Clan keep it real? The primary location, as Russell Potter insisted, was through language and discourse. Potter observed that rappers harness "the power to make oppressors tremble, and more: the power to make them think."[51] The effect of rappers' use of the vernacular, for Potter, was that of a "guerilla incursion." One that "steals language, steals sound, steals the media spotlight, then slips away, regrouping at another unpredictable cultural site."[52] As previously stated, the Clan consciously spoke to

multiple audiences, but they did so in a way that many believe did not compromise their authentic identities or the power of their art.

Although rap music is generally understood as a part of the black vernacular rhetorical tradition, it also is characterized by a remarkable degree of racial heterogeneity among its moguls, artists, and consumers. This heterogeneity is not new to American popular music. Spirituals, the blues, gospel, rock and roll, soul, funk, and disco are all understood as genres rooted in black vernacular culture, yet each contended with appropriation and exploitation by white capitalists, performers, and audiences.

Coming of age in the postmodern era, rap bridged gaps between high and low culture in addition to those between geographically scattered peoples. Radio, television, recorded music, and, eventually, the internet facilitated these interracial interactions, but, this was also prompted by the history of non-black infatuation with African American culture. From blackface minstrel shows, to rock and roll disc jockeys, to slam poetry, generations of white Americans have delighted in imitating African American speech patterns. Potter called such imitations "cultural spectacle[s]."[53] These were very public manifestations of the deep cultural and linguistic interconnections between blacks and whites that play out constantly in everyday occurrences. Thus, to speak of a racially pure black vernacular risks oversimplifying the diversity of interracial influences within the black rhetorical tradition.

Nonetheless, to think of rap as a black vernacular is useful, for African American Language (AAL) is the predominant form of speaking for rappers, regardless of race, class, or gender.[54] Certainly, AAL is a not a closed linguistic system and how, when, and by whom it is utilized varies greatly depending on the social context. It does, however,

have identifiable characteristics that are markers of authenticity for rap artists. Some of the of main features of AAL include changing the initial or final pronunciations of words, dropping consonants, shortening words and phrases, and shifting the stress of syllables to the front. Historically, blacks who adopted Standard English did so out of a desire to achieve upward class mobility. Out of this context, using AAL reaffirms authenticity because of the social and institutional pressure put on African Americans to speak and write in Standard English.

Embracing AAL, then, symbolically aligns rappers with the black working class and poor, who are valorized as resistors of white bourgeois values. To accept the dialect of those who oppress was often equated with acting "white," "bougie," (derived from Bourgeosie) or like a "buppie" (black urban professional). Heavily influenced by the fervent cultural nationalism of the Black Power Movement, the generations raised on hip hop were sensitive to how one's actions could be construed as a sacrifice of one's racial identity to appease white sensibilities. Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar defined cultural nationalism, basically, as the belief that the black masses needed to "culturally regenerate," and this provided the "central thrust of the Black Power movement."[55]

Malcolm X, Maulana Karenga, and Stokely Carmichael all spoke similarly about the difference between "Negroes" and "Black people." Negroes were non-confrontational, they adopted white culture and did not take pride in their African heritage. Black people, on the other hand, were unashamed of their dark skin, they shunned white social norms and were willing to fight for the creation of a society run by and for black people. Malcolm X equated "Negro Revolution" with "nonviolent

revolution," which, Malcolm insisted was a paradox. The "black revolution," conversely, necessitated "bloodshed" for that is how nations are birthed.[56]

Carmichael wrote that the "Negro Establishment" posed themselves as representatives of the black race but were easily "co-opted by the white machine."[57] Karenga's philosophy on Negroes versus black people is summed up well by the song "Mama, Mama," that was taught to young members of Karenga's cultural nationalist US Organization.

> Child: Mama, mama, Negroes are insane
> They straighten their hair and don't know their name.
> They bleach their skin and act so white.
> They don't even have any purpose in life.
>
> Mother: You see my child it's a pity and a shame,
> that your sick brother doesn't even know his name.
> It's not his fault, he's not to blame
> The white man robbed him of his black brain.
>
> Child: Mama, mama, what does it mean to be Black?
> Is it like a color so lovely and dark?
>
> Mother: To be black my child is much more than that.
> It's the way you think and the way you act.[58]

This tension was not new to the 1960s and 1970s; rather, the politics of respectability have been a major social and political force throughout African American history.[59] Malcolm X famously stated this tension arose from the different social statuses afforded to the "house Negro" and the "field Negro" during slavery.[60] Despite the oversimplification, Malcolm's dichotomy is instructive for understanding how African Americans have been forced to grapple with questions of racial authenticity, social hierarchy, and cultural purity throughout history. As is the case with art, these palpable tensions spilled over into black music. Blues men and women were castigated as crude,

lascivious, or sinful by middle class onlookers who, instead, gravitated towards the intellectually stimulating sounds of jazz. In the 1960s, civil rights activists adapted gospel songs for their cause, since these were respectable songs for a morally just crusade.

However, the emphasis on black consciousness and cultural identity during the nascent Black Power Movement provided a reevaluation of the blues. Leroi Jones spoke of the blues as an authentic expression of blackness, which utilized an "Afro-American language." This, he argued, actually marked the beginning of the African *American* vis-à-vis the African transplanted in America.[61] The embrace of the blues, for Jones, was one way to push back against the black middle class' taste for European high art. Similarly, rap was considered by its practitioners and fans as an authentically black art form that undercut bourgeois values, utilized "Afro-American language," and claimed allegiance with the ethos of the field slaves.

To speak Standard English instead of AAL, therefore, could be considered a renunciation of racial solidarity in favor of mainstream acceptance. For most rappers, exchanging one's racial identity (symbolized most clearly by AAL) for middle class respectability was akin to a pact with Lucifer. Their obsession with keeping it real, or remaining authentic, was a direct result of class conflict that pitted the respectable black bourgeoisie (or the aspiring bourgeoisie) against the backward black proletariat and lumpenproletariat. In an attempt to exhibit solidarity, many black youth born into the middle class have even sought out the "ghetto vernaculars" because they are viewed as "an empowering way to reclaim blackness."[62]

As it may be clear by now, public debates over racial authenticity were typically, though not exclusively, male-centered discourses. Constructing a dialogue around

authenticity always coincided with questions surrounding gender identity, which usually meant masculinity. Authentic African Americans were courageous, independent, and protective while those deemed inauthentic were meek, greedy, and 'traitors to the race'. Thus, definitions of masculinity and authenticity were constructed in relation to African Americans' oppressed status in a white-dominated society.

The Hip Hop Generation

To the Black Power era Hip Hop Generation—those born between roughly 1965 and 1975—racism manifested itself in their lives most significantly through several broad processes from the 1960s through the 1990s.[63] The perseverance of personal and institutional racism after the passage of major civil rights legislation in the mid 1960s continued to limit economic opportunities and undercut political power for African Americans. With the broad shift in American economic policy away from manufacturing sector to the service sector (in David Harvey's words, a shift from "Fordism" to "flexible accumulation"), many urban blacks lost a reliable form of income.[64] The suburbanization of American cities, which largely excluded blacks, further exacerbated the economic issues of urban black communities as racially biased realtors valued "black" neighborhoods as risky investments.

In the wake of numerous racially motivated urban uprisings in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the FBI's domestic Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO) obtained greater power to combat internal threats to national security, of which, black "militants" posed one of, if not, the most significant threat. Coupled with the militarization of police

forces, these changes in criminal justice system promoted racial profiling, police brutality, harsh sentencing, and even politically motivated incarcerations and assassinations. tangible

In the mid-1980s, the proliferation of crack, a cheaper and more intense derivative of cocaine, fed addictions in mostly poor urban communities. The intensification of the War on Drugs to fight this so-called "crack epidemic," disproportionately targeted young black men (who were profiled as the prototypical dealers) and single black mothers (who were stereotyped as the primary users). As the 1980s progressed, black men and women were increasingly caught up in America's steadily privatizing system of mass incarceration. With police often acting as an occupying force in black neighborhoods, prosecutors forcing accused persons to accept plea bargains or risk severe punishment in cases with only circumstantial evidence, long prison sentences for drug-related offences, and a lack of drug-treatment options for addicts, the justice system ensnared an alarmingly high number of young black men.

The members of the Wu-Tang Clan were all born within the timeframe that designates them as a part of the Black Power era Hip Hop Generation (GZA – 1966, ODB –1968, RZA – 1969, Masta Killa – 1969, Ghostface – 1970, U-God – 1970, Inspectah Deck – 1970, Raekwon – 1970, Method Man – 1971). As a result, they experienced hip hop during both its non-commercial and commercial phases.

The Wu-Tang Clan arrived on the rap scene during a period of intensified public scrutiny of black youth, rap lyrics, and unauthorized music samples. With Dr. Dre's *The Chronic* and Ice Cube's *The Predator* serving as the ex post factum soundtracks to the 1992 Los Angeles Rebellion (each released within months after the event), the

connection between rap music and racial violence was fresh in the nation's consciousness. In the wake of what American political leaders and the media deemed the "L.A. Riots," rapper Ice-T's Los Angeles-based punk-metal group, Body Count, became the target of an aggressive censorship campaign.

In the group's track, "Cop Killer," politicians, police, lobbyists, and concerned citizens found a song so distasteful that its public denouncement could spark significant legislative action against offensive music. The chorus chanted, "cop killer, better you than me/cop killer, fuck police brutality/cop killer, I know your family's grieving, fuck 'em/cop killer, but tonight we get even."[65] The song's revenge fantasy lyrics were over the top yet menacing enough to instill fear in those worried about another racially motivated uprising. Certainly, the speech introducing the song—despite Ice-T's hyperbolic wish to "shoot 'em in their motherfuckin' face,"—was a harsh but justified indictment of the Los Angeles Police Department's (LAPD) penchant for gross abuses of authority.[66] Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar characterized the campaign launched against "Cop Killer," and rap music more generally, as very visible manifestation of the "culture wars" fought amongst American cultural critics from 1992-1996.[67]

The controversy began when the Dallas Police Association printed the lyrics to the song in their June 1992 newsletter. On June 11, there was enough support within the Dallas force as well as the approximately 12,000 police officers in the Combined Law Enforcement Association of Texas (CLEAT) to publicly announce their intentions to get "Cop Killer" dropped from the *Body Count* album.[68] Led by Georgia's Republican representative and House Minority Whip, Newt Gingrich, sixty members of the U.S. House of Representatives (almost all Southern Republicans) wrote a letter of protest to

Time Warner to express their disgust at the company's irresponsible marketing of "despicable lyrics advocating the murder of police officers."[69] Shortly thereafter, Vice President Dan Quayle backed CLEAT's efforts to boycott Time Warner Inc., which distributed the *Body Count* album.[70] He called the song "obscene" and condemned Time Warner for profiting from a "record that says it's OK to kill cops[.]"[71]

The boycott quickly gained momentum despite the statements of Time Warner's President and co-CEO Gerald Levin and the National Black Police Association in support of Ice-T.[72] By Early July, numerous stores refused to carry *Body Count*, police departments and organizations across the nation pledged to join the boycott, and they planned to protest the upcoming Time Warner stockholders' meeting.[73] The ploy worked, and Charlton Heston's sarcastic recitation of lyrics from "Cop Killer" at the meeting was the final straw that convinced Ice-T to drop the song from future copies of the album and Time Warner to drop the artist from their label early the next year.

Barry Shank argued that "Cop Killer" was such a cultural flashpoint because it seemed to confirm deep-seated white anxieties concerning black violence. However, it also presented black rage in a format that was comprehensible to young whites and its message resonated with many Generation Xers similarly disaffected with mainstream American society. In other words, "Cop Killer" was performed in the style of punk-metal, which was not commonly played by professional black musicians.[74] Therefore, by inserting a black perspective into a predominately white genre, Shank believed "Cop Killer" had the potential to legitimize black rage in the eyes of white youth, making it seem all the more dangerous to their parents. Like many other rap artists, the Wu-Tang Clan both benefitted and suffered from these competing stances on rap music.

The Clan were extremely successful at tapping into the white youth market that felt their music represented authentic ghetto blackness. Regardless of whether this was simply a titillating voyeuristic pleasure for the listener or an exercise in ideological solidarity, the appeal of the Clan to white youth--in fact, youth of all backgrounds—was undeniable. "We in the suburbs now" said Method Man in an early interview, referencing the Clan's music videos, "all they [suburban] children see is that television, that's the only connection they got to the ghetto."[75] Clearly, the Clan understood the power of rap music to reach and impact diverse audiences in the age of Video Music Box, MTV, and Rap City. They also understood the eagerness with which nonblack youth consumed African American cultural products. Young people growing up in mostly white suburbs hungered to vicariously experience black culture through rap and the accompanying music videos. The images and messages within these mediums depicted downtrodden urban landscapes and situations that differed greatly from their own suburban existences. Method Man noted white suburbanites "wanna know what's going on… and we givin' it to 'em… that's why we don't water down our videos, why would we water down life? Real, actual life?"[76]

The Wu-Tang Clan fashioned themselves as documentarians or sorts for the problems associated with life in a black ghetto. Violence, drugs, and prison were issues they dealt with in their everyday lives, and they wished to reaffirm their connections to those within the same environment. "We trapped in this jungle too man," Raekwon stated as he spoke into a documentarian's camera to an imagined community of ghetto dwellers, "so don't never think that we at the level to where we—we above y'all, we can never be above y'all."[77] At the same time, they exposed the harsh realities of this environment to

outsiders. Method Man explained why it was so urgent for the Clan to reveal these problems to the public at large, saying

> if a little kid [is] standing on the block and somebody get shot he can't change the channel. This is real life, he goin' to see it for what it really is, somebody getting shot. Word, I know this little kid now, three years old, he hear gunshots his first instinct it to run into the bathroom cuz there ain't no windows in there he cant get hit by any bullets.[78]

This was not an exaggeration. In an appearance on the Arsenio Hall Show shortly after the release of *Enter the Wu-Tang*, the Clan tell the television host that U-God's two-year old son was recently caught in the crossfire of a shooting in Park Hill. The child's spleen needed to be removed and his leg was paralyzed.[79]

Staten Island: Seeds of a Slum?

By the early 1990s, the Park Hill projects had the reputation as the most dangerous location on Staten Island, and four of the Wu-Tang Clan members called it home. Glancing at the history of Park Hill's ethnic conflict, problems with police brutality, and flowering drug trade helps put the Clan's passion for "reality rap" into focus.

On a local level, they came of age during a time when Staten Islanders were in the midst of a heated debate over what defined their borough's identity. Known pejoratively as the "forgotten borough," Staten Island was traditionally perceived as an outsider within the context of New York City. In 1947, the establishment of the Fresh Kills Landfill on the west side of the Island became a powerful symbol of the borough's outsider status. Although it began as a temporary solution, and grew to be the world's

largest as it became the resting place for all of New York City's refuse. The dump was a daily and pungent reminder that Staten Island played a subsidiary role to the other, more prestigious boroughs,

The population boom initiated by the opening of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge in 1964 caused friction between the Island's mostly white working class residents and the newcomers, many of whom were black Brooklynites. Islanders generally supported the bridge for it offered another means of reaching the rest of New York City. Before the bridge, the only option available to commuters and visitors was the Ferry. As a part of Robert Moses' urban revitalization plan, the bridge finally connected New York's five boroughs by roadway, but now Staten Island's government was forced to deal with the massive population growth without much preparation.

An article in the *New York Times* from 1963 predicted this issue would be extremely problematic if not properly planned out. The author strongly urged Borough President Albert V. Maniscalco to develop a largely rural area in the southwest corner of Staten Island to accommodate the inevitable influx of people that the opening of the bridge would bring the following year. The author lamented the "rush of construction" that already characterized Staten Island's haphazard preparations. If Staten Island did not implement a strategic urban community plan, "[r]eal estate interests, builders and developers" would surely "exploit the section to their own ends… [and in doing so] inevitably they will repeat many of the mistakes that now make large parts of Queens so drab and ugly." The author closed by prophesizing, that the "failure to take advantage of this great opportunity," on the part of the City Planning Commission, "will haunt Staten Island for generations to come."[80] Indeed, the City Planning Commission never assumed

control of the area, and further urban renewal plans proposed by New York City Mayor John Lindsay were rebuffed. The end result was that small builders developed the Island for their own benefit, leaving the Island with "crowded neighborhoods with poor zoning, urban sprawl, and traffic congestion."[81] This was the Staten Island that the members of the Wu-Tang Clan came to know.

In spite of their initial support, Staten Island residents grew to resent the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge for it exposed them to the problems and dangers of the big city. From the late 1960s through the 1970s in New York City, factories closed, drug use increased, welfare was scaled back, and crime rose, all of which the media portrayed as mostly black problems.[82] While African Americans certainly bore the brunt of these problems, the media tended to highlight the breakdown of American values and morals as the root of the problem. This explanation did more to vilify and confirm negative stereotype of non-whites as pathological than it did to explain the persistence of structural iniquities. This representation worsened in the 1980s as crack hit the streets and crimes associated with the drug increased. These factors, among others, helped build popular support for a secession bill, introduced in 1989, that would make Staten Island its own city. This was clear evidence that Islanders on the whole wished to distance themselves culturally and politically from the more racially diverse, liberal communities in the rest of New York City.

The crack cocaine trade, the authorities' responses, and an influx of immigrants and refugees from Liberia created an extremely volatile situation in certain neighborhoods of Staten Island. One of, if not, the first family of Liberians to move into Park Hill were the Sayons. Their only son, Ernest, was born in Brooklyn in 1979 just

after the family arrived in America, but he grew up in Staten Island. He gained a reputation as a friendly mediator between African Americans and Liberians, which was an important role given the tensions that existed amongst these groups due to cultural differences, language barriers, and the limited supply of employment opportunities.

With the onset of the First Liberian Civil War in 1989, relations were strained even further as hundreds or perhaps thousands of Liberians claimed refugee status or illegally immigrated to the Park Hill projects. Those coming to Staten Island from Liberia represented a diverse range of occupations and backgrounds: intellectuals, merchants, clergymen, students, and people hoping to make a better living for themselves. They all believed America offered at least a temporary safe haven.[83] However, the war also brought people who were desperately poor, or even young men who had been forcibly recruited as child soldiers for rebel factions within the National Patriotic Front of Liberia.

By this time period, Park Hill was already an established drug-dealer stronghold, and the allure of major profits and cheap access to intoxicants began attracting Liberian youth to the trade. The connections between Liberian communities and the drug trade came to a fore on May 17, 1993, when two men entered a Liberian social club and open fired at another man in the back of the room with semiautomatic weapons. The previous fall, Liberian Staten Islanders had converted a vacant space within a strip mall—about a block away from Park Hill—into a community center of sorts. Nine people were wounded in the shooting, which was determined to be motivated by a dispute over drugs.

The shooting surprised few who lived in or near Park Hill. One woman who lived across the street, stated that "on Park Hill, you hear shots every day."[84] Another man, who was present at the club shooting, added "the fighting is not just between crack

dealers, but also between crack dealers and users."[85] To combat this instability in the Park Hill area, the NYPD 120th Precinct formed a volunteer anti-drug task force called the Street Narcotics Enforcement Unit (SNEU). The founder of SNEU, Captain Joseph Lehan, started the group because of written and face-to-face pleas from Park Hill residents for the police to get rid of the drug dealers.[86]

The Staten Island police force had been criticized in the recent past for being unable to constraint drug dealing activities. In 1988, well-known social critic and sports commentator, Saeed Shabazz, shot two teenage crack dealers in self-defense. He and his wife, Bernadette, cited the fact that drug dealing had gone on unchecked for two years in their neighborhood, and Bernadette had been severely beaten when she tried to confront the dealers herself. Their complaints to the police were repeatedly dismissed, even after the Shabazz's discovered their had contacts on their heads.

This, coupled with the desire to adhere to national standards, drove the Staten Island police force to take action against drug dealers and users. "Drug sweeps" through Park Hill became a routine whereby officers scoured the project buildings and surrounding areas for people with outstanding warrants. In addition, police began a concerted effort to arrest suspected drug dealers and users for minor offenses like loitering or disorderly conduct.[87] In less than a month, the sweeps led to the arrest of thirty-six people. Naturally, there was growing concern among civil rights organizations, concerned citizens, and black youth over profiling, harassment, and the use of excessive force on the part of the police. There were mixed feelings among Park Hill residents who appreciated the police's efforts but worried about their unchecked authority.[88]

On April 29th, 1994, Ernest Sayon (aka "Kase"), a small-time drug dealer, was on the street during a drug sweep. Sayon had a criminal background that included a petty drug possession charge, a resisting arrest charge, and, most seriously, an attempted murder, illegal weapons, and assault charge which involved Sayon shooting an automatic pistol from a rooftop at rival drug dealers.[89] Despite this, he was unarmed and not dealing on the night of the twenty-ninth when the eight-member team of SNEU went on patrol. During a different arrest, a firecracker went off near the officers and they saw Sayon take off running. Three of the policemen, John Mahoney, Gregg Gerson, and Donald Brown, caught up to Sayon and wrestled him to the ground. Some witnesses stated that they saw the officers punch and beat Sayon with their guns and walkie talkies, then drag the handcuffed man across the concrete.[90] There were conflicting reports over whether Sayon had resisted or not. Either way, he was transported to the hospital (via police van rather than an ambulance) and was pronounced dead soon thereafter.

Over one hundred protestors from the community marched on the police station that night. Victoria Shuford and Natalie Kamau, who were leaders within the Park Hill Tenants Association, organized the demonstration but many joined the crowd spontaneously, which worried police. In the end, the police and protestors were able to have a peaceful dialogue, but four of the protestors were arrested for trespassing and resisting arrest.[91] The scene changed dramatically a few days later, when a demonstration consisting largely of young people took to the streets. Demanding action on the part of Mayor Giuliani and justice for Sayon's mother, they were met with officers in full riot gear, helicopters flying overhead, and for some, pepper mace.[92] Over a dozen demonstrators were arrested and police claimed that three policemen were injured. On the

same day, the Reverend Al Sharpton organized a protest at the residence of New York City Mayor, Rudolph Giuliani, to demand that the Mayor meet with the Sayon family and their representatives. Giuliani did meet with Sayon's family, but he remained reluctant to publicly weigh in on the issue and he remained supportive of law enforcement.[93]

The medical examiner who conducted his autopsy concluded, "the cause of Mr. Sayon's death is asphyxia by compression of chest and neck while rear-handcuffed and prone on the ground immediately following a struggle in which he sustained blunt impacts to his head and trunk."[94] It was determined that the police had not administered a chokehold (prohibited by a recent change in the law) but that at least one officer had used the butt of his gun to strike Sayon's head. The death was deemed a homicide. The question was whether or not the police officers used reasonable force to subdue Sayon. Officer Donald Brown grew up in Park Hill and it was understood that he treated the younger generation of black men in Park Hill with disdain, so much so that he was nicknamed "Robocop."[95] However, some Park Hill residents praised Brown's efforts to clean up their community such as Christida Howard, the former president of the Park Hill Tenants Association. Police spokesmen cited this limited grassroots support as well as the fact the Officer Brown was black to dismiss criticisms that the incident was motivated by race.[96] This oversimplistic rationalization attempted to absolve the police of wrongdoing by glossing over the ethnic tensions between African Americans and Liberian immigrants, the diversity of opinions and lifestyles within African American communities, as well as the institutionalization of racially biased policies within the criminal justice system. Nonetheless, in December, a grand jury acquitted the three officers of all charges.[97]

An article published in the *New York Times* shortly thereafter stated that the area "in or around Park Hill," accounted for the most violent crimes in the borough.[98] While few would doubt this pronouncement, many challenged policemen who used this as a justification for harassing young men and using excessive force in the neighborhood. A frequent occurrence during drug sweeps in Park Hill was "stripping," whereby police stopped young men, roughed them up, and pulled their pants down.[99] Only two weeks after the Sayon homicide, a Park Hill resident, Christine Lee, publicized a video she took of eight police officers beating a tweny-year old black male named Dannis Dublin. Dublin was arrested and handcuffed for carrying an open bottle of vodka onto the street, then kicked and beaten with nightsticks. The police only stopped the beating because Dublin's aunt came outside and screamed.[100]

Conclusion: "Dedicated to the Winners and the Losers"

The Clan were well aware of Sayon's murder, and some may have known him personally.[101] They greatly sympathized with 'Kase' and have gone on record to denounce Officer Brown's brutality. However, the Clan, like many other Park Hill residents, were torn between letting the drug dealers have free reign in the projects and allowing the police to clamp down on such activities. Many of the Clan had dealt drugs and committed crimes, but they experienced tragedies as a result of these activities as well. Most poignantly, in early March of 1994, U-God's two-year-old son, Dante, was hit by a stray bullet in a drug-related shooting in Stapleton—a housing project whose drug dealers competed fiercely with their Park Hill counterparts. After a period in the intensive

care unit at Staten Island University Hospital, the young Dante Hawkins recovered, but he lost a kidney and dislocated two fingers. A few days later, a close Wu-Tang associate, Two Cent, died from a gunshot wound to the chest.[102]

The Clan's intimate association with the problems of Park Hill, Stapleton, and other dangerous New York City housing projects demonstrated the epistemological authenticity of their first-person lyrics. They rapped about the hardships of ghetto life and the aspirations of its occupants because they actually experienced these things. The introduction of crack and the War on Drugs brought much tragedy to Staten Island's poor, but it also offered way out of poverty on one's own terms. Drug dealing provided a route to the American dream that circumvented white power structures, though it also exploited those who were denied access to these structures. The music of the Wu-Tang Clan harnessed the paradoxes imbedded within this situation by exploring the conflicting forces that tugged young black men of the Black Power era Hip Hop Generation in different directions, for better or for worse. A line from "Can It Be All So Simple" stating that the song is "dedicated to the winners and the losers," perfectly illustrated this contradiction.

In the music video for " Can It Be All So Simple," directed by the innovative Hype Williams, Raekwon and Ghostface rap in front of a legion of local friends and supporters parked on 205 Broad Street. This visual poses the two as local representatives of the Stapleton housing projects, which stand across the street. But they are also representatives of Staten Island as a whole, which Williams expresses by interspersing slow motion images of local street culture landmarks on Staten Island. Among these

landmarks were graffiti pieces dedicated to Two Cent, Kase, and the monumental "Can It Be All So Simple" aerosol mural.

The details around the creation of the latter are unknown, but the piece simultaneously celebrates the Wu-Tang Clan and "fallen soldiers" (deceased participants in Staten Island's street life. The piece was painted on a building wall across from the Park Hill projects and—at the time of this writing—it remains well preserved. In the ephemeral world of graffiti pieces, the longevity of the "Can It Be All So Simple" mural stands as a testament to the deep emotions that were imbedded in the paint, the song, and the Clan. The Wu-Tang Clan hovered a magnifying glass over the ghettos of Staten Island. Their personal suffering, hopes, and dreams, resonated with their community because many had seen, done, or thought the same things (or at least. knew others who did). This was a group that kept it real for the Black Power era Hip Hop Generation—for both the "winners and the losers."

ENDNOTES

ENDNOTES

[47] "Straight Outta Compton," N.W.A., *Straight Outta Compton*, Priority Records, 1988.

[48] Officially credited to Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, the song was essentially a Melle Mel solo effort featuring Duke Bootee, another artist on Sugar Hill Records.

[49] Perry, *Prophets of the Hood*, 87.

[50] Ibid., 88.

[51] Russell Potter, *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 14.

[52] Ibid., 76.

[53] Potter, *Spectacular Vernaculars,* 63.

[54] Geneva Smitherman, *Word From the Mother: Language and African Americans* (New York: Routlege, 2006). Smitherman conceptualized African American Language as a distinct linguistic system that "gives shape, coherence, and explanation to the condition of U.S. slave descendants and functions as a mechanism for teaching and learning about life and the world," 64.

[55] Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar, *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 93-94.

[56] Malcolm X, "Message to the Grassroots," speech, Northern Negro Grass Roots Leadership Conference, Detroit, MI, November 10, 1963, republished online as "Message to the Grassroots," *Ashbrook Center*, accessed June 3, 2014, http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/message-to-grassroots/.

[57] Kwame Ture (formerly known as Stokely Carmichael) & Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 11. Original publication (New York: Random House, Inc., 1967).

[58] Scot Brown, *Fighting for US: Maulana Karenga, The US Organization, and Black Cultural Nationalism* (New York: New York University, 2003), 20-21.

[59] Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

[60] Malcolm X, "Message to the Grassroots."

[61] LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1963), xii.

[62] Potter, *Spectacular Vernaculars*, 69.

[63] Pero G. Dagbovie, "'Of All Our Studies, History Is Best Qualified to Reward Our Research': Black History's Relevance to the Hip Hop Generation," *T he Journal of African American History* 90, no. 3 (Summer 2005): 303. Bakari Kitwana conceptualized the "Hip Hop Generation" in his 2002 book of the same title, stating that they represented the generation of black youth born between 1965 and 1984. Kitwana asserted that the most significant influences on their worldview were hip hop culture, mass incarceration, and globalization. Dagbovie refined Kitwana's characterization of the Hip Hop Generation by dividing it into those born around the time of the Black Power era (1965 to the mid-1970s) and those born after the Black Power era (from the late 1970s to the mid 1980s). The primary difference between these two sub-division, Dagbovie asserted, was that Black Power era hip hoppers were aware of hip hop's roots in black cultural nationalism, while the post-Black Power era hip hoppers mostly consumed decontextualized commercial hip hop culture.

[64] David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford, UK; Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1989), 141.

[65] "Cop Killer," Body Count, *Body Count*, Sire, 1992.

[66] The Chief of the LAPD, Daryl Gates, famously stated that he believed black people had physical characteristics that made them less susceptible to chokeholds. The LAPD also pioneered the use of the "batteram" a tank-like vehicle used to break into houses of suspected drug dealers or gang members, often without obtaining a warrant. Robin D.G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 193.

[67] Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar, "Slouching Toward Bork: The Culture Wars and Self-Criticism in Hip-Hop Music," *Journal of Black Studies* 30, no. 2 (November 1999), 164.

[68] Barry Shank, "Fears of the White Unconscious: Music, Race, and Identification in the Censorship of 'Cop Killer'," *Radical History Review* 66 (1996): 124.

[69] Prepared by Chris Morris, Bill Holland, Charlene Orr, Paul Verna, and Ed Christman, "Quayle, Congressmen, L.A. Pols Join 'Cop Killer' Posse," *Billboard*, July 4, 1992.

[70] Bruce D. Brown, "Quayle Boosts 'Cop Killer' Boycott Campaign," *Washington Post*, June 20, 1992.

[71] Morris et. al. "Quayle, Congressmen, L.A. Pols," *Billboard*.

[72] Brown, "Quayle Boosts 'Cop Killer' *Washington Post.*

[73] Morris et. al. "Quayle, Congressmen, L.A. Pols," *Billboard*.

[74] Record companies consistently dissuaded black artists from playing hardcore rock music in favor of R&B, which was believed to be a safer moneymaker. Case in point was the all-black protopunk band, Death, whose members noted how difficult it was to shop their music to record labels in the 1970s. *A Band Called Death*, directed by Jeff Howlett & Mark Covino (2010, Hollywood, CA: Image Entertainment, 2013), DVD.

[75] Method Man, "Wu Tang Clan in Staten Island Park Hill Projects (Part 1)," YouTube Video, 5:28, posted by wu4ever90, September 24, 2009, accessed February 28, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZpQ-6YiIiBw.

[76] Ibid.

[77] Raekwon, Ibid.

[78] Method Man, Ibid.

[79] "The Wu-Tang Clan 1994 Interview/C.R.E.A.M.," YouTube Video, 6:41, posted by egoggles, August 1, 2011, accessed March 4, 2014, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v2AeZWnl32E.

[80] "Seeds of a Slum?," *New York Times*, November 5, 1963.

[81] Daniel C. Kramer & Richard M. Flanagan, *Staten Island: Conservative Bastion in a Liberal City* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, Inc., 2012), 73.

[82] In 1972, the district attorney of Staten Island claimed that drug violations and drug-related crimes grew by fifteen per cent from 1967-1972. "Bounty for Helping to Catch Drug-Pushers Is Established on Staten Island," *New York Times*, August 2, 1972.

[83] Raymond Hernandez, "The Feel of Africa Transplanted," *New York Times*, June 20, 1993.

[84] Richard D. Lyons, "Shooting At Staten Island Bar Leaves 8 Injured," *New York Times*, May 18, 1993.

[85] Ibid.

[86] Joseph B. Treaster, "Unwelcome Focus on a New Anti-Drug Unit," *New York Times*, May 10, 1994.

[87] Ibid.

[88] "One Neighborhood, Two Lives --- A special report.; A Death on Staten Island: 2 Paths Cross on Familiar Ground," *New York Times*, May 15, 1994.

[89] Ibid.

[90] Ibid.; Clifford Krauss, "Giuliani Pledges to Investigate Man's Death in Police Custody," *New York Times*, May 1, 1994.

[91] Brian J. Laline, "A Police Struggle, and a Black Man Dies. Twenty Years Ago. And Today," *SIlive.com*, July 18, 2014, accessed August 14, 2014, www.silive.com/news/index.ssf/2014/07/sayon.html; Krauss, "Giuliani Pledges to Investigate," *New York Times.*

[92] Debbie Officer, "Staten Island youth rally against police brutality," *New York Amsterdam News*, May 7, 1994.

[93] Krauss, "Giuliani Pledges to Investigate," *New York Times.*

[94] Clifford Krauss, "DEATH OF SUSPECT IN POLICE CUSTODY IS CALLED HOMICIDE," *New York Times,* May 10, 1994.

[95] "One Neighborhood, Two Lives," *New York Times.*

[96] Krauss, "Giuliani Pledges to Investigate," *New York Times.*

[97] Robert D. McFadden, "Officers Not Charged In Death of S.I. Man: Grand Jury Won't File…" *New York Times*, December 9, 1994.

[98] Clifford Krauss, "Staten Island Is No Longer An Oasis From Crime," *New York Times*, March 6, 1995.

[99] Ibid.; Lenora Fulani, "Did Staten Island Police Kill?," *Philadelphia Tribune*, May 31, 1994.

[100] Ibid.

[101] Method Man has mentioned Kase in several songs ("What the Blood Clot!?!," from *Tical*, a St. Ides Malt Liquor television commercial from 1995, and "The Heart Gently Weeps," from the Clan's 2007 album *8 Diagrams*) but it is unclear whether these were ways to honor a close friend or simply gestures to show solidarity with a stranger from the same community.

[102] "Rapper's Son in Crossfire," *Billboard*, March 26, 1994; Havelock Nelson, "The Rap Column," *Billboard*, April 16, 1994; U-God, interview by Bobby Viteri "U-God of the

Wu-Tang Clan is Finally Speaking His Piece," *Vice*, July 23, 2013, accessed August 14, 2014, http://www.vice.com/read/u-god-is-finally-speaking-his-piece-with-keynote-speaker. Method Man mourned Two Cent in his song "P.L.O. Style," stating he wished his friend would "rest in peace."

CHAPTER 2
"COMMERCIAL OR UNDERGROUND, WHERE DO YOU FIT?": THE GENIUS ON COLD CHILLIN'

Those were the days, back in Junior High
For an eighth grader, my style was kinda fly
And just to prove I was an MC pro
I often sponsored a classroom show
And the hype part of my imagination
Was making my homeroom a hip hop station
Minutes before the late bell would ring
I would greet the audience and then I'll swing
A lyric or two as the students barked
Because my rhymes had sparked
Off somethin' causin' the class to mingle
To a rhythm which is now a twelve inch single
Letting off many styles of hip hop
Holdin' the mic that I made in wood shop
Forget gold, my key chain was a cable
Two math textbooks were turntables
And for a mixer, somethin' much cooler
A penny being cross faded on a ruler
Measurin' dope beats that were flexed
From hands that played a drum roll on a desk
From my home girl, her name, fly ass Emory
Sweet memory
I remember sittin' in my art class
Drawin' up lyrics kinda fast
The outcome, a masterpiece
Live shows with hyped up rhymes released
As if lyrics were flowin' from the heavens above
I'll grab a mic and provoke a push to a shove
From boys and girls who broke necks to see
The lyrics G.O.D.

Those were the days[103]

This deeply personal narrative described GZA's (going by "The Genius" at this time) memories of what hip hop culture meant to him as a kid, before he desired to make it his profession. He claimed that by age eleven—which would be 1976—he had moved on from nursery rhymes to taking rapping seriously and writing his own original rhymes.[104]

Born in 1966, GZA was the oldest member of the Clan and he was able to absorb hip hop culture when it was still a relatively self-contained local phenomenon.[105] The period from 1973 to 1979 were hip hop's formative years, bookended by the first time DJ Kool Herc repeated a break beat using two turntables at a party and the release of the Sugar Hill Gang's "Rapper's Delight," which first brought rap to the attention of mainstream audiences across the nation. In "Those Were the Days," GZA glorified this era as a time when people rhymed for notoriety, respect, and fun, instead of money. The young GZA wore cables around his neck rather than the ostentatious gold chains that became popular among rappers in the late 1980s. He practiced rhyming into a wooden microphone he made himself because he could not afford an electronic microphone. This was art for art's sake, not art for profit.

However, in the second verse of "Those Were the Days," GZA implied that his childhood fascination with rapping was developing into a marketable skill by the time he was in high school. Now armed with a boombox and microphone, GZA easily disposed of numerous MC's who think they can defeat him in a rhyme battle. It was obvious that GZA was in a league above all those around him, and this was why he obtained a record deal and others did not. This song revealed a major tension that existed among the Black Power era Hip Hop Generation who turned their love of hip hop into a career: how could one honor hip hop's non-commercial roots while also creating a sustainable source of income? Put another way, how did rappers negotiate hip hop's "underground" roots versus its commercial appeal?

Taken as a whole, GZA's first solo effort, *Words From the Genius* (1990), made little effort to appeal to mainstream tastes, with the exception of "Come Do Me." For the

most part, he followed the paths of extremely popular and well-respected hardcore acts that became successful without conforming to more conventional pop themes like love, dancing, and parties. GZA utilized his extensive repertoire of battle rhymes to craft songs in the vein of the hardcore lyricism of Rakim's "My Melody" or Big Daddy Kane's "Raw."[106] This rhyming style focused heavily on describing the MC's own style vis-à-vis one's opponents using vivid metaphors and complex wordplay. Also, GZA emulated the thematic range of Kool G Rap, who took explicitly sexual rap to an extreme and pioneered the concept of telling in-depth narratives centered on organized crime.[107] In tracks like "Stay Out of Bars," "What Silly Girls Are Made Of," and "Living Foul," GZA tried his hand at social commentary in the mold of KRS-One from the group Boogie Down Productions, who became one of the first artists to trumpet "underground" rap. For KRS-One, the underground meant your music had "that raw ghetto sound," it reflected "reality," and it "strengthen[ed] and uplift[ed] the mind."[108] Above all, an underground artist did not stifle his or her political opinions in order to attain more radio play or pop chart success. KRS-One clarified that both commercial and underground artists could "write hits" and one could even become an "underground superstar," blurring the distinctions between the supposedly opposite styles.

Words From the Genius was GZA's attempt to achieve underground superstar status. He failed on his own, but within the context of the Wu-Tang Clan, the entire group became underground superstars. Therefore, GZA's failure served as an important learning experience. He learned how the music industry operated and how he could rebrand his image to find success. In a rap market flooded with talented and hungry rappers, "The Genius" simply did not generate the buzz necessary to sell a lot of records,

despite his obvious gift as a rapper. Once he reemerged as GZA within the kung fu-obsessed, nine-member posse of eccentric Staten Island toughs, it was obvious that there was a purposeful shift in marketing strategy. The Clan marketed themselves in a way that was commercially viable, without rejecting the aesthetics of the underground as laid out by KRS-One.

GZA's short-lived existence on Cold Chillin' Records was a particularly jarring experience. He was considered the best rapper among their crew and had created an album in which he exerted a surprising amount of creative control. *Words From the Genius* included fifteen tracks, fourteen of which GZA had professionally recorded and mixed prior to his record deal, giving him a level of artistic freedom not enjoyed by most other newly contracted rappers. These songs made it onto the album unadulterated. Cold Chillin' only asked for one additional radio-friendly track to appeal to pop audiences.

GZA's response was the upbeat "Come Do Me," a polished single that the young artist was extremely proud of. He later claimed that, at the time, he thought it sounded "slick" and "cool for R&B rap."[109] But only one year later, GZA completely renounced this style of music and the industry that pushed it. His verse on "Protect Ya Neck" is one of the most venomous attacks leveled against a record label ever recorded in rap music. He claimed that the label was a domineering, impersonal entity that mishandled his publicity. GZA rapped,

> The Wu is too slammin' for these Cold Killer labels
> So they ain't had hits since I seen Aunt Mabel
> Be doin' artists in like Cain did Abel
> Now they money's gettin' stuck to the gum under the table
> That's what you get when you misuse what I invent
> Your empire falls and you lose every cent
> For tryin' to blow up a scrub
> Now that thought is just as bright as a twenty-watt light bulb.[110]

Certainly, GZA was justified in some of his complaints against Cold Chillin'—which had a reputation for mismanaging their new artists—but more importantly, he was speaking to an audience that was already predisposed to dislike the products of major recording labels.

Ever since the Sugar Hill Gang scored a hit single with "Rapper's Delight" in 1979, there was a tension in New York rap. The split—nebulous though it may have been—existed between music that leaned towards pop hooks and danceable beats and music that kept the "for the love of the culture" spirit of early hip hop. Discourse flourished among rap fans and practitioners about what constituted "mainstream" rap versus "underground" rap. Mainstream rap was believed to be music diluted by the process of commodification. Essentially, corporate influence corrupted black artistic expression by softening the rough edges to appeal to as wide and diverse an audience as possible. Underground rap, on the other hand, made no creative concessions in order to achieve success. This is the sentiment the Wu-Tang Clan attempted to capture with the content and sound of *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)*.

The high degree of uncertainty that has characterized consumer tastes in the American music industry means that timing, perseverance, and pure luck are major factors dictating which artists rise to the top and which ones sink to the bottom. The Clan found a successful formula by associating themselves with the underground scene in New York. Underground was code for authentic, and at this time, rap audiences (especially on the East Coast) yearned for authenticity. Dr. Dre's *The Chronic* was the dominant sound of the nation after its release in December of 1992. With themes of embellished violence, blatant misogyny, and partying set to slow funky beats, the Clan's *Enter the Wu-Tang*,

released almost a year later, seemed like the polar opposite. It was not danceable, the content was dark and violent but not glorified, and it was "peculiarly sexless" in the words of Simon Price.[111] These aesthetics drew from the New York underground but packaged it in a format that was more marketable to a general audience than to a small niche fan base. But before all this, GZA entered the music industry as The Genius, uncertain of how to balance his underground style with the desires of his label for hit singles and easily marketable personalities.

The Rap Industry on Staten Island

When established record companies realized rap had national appeal, they courted small independent labels, who had the street-level personnel to find the most promising artists. Dan Charnas wrote, "independent labels laid down hip-hop's guerilla paths through the backwaters of the entertainment business. The indies had the maps to the land. The majors, for all their muscle and machinery, did not."[112] Majors were aware of this, but that made them all the more motivated to use their muscle and machinery to get the maps.

Warner Music Group, a subsidiary of the multimedia corporation Warner Communications, bought Cold Chillin' Records in 1988, three years after they acquired half of Tommy Boy Records (they gained full ownership by 1990). This strategy followed a long-held practice in the music industry; one that is periodically employed when independent labels (often ones that promote black music) are believed to be cornering profitable niche markets.[113] With the explosion of independent labels that

accompanied the rise of punk and rap music in the 1970s, it became commonplace in the 1980s for large corporations to subsume them in order to attach their corporate image to cutting edge music. Historically, independent labels have had chronic difficulties manufacturing and distributing music because of their limited resources and networks. This gave large corporations a huge advantage, making it difficult for independents to resist striking deals with them. This is the context in which the future members of the Wu-Tang Clan hoped to transform their love of hip hop culture into a viable career.

The Wu-Tang Clan emerged from a vibrant hip hop community that spanned all of New York City, yet was manifested differently on very localized levels. Staten Island's rap scene garnered very little attention in relation to the other boroughs of New York City. Growing up on Staten Island, GZA recalled that the borough definitely lacked the enthusiasm for hip hop that existed elsewhere in New York City. When he started rhyming, GZA knew very few people on Staten Island who took it seriously, so he often visited family members in the Bronx where he had better access to block parties that boasted the best rappers. GZA also obtained many of the highly coveted bootleg tapes of live performances by some of the most influential acts of the time period: The Cold Crush Brothers, The Treacherous Three, the Fearless Four, and Spoonie G. In addition, GZA drew from a number of nameless MCs who contributed to the art form, yet will never gain recognition for their efforts because they were never recorded.[114]

On Staten Island, GZA cited two unrecorded rappers named Punch and Stevie Steve as formative influences, as well as the Force MCs, who left probably the largest mark on the entire Staten Island rap scene. The group formed in 1981 and Charles "Mercury" Nelson, who taught the other members how to rap, lived down the hall from

GZA.[115] GZA recalled watching the group perform rapping and singing routines on the Staten Island Ferry for tips, which brought them to the attention of the influential New York City DJ, Mr. Magic. He dubbed their style "doo wop hip hop," and they started to gain a following in the New York underground rap scene after a famous battle with the Cold Crush Brothers in 1983.[116] When they secured a recording contract With Tommy Boy the following year, the label's founder, Tom Silverman, changed their name to the Force MDs and marketed them as an updated doo wop group. As the Force MDs, the influential MCs abandoned rapping for a more conventional R&B singing style, though they continued to use hip hop-inspired beats. The MDs even scored a couple major hits on the R&B charts with "Tender Love" in 1985 and their 1987 number one hit, "Love is A House." Their popularity fizzled thereafter, but they were held in high regard for opening the door for other Staten Island rap artists.

By 1981, GZA had formed a group with his cousins, ODB and RZA, called the All in Together Now Crew. Like the Force MDs, they traveled around from borough to borough performing routines and battling other MCs, with ODB (then going by The Professor) often providing the beat boxing for RZA (aka The Scientist) and GZA (the Genius).[117] By the mid-1980s, they were making demos and hanging out with the D.M.D. Crew (Dick 'Em Down Crew), which was a loose collective of friends and MC's from Staten Island's Park Hill Projects that included Raekwon, Method Man, U-God, and Inspectah Deck among others.[118]

The Genius and Cold' Chillin' Records

By the mid-1980s, the Genius/GZA, who was the eldest member of the Clan, was an experienced and serious rapper. Searching for a deal, he ended up hiring a local entrepreneur named Melquan as his manager. At the time, Melquan was the "Funky President" of a label likely owned by his father called Yamak-ka Records (pronounced like 'Jamaica', but also a play on "Your Making Records").[119] In addition, he used his industry connections to start a side business, Melquan Management, to land deals for artists on labels other than his own.[120] RZA's recollection was that "…back then, Melquan was making a good name in the underground," so he and GZA sought out the services of a budding industry insider. GZA affiliated himself with Melquan first, giving an immediate connection to his cousin RZA (at the time going by Rakeem or Prince Rakeem). Melquan ended up managing both men, helping each score a record deal.

The exact circumstances surrounding GZA and Melquan's business agreement are unclear.[121] In an interview with former Yamaka-ka artist Sir Ibu (from the rap group Divine Force), Ibu made a statement that, on the surface, seemed to claim that GZA may have met Melquan through Divine Force. While recording "Holy War (live)," the follow up to their unsuccessful 1987 single "T.V. Guide," Sir Ibu stated that "GZA contacted our record label and he wanted to be a part of it."[122] He continued,

> Anybody who wanted to be a part of it, Melquan would have us come in and we would listen to him. We actually liked him [GZA] a lot, so were like, 'Let's sign him, let's bring him on'. Once he came aboard he was like, 'Hey, I got a cousin too, his name is Raheem [RZA], you might be interested in him'. So he came in and we liked him and said, 'Let's sign him too'. Then he's like, "I've got another cousin, his name is Unique – Ason [Ol' Dirty Bastard].[123]

It is difficult to determine whether Ibu meant that Melquan signed GZA and RZA to

Melquan Management after this event or if Melquan already managed them and Ibu was pushing Melquan to sign GZA and RZA as artists on the Yamak-ka roster. GZA only discusses Sir Ibu in one interview, but his memory seems to support the latter conclusion.

In the interview—originally conducted by Kevin Beacham for his Chicago-based hip hop radio show "Time Travel" and later published on the rap blog *Oh Word*—GZA implied that both he and RZA were already managed by Melquan when he began working with Ibu and Divine Force. When asked about his affiliation with Sir Ibu, GZA replied "That's my brother right there, I've known him for years. Ibu was part of a group—Divine Force—that Melquan was managing. After me and RZA hooked up with Melquan we [Ibu, GZA and RZA] clicked."[124]

Melquan was a significant connection because he fronted the money to GZA to work with a team of professionals to make a demo. GZA recalled, "He put up some money. He put us in the studio—put his money where his mouth was at."[125] This experience would have a major influence on the Clan's future development because it was the GZA and RZA's first exposure to a professional working environment. More than that, Melquan brought in producer Osten Harvey, Jr. aka Easy Mo Bee—who gained fame providing beats for Big Daddy Kane's 1989 album *It's a Big Daddy Thing*—to provide the beats for GZA's songs. Mo Bee remembered, "this tall dude, Melquan, walked up to me and was like, 'You Easy Mo Bee, right?'—'Yeah, yeah'—'I got this new artist I want you to work with, and his name is the Genius." He was like, "I want to do some records with you; you just did some stuff with Kane."[126]

Under his original moniker the Genius, GZA began recording a set of fifteen demo tracks that would become his first studio album, *Words From the Genius.* Melquan

brought the Genius and Easy Mo Bee into Firehouse Studio, which was nestled in a two-bedroom loft across the street from Station 3 of the New York City Fire Department in the Boerum Hill neighborhood of Brooklyn.[127] The studio was owned by Yoram Vazan, an Israeli immigrant who graduated from the Institute of Audio Research in 1981 with a degree in Audio Engineering.[128] He originally purchased the space with his friend, Shlomo Sonnenfeld, who was also an Israeli student at the New York Institute of Audio Research.[129]

In 1987, they opened the studio, then called Such-A-Sound.[130] Neither had much experience with hip hop; Sonnenfeld was mostly involved with New York's punk rock and metal scene as a writer and guitarist while Vazan, up to this point, had worked with mainly Latin jazz musicians.[131] However, Sonnenfeld claimed to have taken an interest in "the new art of sampling," prompting he and Vazan to invest in an Akai S900 sampler—a machine at the cutting edge of sampling technology at the time; an E-mu SP-12—an early digital percussion sampler; and an Atari computer and sequencer—which allowed one to create, store, and program music with or without a synthesizer. Once they placed an advertisement in *Village Voice* promoting their equipment, several rap artists began renting out the studio for twenty dollars an hour.[132]

Easy Mo Bee and his brother, Patrick Harvey aka LG, produced fourteen of the fifteen tracks for the Genius and Mo Bee co-produced Prince Rakeem's first single "Ooh I Love You Rakeem." Since Mo Bee had success with Cold Chillin' artist Big Daddy Kane and because "Melquan had some sort of affiliation with 'Fly Ty' [Cold Chillin' founder Tyrone Williams]," the Genius secured a record deal in 1990.[133] GZA succinctly remembered the situation: "We hit the party scene—stopped paying to get in and all types

of things of that nature. We did some demos and he [Melquan] took it to Fly Ty and he wanted to sign it automatically, and I was in on Cold Chillin'."[134]

GZA's first album, *Words From the Genius*, was released by Cold Chillin' Records in 1991, and it would be a mixed blessing for the young MC. The lead single, "Come Do Me," contained a catchy chorus hook and the Genius bragged about his sexual prowess over an up-tempo beat. The choice of this single reveals the incongruity of the Genius' vision for his own career with the label's marketing capabilities and willingness (or lack thereof) to support new artists. "Come Do Me" was the last song recorded for the album because representatives of Cold Chillin', as GZA described it, said they "needed something commercial." RZA lent some rhymes and GZA switched them around to make what he thought "was cool for R&B hip hop." However, GZA noted the market for this style of rap was already flooded with artists trying to capitalize on its popularity and most people who heard his single had no interest in finding out what else was on the album. "It's a catch-22," said GZA about being recognized as the "Come Do Me" rapper, "it was hurting me but it did good too. That song was known in Florida so every time I went down there I was able to get a show.[135]

On the album cover, the Genius presented himself as just what his name implied. He was rap scholar of sorts, putting a quill pen to the open page of a tome. He was seated at a makeshift desk, surrounded by fourteen volumes labeled "Words from the Genius." Remembering the creative differences between himself and the label over the album cover, GZA stated,

> It was my idea, but it was changed. The books were supposed to be giant, incredibly giant sized books that I would be sitting on, books almost half the size of cars, something real animated. They couldn't get books that big so they got those books that I had on the cover. Then I got the feathered pen and all that to go

along with the name. I just didn't like the sound of it and all that.[136]

The lack of full financial and creative support from Cold Chillin' was not an uncommon practice for music labels that did not want to sink too much money into an unproven artist. "Big Daddy Kane was the king over there at Cold Chillin'," Easy Mo Bee later observed, "so the Genius was *not* going to rise above Kane."[137] In other words, Cold Chillin' was much more willing to put resources into marketing and promotion for an artist like Big Daddy Kane, who already had a devoted fan base. GZA felt like "just another artist on a label with a whole bunch of other artists and there was really no room for me there." Yet, GZA realized the benefits of his time on Cold Chillin' when looking back on it, noting that "even though I wasn't pleased being on that label it still was a step in the door and it allowed room for other opportunities."[138]

In 1991, GZA undertook a tour with other Cold Chillin' artists excluding "the two top dogs" Big Daddy Kane and Biz Markie. The omission of the label's two most commercially successful artists from the lineup limited the tour's chances of drawing large crowds. Indeed, GZA recalled "a lot of the shows were weak. We were getting like 100 people. One place had like 15 people and 8 of them was us."[139]

Additionally, Melquan wanted GZA to have backup dancers at his performances, something GZA had mixed feelings about. While it was commonplace in the late 1980s and early 1990s for male rappers to include two or more male dancers at live shows, but GZA felt uneasy about it because Cold Chillin' "was so cheap they would only let me bring one dancer out."[140] As talks of a second album floundered, GZA and Melquan began disagreeing over the direction of the former's career. *Words From the Genius* "wasn't selling a damn thing" and GZA's family experienced a "sudden tragedy" that

pushed him over the edge, leading him to demand an end to his contract at Cold Chillin'.[141]

At the time of his departure, GZA recalled feeling a great deal of animosity towards those he worked with at Cold Chillin' in particular and the rap music industry as whole. In a 1996 interview, GZA stated

> Cold Chillin', they didn't want to have anything to do with me. They was frontin'. Lyrically, I had a great album—I think so—musically, it wasn't as good as the Wu-Tang material is. Easy Mo Bee produced the album back then but he's ten times better than he was then—he was learning. So, lyrically I had a strong album, musically it was alright. It coulda, it coulda been pushed [marketed more heavily by the label], whatever whatever. It didn't work, it didn't happen.[142]

The ostensible problem with GZA and Easy Mo Bee's artistic relationship was that the beats were created without regards to GZA's rapping style. In essence, Cold Chillin' Records was resting on their laurels by putting the majority of their promotional efforts into established artists and leaving new artists to struggle in relative obscurity. On the other hand, despite the labels' insistence that GZA add "Come Do Me" to the album, the record executives took a relatively hands off approach to the content of *Words From the Genius.* While this approach hurt GZA in the promotional department, it allowed him to make an album basically on his own terms. Unfortunately for GZA, the lack of a sufficient advertisement campaign left most rap fans unaware of his work besides "Come Do Me," which was not representative of GZA's artistic style.

More than his general displeasure with his label, GZA had not wholly developed a consistent public persona. In the music industry during the early 1990s, artists almost required a coherent image, sound, and attitude in order to resonate with increasingly visual-oriented and mass media-consuming audiences. He claimed that RZA and ODB gave him the moniker of 'Genius' and "it just stuck with me" even though GZA said he

"didn't want it because I thought people would look at that name and expect too much, just too much."[143] The name attempted to capitalize upon the fashion in the commercial New York rap scene to adopt aliases and demeanors that accentuated one's intellect. GZA cited another Cold Chillin' artist, Nathaniel Thomas aka Kool G Rap, as the inspiration for the title of Genius. [144] But GZA later called his Genius persona "a stretch" and disparaged it as "nerdy."[145]

GZA's idolization of Kool G Rap is significant, for the latter became one of the most important influences on underground rap in the decade to come. G Rap's influence on GZA's work as both the Genius and as GZA was abundantly clear through notions of masculinity. "Talk Like Sex," from Kool G Rap and DJ Polo's second album *Wanted Dead or Alive* (1990) probably stands as the most obscene rap song released on a mainstream label at this time. Although clearly an exaggerated tale of sexual prowess that played up stereotypes of black men as hypersexual, Kool G Rap vividly describes sexual acts, some of which are so violent that they would be considered sexual assault. For example, G Rap rhymes "swinging with this here stud, you need practice/I'm leaving floods of blood on your mattress," while later stating, "for demonstration, watch me slam her/you'll notice the sound of steady pounding/like a jackhammer once on it, you can't cop out/I'm pounding you down until your eyeballs pop out."[146] In the track "Superfreak," GZA clearly emulated G Rap's pornographic rap style but places it within a storyline about a young woman with a complex psychological process, thus adding, at a minimum, a veneer of social critique.

The multiple songs on *Words From the Genius* that discuss women are significant to our understanding of GZA's conception of masculinity, because his later records,

hardly mention women at all. Therefore, it is beneficial to look closely at GZA's portrayal of women to glean information about his own self-image and his gendered assumptions. This also provides insight into how the other Clan members viewed manhood and women, because they shared a similar belief system about the proper roles of men and women in society.

"Come Do Me" vis-à-vis Words From the Genius

In a 1994 interview, GZA distanced his work from that of Snoop Doggy Dogg, whose 1993 album *Doggystyle* was heavily criticized for misogynistic lyrics and album artwork. GZA did not dismiss Snoop altogether, stating "[p]ersonally, I like his shit," before quickly clarifying "I'm not one to say women are ho's or bitches, I'm not down with that. I'm not comin' with that point of view."[147] GZA did, in fact, refer to women as bitches on occasion, but on the whole, his lyrics as a member of the Wu-Tang Clan did reject the pervasive misogyny of artists like Snoop. Rejection, perhaps, is not the most appropriate term, for GZA's way of 'rejecting' misogynist lyrics was to simply omit women from his rhymes altogether. GZA's peculiar silence speaks to his efforts to reinvent his image following the disappointment of his first album, *Words From the Genius*, on which he rapped extensively about women and sex. Interestingly, his approach on *Words From the Genius* leaned heavily on negative portrayals of women with the exception of the album's only single, "Come Do Me." This makes for a revealing case study about how GZA reconciled conflicting notions of gender and sexuality in order to appeal to both a mainstream audience and an underground audience.

As the title suggests, “Come Do Me” is about sex. Yet, GZA’s narrative was not a simple tale of male sexual conquest. In many ways, it was a tale of two equals engaging in a mature sexual experience. Certainly, this sexual encounter occurs within the context of a pop song, which has traditionally presented sex in unrealistic and often sexist terms, but rap artists like Big Daddy Kane and Father MC (both GZA’s label mates on Cold Chillin’) pioneered the concept of addressing mature sex through a hardcore rapping style. Working within this format, GZA presented a more complex depiction of sex that leant agency to both the male and the female.

The first verse explains how GZA met a woman, whose name he later learns is Shalonda.

> Here I am loungin’ at a hype party
> Then I see this lady with a hellafied body
> With a pair of bedroom eyes that were clocking the Genius
> Well, you see what I mean is
> She had the look as if she was attracted
> To me so what I did, I reacted
> In a manner to show that I was feeling the same
> Now check out the game
> I said lovely, I be The Genius and how ya doin’?
> I'm on a chase and you’re the one that I’m pursuing
> She said it’s a pleasure Genius, I’m doing kinda fine
> But what’s on your mind?
> I said
>
> [Chorus]
>
> Girl
> Come do me
> Yeah baby
> You know what time it is
> That’s right, you sweetheart
> Come do me
> Just me and you baby, just me and you[148]

Thus, the first introduction we get to Shalonda is her physical appearance, which

the music video emphasizes by continually cutting from the party scene to a silhouette of a curvaceous woman dancing behind a thin screen. In addition, his use of the terms "lady," "lovely," "girl" as well as his superficial pick-up line suggest GZA saw himself in a position of social power vis-à-vis the woman. However, neither person is portrayed as a predator or prey—instead, there is mutual attraction. Shalonda initiates contact through her body language ("[s]he had the look as if she was attracted/to me…" and GZA approaches her respectfully "…so what I did, I reacted/in a manner to show that I was feeling the same." Perhaps most significantly, GZA raps from the perspective of Shalonda, giving his potential sexual partner a literal say in the matter. He did so without imitating a woman's voice in the belittling way that was fairly common among male rappers, nor did he make the woman say anything degrading, unintelligent, or submissive.

In the second verse, the two have a conversation that further solidifies their initial sexual attraction to one another.

> I said sexy where you live? Over yonder?
> What's your name?
> She said it's Shalonda
> She said she knew me from back in the days
> And that I had her running on a wild sex craze
> I said now you're kinda big and well-developed
> And parts of your body just made my head swell up
> She said her feelings were so deep for me
> To the point where she wanted to sleep with me
> I said come on babe, I know you're jokin'
> She said if I'm jokin' you must be smokin'
> I said the only thing I wanna be smokin' is your boots
> And she said "I hear ya [troop?]"
> And just from that little bit of conversation
> It put my hormones into activation
> The whole thing just went to my head
> As I held her hands and said
>
> [Chorus]

Baby
Come do me
Just me and you baby
Yeah, talkin' bout you
Come do me
Me and you one-on-one
And I like that

Shalonda and GZA affirm that their sexual desire is consensual. In the chorus, GZA expresses a very personal interest in making the experience special, emphasizing the fact that it will be "me and you one-on-one."

The importance GZA places on having a personal connection with his sexual partner is reinforced by the final verse.

Hey good looking how many times may I say
That your gorgeous smile takes my breath away
Your soft warm little voice is very pleasing
And your tight mini-skirt is kinda teasing
Me, it makes me wanna do the nasty
And you got the look of being very classy
So go ahead and whip it on me
As Latifah said, "gimme that body"
So you see right there I desire you
I'm not a pimp and I don't want to hire you
Cause that's not what the Genius is about
Let my love slide in and never slip out

The second half of this verse is most significant for two reasons. First, GZA invokes the hook "give me body!" from Queen Latifah's song "Come Into My House." Set to a house beat, the song was ostensibly about dancing although it could easily be read as sexual innuendo. More importantly, Queen Latifah symbolized a new generation of women-centric, politically conscious, extremely talented female rappers. Latifah addressed numerous controversial topics concerning women in her raps such as politicians' vilification of poor black women ("The Evil That Men Do"), overcoming stereotypes ("Ladies First"), and sexual expectations ("That's the Way We Flow"). At the time,

Latifah was a polarizing figure within the rap community, and many vilified her as anti-man. Therefore, GZA's shout out to Latifah places him in at least partial solidarity with her political views and lyrical ability.

Second, GZA explicitly states he does not see himself as a pimp, which had become a romanticized figure in the urban black masculine imagination primarily due to the influence of Blaxploitation films in the 1970s. This disavowal of the pimp image serves to equalize the power relations between the man and the woman. The pimp represents the epitome of male power and female subservience in a sexual relationship, and GZA flatly rejects this, opting instead for a relationship founded upon mutual respect. The final line, "[l]et my love slide in and never slip out"—in spite of its vivid sexual imagery—uses the word "never" to imply that a deeper connection exists between them: a connection that transcends sex.

However, the remainder of *Words From the Genius* GZA took a drastically different stance towards women. On "Stay Out of Bars," GZA calls a bar maid a "whore," chastises a prostitute for masturbating in a phone booth while talking on a sex line, and finally, he shoots up a transvestite bar after he and RZA picked up two women who turned out to be men. "What Silly Girls Are Made Of " was an opprobrium leveled against young single moms on welfare, "dense" girls who try to seduce men for their money, and prostitutes who GZA calls "bloodsuckers." Finally "Superfreak" tells the story of a one-night stand with a lustful "hot little bitch" in pornographic detail.

Conclusion: Conflicting Images of Women

The mixed attitudes towards women presented on *Words From the Genius*, points to a larger issue within rap music and American society at large: the false dichotomy that portrays young (primarily black) women as either good or bad girls defined primarily through sexuality. Women usually fell within the category of "sistahs" or "bitches," though there were some grey areas. Gwendolyn D. Pough added nuance to this either-or situation by identifying three stereotypical representations of the "ghetto girl": the "baby mama," the "tweener," and the "hoochie" or "chickenhead."[149] The baby mama is a variation on the welfare queen, in that she is usually a young single woman who has one or more kids for which she receives welfare or child support to handle expenses. The "tweener" is a young woman with "bourgeois aspirations," who is usually wary of sex so that she will not get tied down in the ghetto.[150] The hoochie is basically one of the guys while the chickenhead hangs around the guys in order to get "money, protection, sex, or al three."[151]GZA explores each of these stereotypes in different songs, though he attempts to expand the limits of the stereotypes by contextualizing these characters' actions within realistic situations. This does not justify his sexist rhetoric, but it demonstrates that GZA was conscious of stereotypes about black sexuality and was playing with these ideas to some extent.[152]

GZA, like the other members of the Clan, rationalized their attitudes towards women largely through the lens of the Nation of Gods and Earths (NGE). Also known as the "Five Percenters," the NGE was a break away sect of the Nation of Islam. Those who wished to be members were required to learn the "120 lessons" by rote. The lessons

taught that eighty-five percent of the population was ‘deaf, dumb, and blind’, while ten percent exploited the eighty-five percent for their own gain, and the remaining five percent were the ‘poor righteous teachers’ responsible for freeing the eighty-five percent from ‘mental slavery’. Black men were celebrated as individual ‘Gods’ while women were ‘Earths’ because they bore and nurtured children.

Since GZA considered himself a part of the Five Percent—a ‘God’ in his own right—his lyrics about women reflect his didactic and even condescending attitutudes about how a respectable ‘Earth’ should act. Thus, GZA criticized those women whom he felt were acting like eighty-five percenters. His conception of what behaviors qualified a woman as dumb, deaf, and blind largely followed the politics of respectability that had been employed in different historical contexts in the U.S. to judge the propriety of black women. For GZA, the Clan, and other members of the NGE, notions of respectability centered on the ‘cleanliness’ of women’s bodies and minds. Were their thoughts and sexual behaviors appropriate for a black woman, or were they unhealthy habits that hrt the whole race? GZA’s insinuation was that prostitutes, transvestites, women wanting a financially stable partner, and sexually available women all transgressed from his conception of female respectability. It was GZA’s job, then, to make these eighty-fiver percenters aware of their harmful behaviors so that they may one day reform themselves into respectable Earths.

When GZA reemerged in the Wu-Tang Clan almost two years later, his lyrics barely dealt with sex or women at all. As a part of his reinvention as an underground artist, it seems, GZA consciously avoided writing anything like “Come Do Me.” Whether the reasoning, from this pint onward, GZA omitted women almost completely from his

lyrics. Writer, Ian Cohen, even went so far as to say GZA's solo album *Liquid Swords* was "one of the least sexual hip-hop records ever made." Without much exaggeration, Cohen asserted that "[o]ff the top of my head, there are probably two total lines which acknowledge women as physical beings." He attributed this to GZA's "lack of commercial ambition," hinting at a crucial point: the audience for underground rap consisted mostly of males and it was perceived as such by the artists producing the music.[153]

ENDNOTES

ENDNOTES

[103] The Genius, "Those Were the Days," *Words From the Genius*, Cold Chillin', 1991.

[104] Q with Jian Ghomeshi, "GZA on Q TV," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VJ9gJeggQJI.

[105] GZA, interview by Kevin Beacham, *Time Travel*, 2002. Republished under title "Time Travelin' with the Genius," *Oh Word*, blog, September 19, 2005, accessed January 30, 2014, http://archive.ohword.com/features/33/time-travel-with-the-genius?pg=all.

[106] "My Melody" was released in 1986 as the B-side to the single "Eric B. is President," both of which appeared on Eric B. and Rakim's debut album, *Paid in Full*. Big Daddy Kane's "Raw" served as the lead single for his 1988 album *It's a Big Daddy Thing*, which hit stores a year after the single dropped.

[107] GZA's take on explicit sex can be heard on "Superfreak" which closely resembled Kool G Rap's song "Talk Like Sex" (1990). Kool G Rap's "Road to Riches" (1989), set an important precedent for rapper's wanting to discuss the finer points of drug dealing, a concept GZA ran with on "Life of A Drug Dealer."

[108] Boogie Down Productions, "Ghetto Music," *Ghetto Music: The Blueprint of Hip Hop* BMG / Sony Music Entertainment, 1989.

[109] GZA, interview by Kevin Beacham, *Time Travel*.

[110] "Protect Ya Neck," The Wu-Tang Clan, *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)*, Loud, 1993.

[111] Simon Price, "20 Years On: enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers) Revisited," *Quietus*, December 9, 2013, accessed on February 23, 2014, http://thequietus.com/articles/14070-wu-tang-clan-enter-the-36-chambers.

[112] Charnas, *The Big Payback*, 269.

[113] For a discussion of how this process played out in R&B and blues music, see Reebee Garofalo, "Crossing Over: 1939-1989," *Split Image: African Americans in the Mass Media* (Washington D.C.: Howard University Press, 1990), 57-121.

[114] GZA, interview by Kevin Beacham, *Time Travel.*

[115] Ibid.; Stevie D, interview by JayQuan, "Stevie D of the Force Mds by JayQuan," *jayquan dot com*, 2005, accessed August 18, 2014, http://www.thafoundation.com/stevied.htm.

[116] Ibid.; GZA, interview by Kevin Beacham, *Time Travel*; Stevie D, interview by UrbanBridgez.com, "Exclusive: Force MD's Speak to UrbanBridgez.com," *UrbanBridges.com*, November 6, 2009, accessed August 18, 2014, http://urbanbridgez.com/ubgblog/2009/11/06/exclusive-force-mds-speak-to-urbanbridgezcom/.

[117] Beat boxing is when a performer creates drumbeats and sound effects using only one's mouth and vocal chords.

[118] Each member of the Wu-Tang Clan came to hip hop from different pathways.

Raekwon recalled that he befriended Ghostface through "some mic-fight shit" around 1985 or 1986. ("Chairman" Jeff(erson) Mao, "Interview with Raekwon Pre-'Only Built 4 Cuban Linx…' (1995)," *egotripland,* August 1, 2011, [originally conducted June 1995], accessed November 27, 2013, http://www.egotripland.com/raekwon-pre-cuban-linx-ego-trip-magazine-interview-june-1995/). Raekwon lived in Park Hill, a Staten Island public housing project which was home to many drug dealers who were at war with those in the Stapleton Projects, where Ghostface resided. However, each were close friends of RZA and were involved in making demo tapes in the late 1980s. Raekwon and U-God became friends at a very young age because their mothers attended school together and lived in the same building in Brownsville, Brooklyn. (U-God, Interview by Brian Josephs, "U-God Talks 2 Chainz, New Book and Wu-Tang Album Title," *The Boombox*, October 31, 2013, accessed Septmeber 29, 2013, http://theboombox.com/u-god-keynote-speaker-interview/).

U-God stated that he was a "late bloomer" when it came to hip hop. He began rapping around 1985, but he served primarily as a beat boxer—one who vocally imitated drum beats—for Cappadonna and Method Man. (U-God, interview by Riotsound.com, *Riotsound*, 2005, accessed September 29, 2013, http://riotsound.com/hip-hop/rap/interviews/Ugod-of-Wu-tang/index.php; U-God, *Rise of a Fallen Soldier*).

Method Man's introduction to rapping is not well documented, mainly because he chooses not to divulge too many details about his youth. When discussing ODB's penchant for taking lines from his fellow group members— he claimed that ODB used some of his lyrics for the track "Dog Shit" on the 1997 album *Wu-Tang Forever*— Method Man noted that he was writing rhymes by the time he was fifteen (around 1986). (Matthew Perpetua, "Method Man: Ol' Dirty Bastard Stole Rhymes," *Rolling Stone*, October 19, 2001). Living in the Park Hill Projects, which was known as a place to acquire high quality marijuana, Method Man recalled that he performed rap verses for the numerous people who came through to make drug deals. ("Back on the Block With Method Man | Grantland Channel," YouTube Video, 3:50, posted by Grantland Channel, November 8, 2013, accessed February 16, 2014, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MF6bjN9I4XE#t=100).

Inspectah Deck is similarly nebulous about when he became invested in rapping. Only a handful of interviews broach the subject, and from these, there is little evidence to suggest that he took rhyming seriously before he went to jail in 1985. Before he became an MC, Deck noted that DJing piqued his interest first, and he would often "put the speakers in the window and cut up [records] for the whole outside." When recalling this time period, the song "Dear Yvette" stuck out in his mind as one that he used to practice his DJ techniques. The song was from L.L. Cool J album *Radio*, released in November of 1985; therefore, once Deck "[e]ventually" followed the example of his MC friend Ratchet Rush and "started rhyming" himself, it was likely 1986 or later. (Inspectah Deck, interview by Dark 7 Invader and The Reccollectah, "Inspectah Deck – [The Manifesto Of A Rebel (Wu-Element Interview Series # 3)], May 11, 2010, accessed February 17, 2014, http://wu-international.com/misc_albums/Interviews/InspectahDeck%20Interview.htm.)

Masta Killa admitted that while he was a lifelong fan of hip hop, when he "came amongst my Wu-family, I mean, they were on such a—a different lyrical level… I had to basically go back to basic training… before I was ready to touch the microphone." ("Masta Killa Interview with MusicFeen.com," YouTube Video, 16:56, posted by AZ TV, December 20, 2012, accessed February 17, 2014, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VJ9gJeggQJI). In fact, Masta Killa had no intention of rapping for a living up until he heard the demo for "Protect Ya Neck," in 1992. With encouragement from his chess-playing buddy GZA, Mastat Killa scrapped his plan of attaining a GED and Bachelor's degree to record with the Clan. He "decided to take the art form of rhyming a little bit more serious," and wrote a verse for GZA to look over. Masta Killa, then stated that GZA read it and told him "You wrote this?—if you can learn how to say that, you got a job." ("Masta Killa Speaks On Early Days of Wu-Tang," YouTube Video, 5:00, posted by naturesoundsmusic, December 20, 2012, accessed July 3, 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TEDjC6Q9Z9w). This verse would later appear on "Da Mystery of Chessboxin'," and even though it was Masta Killa's lone contribution to *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)*, it cemented his place in the group.

[119] "Funky Pres" or "Funky President" Melquan appear on the labels of Yamak-ka records such as Divine Force's "Holy War (Live)." On that track, Sir Ibu demonstrated the flexible pronunciation of Yamak-ka with the line "You're making records, is what I am making." Another prominent underground rapper of the time, Just-Ice, noted in 2005 that Melquan had "his own record label called 'You're Making Records." (Just-Ice, interview by Troy L. Smith, The Foundation, Spring 2005, http://www.thafoundation.com/justice.htm); RZA, on the other hand, remembered it as "Jamaica" Records. Also, RZA is the only source I found that connected Melquan's father to Yamak-ka. He stated, "His [Melquan's] father had the label, Yamak-ka Records." (RZA, interview by Phara, DJ Poom, Finesse, and Bashir, *HipHopCore.net*, May 2005, http://www.hiphopcore.net/interviews/93%7Ceng-rza.html). It is uncertain what the nature of Melquan's father's role was, but regardless, it points out that the commercialization of hip hop did not just benefit the very poor and the very rich, as the dominant narrative of hip hop's growth suggests. Those with some savings or with the right relationships found numerous ways to seize opportunities during rap's Golden Age" in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This would also be true of the Wu-Tang Clan, who

benefitted from RZA's mother paying his rent and from RZA and GZA's contacts within the music business.

[120] Not much information is available about Melquan's business ventures, apart from the fact that they existed and people knew about them. The only evidence I found that indicated Melquan Management was a separate entity from Yamak-ka was a promotional poster of the Genius, where a "Melquan Management" logo sits in the bottom right corner.

[121] In interviews, GZA makes no specific reference as to how they met or knew each other. For example, he said "I ran into Melquan and somehow he became our manager."

[122] Sir Ibu, interview by Robbie Ettelson, "Sir Ibu: The Unkut Interview," *Unkut.com*, January 21, 2014, accessed January 29, 2014, http://www.unkut.com/2014/01/sir-ibu-the-unkut-interview/.

[123] Ibid., Ol' Dirty Bastard was never managed by Melquan, nor did he receive a recording contract until his involvement in the Wu-Tang Clan.

[124] GZA, interview by Kevin Beacham, *Time Travel*; In line with GZA's insinuation that he met Melquan before the Divine Force "Holy War" recording session, RZA asserts that he took the initiative to connect with Melquan. In the song "Problems" from an early Wu-Tang demo tape, RZA rhymed "so I make the demo tape with my voice on track/took it to Melquan, he sent it back/with a note attached sayin' he admired me/made me a contract and then hired me." No other sources have yet surfaced about this moment, so RZA's chain of events must be accepted with extreme caution, for the song "Problems" is a dramatized "come-up" narrative common to rap music. In such songs, the artist highlights his or her struggles with issues such as poverty, crime, and more specific hardships in order to showcase their dedication to the art of rap or their ability to act as breadwinners. In "Problems," RZA exposes what he poses as his actual psychological state regarding a number of external stressors. He describes seemingly realistic situations about his friend talking behind his back, his girlfriend breaking up with him after he tells her his alcoholic father beat him, and now nobody is inviting him out with them. At the end of the second verse, RZA reaches rock bottom and toys around with the idea of committing suicide. This sets up the concluding 'come-up' verse where RZA overcomes his mental anguish with positive thinking and he begins putting in the hard work necessary to make his own destiny. In this context appears the line about Melquan. As it should be clear, establishing a chronology of GZA and RZA's early forays into the music industry from the available sources presents an insurmountable challenge at times. The unreliability of human memory found in oral sources, coupled with the ulterior motives behind song lyrics makes reconstructing an accurate timeline impossible in this case. Therefore, the greater importance of the previous and following discussion may not be who was influenced by whom. Rather, the story of RZA and GZA's first experiences as professional musicians demonstrates the basic necessary of cultivating the right

relationships on a professional and informal level in order to get a chance in the music industry.

[125] GZA, interview by Kevin Beacham, *Time Travel*.

[126] Easy Mo Bee, interview by Christopher Daniel, "Easy Mo Bee: Mo' Better Blues," *Blues and Soul*, July 17, 2010, accessed January 22, 2014, http://www.bluesandsoul.com/feature/578/easy_mo_bee_mo_betta_blues/.

[127] Phillip Mlynar, "Interview: Yoram Vazan of The Firehouse," *Red Bull Music Academy*, June 6, 2013, accessed January 31, 2014, http://www.redbullmusicacademy.com/magazine/yoram-vazan-interview.

[128] Yoram Vazan, "Bio," *Firehouse Studio – Tel Aviv*, 2013, accessed February 15, 2014, http://www.vazanmastering.com/bio.

[129] Shlomo Sonnenfeld, "About," *Lofiles Music,* accessed February 15, 2014, http://lofiles.org/about/.

[130] Vazan, quoted in Mlynar, "Interview: Yoram Vazan," *Red Bull Music Academy.*

[131] Sonnenfeld, "About," *Lofiles Music.*; Vazan, "Bio," *Firehouse Studio – Tel Aviv*.

[132] Sonnenfeld, "About," *Lofiles Music.*; Vazan, quoted in Mlynar, "Interview: Yoram Vazan," *Red Bull Music Academy.* Sonnenfeld and Vazan would part ways sometime in 1988, but not before they served as engineers for Audio Two's first album, *What More Can I Say?*, as well as that of their half sister, MC Lyte's *Lyte as a Rock*. Sonnenfeld left to open a studio of his own, while Vazan stayed put and renamed the business Firehouse Studio.

[133] GZA, interview by Kevin Beacham, *Time Travel*.

[134] Ibid. RZA claimed he and GZA finished recording their demos sometime in 1988, however it appears that Melquan did not contract Easy Mo Bee until after the release of *It's a Big Daddy Thing* in September of 1989. Thus, their demos were probably recorded in late 1989 or early 1990. The circumstances surrounding RZA's signing to Tommy Boy are even more veiled. RZA has said, "[Melquan] signed me and GZA on his label, but to manage us. That's how Melquan was able to go to Tommy Boy and secure a single deal for myself with an album option, and go to Cold Chillin' and secure a single deal and an album option for GZA. (RZA, interview by Phara, DJ Poom, Finesse, and Bashir, *HipHopCore.net*). No information exists as of yet regarding Melquan's links to Tommy Boy, or what exactly happened to get Prince Rakeem signed. The only connection that stands out between RZA and Tommy Boy at this time was through Prince Paul. RZA noted that Prince Paul, the producer of Tommy Boy artist De La Soul's 1988 album *3 Feet High and Rising* also programmed the hi-hat percussion for "Ooh I Love You

Rakeem." (RZA, *The Wu-Tang Manual*, 190). While it is mere speculation that Prince Paul's place in Tommy Boy had anything to do with RZA's signing to the label, it is worthwhile to consider it as a possibility given the lack of evidence about the true sequence of events.

[135] GZA, interview by Kevin Beacham, *Time Travel*.

[136] GZA, interview by Alexander Fruchter, *Closed Sessions,* October 13, 2013, accessed January 17, 2014, http://www.closedsessions.com/2013/10/tbt-interview-gza-words-from-the-genius-2005/. Originally published November 30, 2005.

[137] Easy Mo Bee, interview by Ryan Proctor "Archive Easy Mo Bee Interview – Part One," *Old to the New – Ryan Proctor's Beats, Rhymes & Hip-Hop Nostalgia*, January 13, 2009, accessed January 22, 2014, https://oldtothenew.wordpress.com/2009/01/13/archive-easy-mo-bee-interview-part-one-originally-printed-in-blues-soul-933-nov-2004/. Originally published in *Blues & Soul* 933 (November 2004).

[138] GZA, interview by Kevin Beacham, *Time Travel*.

[139] Ibid.

[140] Ibid.

[141] Ibid.; While GZA makes no indication as to what the "sudden tragedy" may have been, there is a possibility it was his mother's passing. When asked about what his mother thought of his rap career in 2008, GZA first remarked that she had passed away, then shared several memories about her, all of which occurred during his time on Cold Chillin'. This is not conclusive proof that his mother's death was the event that precipitated his departure from Cold Chillin', but his recollections seem to suggest that this may have been the case. The following is the transcript from the interview. [Interviewer Vish Khanna] "What does your mom wish you were doing instead?" [GZA] "My moms was one of my biggest supporters. She passed away but she was one of my biggest supporters and one of my biggest haters. I wouldn't say hater but, at one point, when things weren't going well, she had her little lines to throw, especially when I quit that city job. Lines like 'That damned hip-hop' and 'Hammer's successful 'cuz he pray'. But she was always one of my biggest supporters. My family always gave parties and dances and, when I was on Cold Chillin' Records, my mother would always bring my 'Come Do Me' single along and ask the DJ to play it, so she was a big time supporter." (GZA, interview by Vish Khanna, in "Questionnaire," *Exclaim.ca*, November 2008, accessed February 17, 2014, http://exclaim.ca/Features/Questionnaire/gza).

[142] "Classic Genius Interview," YouTube Video, posted by Rap Entertainment Television, June 3, 2010, [interview originally conducted 1996], accessed October 5, 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VpGpWIMm9QM&list=RD02JfliUn6G73E.

[143] GZA, interview by Alexander Fruchter, *Closed Sessions*.

[144] GZA listed the following rappers as influential for his name choice: Educated Rapper of UTFO, Wise Intelligent of Poor Righteous Teachers, and Knowledge Reigns Supreme Over Nearly Everyone (KRS-One) of Boogie Down Productions. (GZA, interview by Alexander Fruchter, *Closed Sessions*). Kool G Rap's name stood for Kool Genius of Rap, a play on the 1981 hit song "Genius Rap" by Dr. Jeckyll and Mr. Hyde, which sampled the Tom Tom Club's "Genius of Love" from the same year.

[145] GZA, interview by Alexander Fruchter, *Closed Sessions*.

[146] Kool G Rap & DJ Polo, "Talk Like Sex," *Wanted Dead Or Alive*, Cold Chillin', 1990.

[147] GZA, interview by Agnus Batey, *Quietus*.

[148] The Genius, "Come Do Me," *Words From the Genius*.

[149] Gwendolyn D. Pough, *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 2004), 134.

[150] Ibid.

[151] Ibid., 135.

[152] Imani Perry explores this notion in depth, especially in her discussion of the "badman" and "gangsta" constructions of masculinity in rap music. *Prophets of the Hood*, 124-147.

[153] Ian Cohen, "Liquid Swords: Chess Box Deluxe Edition," under "Reviews," *Pitchfork*, July 27, 2012, accessed March 9, 2014, http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/16857-liquid-swords-chess-box-deluxe-edition/.

CHAPTER 3
"FROM THE SLUMS OF SHAOLIN": BLACK ORIENTALISM, HONG KONG ACTION CINEMA, AND THE WU-TANG CLAN

On the evening of January 21, 2004, five representatives from various races of the United States sat on a large stage in front of an enthusiastic New York City crowd. Delegates from the white, black, Latino, Jewish, and Asians/Chinese races were either making last minute phone calls or calmly waiting for the ceremony to commence. One of the three announcers providing commentary for the event welcomed the television-viewing audience to "first and maybe only" Racial Draft. The purpose of the draft was for the various delegations to claim the most important mixed race people in American sports and entertainment for their respective race "once and for all."

This was the premise of Dave Chappelle's final sketch from the first episode of his eponymous television show's second season. To add another level of absurd gravitas, Chappelle's Racial Draft parodies the media spectacle surrounding professional sport drafts such as those of the National Football League or the National Basketball Association. By portraying race as a personal identifier that can simply be attributed to a person without their input and using ambiguous racial labels like "Jew" or "Latino," Chappelle thoroughly satirizes the arbitrary nature of racial classification. Undeterred, the delegates, commentators, draftees, and audience all take the draft extremely serious for one's racial identity, however meaningless it may be on one level, holds very deep meanings on another. The first pick of the draft went to the black delegation, and they chose Tiger Woods, who was reportedly of African American, Caucasian, Chinese, and Native American ancestry. Woods, played by Chappelle, could barely contain his

excitement because he felt that he could finally express his true self through a black male identity. Chappelle portrays Woods as a bourgeois character whose notions of what constitutes black identity are a string of crude stereotypes, a commentary on the intersectionality of class, gender, and racial identity. Immediately following Woods' acceptance speech, an announcer received word that the "Now 100% Black" golfer was dropped from all of his endorsement contracts. With this, Chappelle confronted the viewer with the fact that simply being a young black man in America can have negative material consequences.

Each delegation proceeded with their choices—the Jews selected musician Lenny Kravitz; the Latinos chose former Cuban expatriate Elián González "before the white people tried to adopt him as one of their own… again"; the whites haggled with the black delegation to keep white rapper Eminem and make the "100 per cent black" Republican politicians, Colin Powell and Condoleeza Rice, official members of the white race in exchange for O.J. Simpson.

Lastly, a man in a silk Chinese jacket with a phenotypically "Asian" appearance—epicanthic fold, straight black hair, short stature—approached the podium. He was announced as the representative of the Chinese delegation, but the descriptive graphic that appeared on the screen read "Asians." This could be read as simple mistake on the part of the Chappelle's staff, or it could be an intentional incongruity to poke fun at oversimplified racial labels, or it may be suggestive of the misunderstood place Asian and Chinese people hold in Americans' imaginations. The man proclaimed, "the Asian delegation chooses the RZA, the GZA, U-God, Inspectah Deck, Ghostface Killah, the Wu-Tang Clan!"

In the eyes of Chappelle and his writing partner Neal Brennan, the Wu-Tang Clan make a perfect punch line because they have zero Asian 'blood', yet their art and image was so indebted to Asian cultural products, that they could defy genetics and become honorary Asians. Was the joke funny because kung fu films were viewed as an preposterous (even illegitimate) way to familiarize oneself with Chinese culture? Or was it funny because the Clan turned their weird obsession with kung fu films into massively successful business venture (a ridiculous notion that actually happened) and changing races seemed like a logically absurd next step? Or was it funny because Americans 'know' a bunch of black guys simply cannot be a part of the Asian race? Perhaps the answer lies within each of these explanations.

In his acceptance speech, RZA stated "this is big for us yo, 'cause, we've always been a fan of the kung fu and the Chinese culture and shit so it's like bong bong!" Rather than dismiss this statement as frivolous, the idea that the Clan could be *fans* of both kung fu films and Chinese culture is significant.

Fundamentally, a 'fan' is a product of modernity. The Wu-Tang Clan became fans of Chinese culture by utilizing the mass media to consume commercial products like kung fu movies, and they reemployed that version of Chinese culture in their music and image. This repackaged Asianess was accessible to American consumers, who could easily become fans of "kung fu and the Chinese culture and shit" if they were not already. By positioning themselves as fans of—as opposed to aficionados or specialists in—Chinese culture the Clan situate themselves within the realm of popular culture, not high culture. By doing so, they did not claim to be experts in Chinese culture, but their carefully chosen kung fu film samples demonstrated they had a deep knowledge and

appreciation for Hong Kong action cinema. This helped the Clan accrue cultural capital within an "economy of fandom," which allowed other kung fu film fans to confirm the Clan's status as passionate fans.

In 1993, the Wu-Tang Clan made a huge splash in the rap music industry with their groundbreaking debut album, *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)*. Their strange mixture of kung fu film samples, urban dystopian narratives, dark humor, avant-garde music production, and pop culture references, made the group instantly recognizable and successful to audiences of all races, ethnicities, genders, and classes. To understand why the Wu-Tang Clan became such a cultural phenomenon, an appropriate starting point would be the name itself. Most striking about the name the 'Wu-Tang Clan', may be the simple fact that it refers to a sect of Taoist Chinese monks who built a temple complex on Wudang Mountain in the early fifteenth century.[154] How did a group of young men from Staten Island decide this was the idea that would make them a lot of money? This chapter answers this question by looking at the role of Hong Kong action cinema—a genre that is commonly referred to in the U.S. as 'kung fu' or 'martial arts'— in shaping the outward identity and marketing strategy of the Wu-Tang Clan.

After a short discussion of the business considerations that went into the Clan's sampling of kung fu movies and martial arts imagery, a portion of the chapter examines the economic, social, and cultural processes that made these films available and appealing to the Clan. As film studies expert Janet Harbord stated, "The paths of filmic circulation, whilst not strictly determined or fixed, deliver different film cultures to locations with diverse symbolic status."[155] In many cases, Hong Kong martial arts films were created specifically to appeal to male audiences in foreign countries, so they often idealized

traditional Chinese masculine virtues. This formula would resonate with Americans, who were increasingly intrigued and entranced by Asian culture following WWII and especially in the wake of the counterculture and anti-Vietnam War movements. In particular, working class black American males in major cities were drawn to martial arts films throughout the 1970s and 1980s due to the status of motion pictures as a central form of urban entertainment, cinema's history as community and identity builder for African American spectators, the 'orientalist' appeal of Chinese cultural products, and the masculine values reinforced by the movies.

I also explore what English professor Amy Aburo Ongiri called, the complex "ways in which African Americans are capable of reading and translating cultural cues, even within the complications that arise with the transnational migration of popular cultural across boundaries and borders."[156] The Clan's exploration of martial arts philosophy and its applicability to their own everyday experiences demonstrates that a complex reading of culture was taking place based on the subversive traditions of black cinema spectatorship and the efforts of black youth to understand the world around them. Yet, by using the Wu-Tang Clan as an example, it is clear that they capitalized upon the "black Orientalist" perspective that characterized many working class African American youths' interpretations of the movies.[157]

The concept of black Orientalism references Edward Said's foundational 1978 work *Orientalism*, which posits that the Orient is constructed in opposition to the Occident, but in this case, from the Occident perspective emerges from the epistemological viewpoint of African Americans. The social distance of black consumers from the producers of kung fu films—in conjunction with the limitations of cinema as a

medium for cultural transmission—often made Chinese culture in such movies as static and inflexible. This may have led black spectators such as the members of the Clan to misunderstand aspects of Chinese culture, but this did not prevent them from identifying the morals of the narratives nor from appreciating human experiences presented from an ostensibly non-Western perspective.

Some may see the Clan's interpretations of Hong Kong action cinema as an example of black youth reading across culture in ways that are distinct from white consumers. Yet, the Clan promoted their readings of kung fu films in order to publicize and legitimize the marketing concept of their music and their brand. This suggests that the interpretations of kung fu movies forwarded by the Clan are by no means representative of black youth, but instead, are a very particular manifestation of black spectatorship driven by the desire for material gain. Thus, the black Orientalism displayed by the Clan is very intentionally crafted to appeal to an American audience that is predisposed to think of Asia from Orientalist perspectives. The commercial interests shaping the Orientalism of the Wu-Tang Clan are powerful, for their brand identity relies on people connecting with their martial arts concept. Corporate influence does not preclude all possibility that the Clan felt genuine emotions or drew concrete life lessons from viewing kung fu films. But it certainly blurs the line between authentic human expression and market demand, to the point where the two are almost indistinguishable.

To understand why the Clan's martial arts concept had such appeal to black consumers in particular, it is important to examine Hong Kong action cinema from its inception in the early twentieth century through its introduction to—and subsequent success on—American soil half-century later. From the 1970s to the early 1990s, the Wu-

Tang Clan came to understand East Asian culture almost exclusively through the medium of the action film, whether at theaters or at home. An examination of the circumstances surrounding the production and consumption of these films, as well as the historical actors involved in each process, helps explain why the Wu-Tang Clan exhibited their particular manifestation of black Orientalism in their music and why fans were inclined to accept it.

Uncovering these transnational linkages demonstrates how most African Americans in large cities gained access to Hong Kong cultural products in the first place. This is important because the members of the Wu-Tang Clan, for the most part, experienced Chinese culture through the lens of Hong Kong action cinema. The expression of Chinese culture through this medium was limited by the production team behind the movies as well as the product itself. Cultural nuances are difficult to convey in film format, and for storytelling purposes, they are often not even desirable. Politically and economically motivated interpretations of Chinese culture were ingrained in the movies. As a result, the limitations of cinema as a truth-telling medium often presented black youths with a problematic version of Chinese culture, but the cinema also made China intelligible, allowing for complex readings of culture across time and space.

The Wu-Tang Clan capitalized on the cult following kung fu films garnered among black consumers, who could find meaning in the storylines, characters, and the messages of the movies. At the same time, the Clan employed their martial arts concept in a decontextualized fashion that made it accessible to consumers with limited knowledge about kung fu films or Chinese culture. By applying a so-called ‘martial arts philosophy’ to rap music, the Clan crafted a pastiche of ‘Asian’, ‘American’, and

'African American' cultural values that appealed to consumers with varying levels of familiarity with kung fu. By publicizing their complex readings of martial arts films, the Wu-Tang Clan reinforced the coherence of their marketing concept and the humanity of their corporate image. This contributed to the strong connections fans felt to the Wu-Tang brand, as it gave their music a unique theme and a sense of purpose.

Constructing an Identity, Marketing a Concept

Constructing the identity of the Wu-Tang Clan, the rap group, was necessarily an act of constructing a brand. In the post-Beatles, MTV-era of the U.S. pop music industry, successful musicians almost always needed a memorable image to augment their sound or to act as a vehicle for their music to even be heard in the first place. The distinctiveness of the group's image, relied on the sheer volume of members, which was not necessarily a new concept, but the way it was packaged was completely different than anything before.

Influenced most immediately by the dynamics of Marley Marl's rap collective the Juice Crew, the sentiment of A Tribe Called Quest and their Native Tongues collective concept, as well as the Hit Squad's influential posse cut "The Head Banger," the Wu-Tang Clan drew from all three to fashion their own collective.[158] The idea was to bring together family, friends, and the best talent from Staten Island to make an album with both posse cuts and individuals' songs to help launch solo careers. Raekwon explained in a 2012 interview with Alvin Blanco that the Clan modeled themselves after the Hit Squad—made up of Eric Sermon and Parrish Smith (aka EPMD), K-Solo, Redman, Das

EFX, and DJ Scratch among others—to take advantage of the growing market for posse cuts and the demand for groups outside of New York's four main boroughs.

> And we always used to say, alright, you see Redman? We got Method Man. You see EPMD? You got Rae and Ghost… we was always trying to match their group integrity, because we felt like they was the shit… we just was worried about making where we from hot. You know, they was from Jersey, and they gettin it in. Long Island, and all of that. So, you know, Staten Island was still a mystery to everybody.[159]

The idea behind this approach was to pave the way for each member to sign a solo deal with a different recording label and expand their business interests horizontally through the music industry. To make this project work, the group containing nine vastly different MC's required some organizing principles.[160]

On *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)*, the group centered their identity on kung fu metaphors, an unabashedly do-it-yourself aesthetic, and a form of benevolent commercialism that was designed to uplift the black community on Staten Island. These principles helped make the Clan intelligible to a wide spectrum of music consumers, and served as a launching pad for each individual to craft their own identity and pursue solo recording contracts. The business plan drawn up by RZA had always involved signing each member off to a different label, but this was designed to benefit the group as a whole, not just individuals. One members' solo success boosted the entire Wu-Tang brand, and everyone would get a turn in the spotlight, in theory.[161] Gerard Butler, who grew up on Staten Island with members of the Clan, believed this collective identity was essential to their success: "As the group they become something bigger. Because Wu-Tang becomes like one person in a sense."[162] Individualism always occurred within the context of the group and the term "clan" was utilized to invoke an image of kinship, but also to obscure the very intentional corporate branding that was taking place. RZA

created Wu-Tang Production Co. before the Clan had any money from selling records, an indication that RZA's ambition was to make Wu-Tang a sustainable capitalist venture from day one.[163]

The initial effort to package and market a strong group identity was clearly evident in a few processes. The logo went from a detailed sketch of a severed head being held by the signature 'W' in its first incarnation, to a book with the 'W' on the cover and sword inscribed with "records," to its current form: simply the 'W'.[164] The album cover for their debut, *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)*, featured members of the Clan with stockings on their heads, which obscured their individual identities. Photographer Daniel Hastings, who shot the album cover, recalled convincing the six Clan members to resist their desire to leave their faces visible because "…you guys are the Wu-Tang Clan. You're selling the Wu-Tang Clan. Let's do this. Let's get some hoodies, put the logo on there."[165]

The concept behind the name was boiled down to a rote explanation, usually delivered by GZA or RZA in early interviews. The following is a composite summation of the language they typically used to describe the concept:

> Wu-Tang represents a sword style of rhyming. The Wu is the way, the Tang is the Slang, and Clan represents the family. Being that we are lyrical assassins, we are aware that the tongue is symbolic to the sword. Like when in motion it produces wind. When you hear the word "wu" you hear the word "wind," and the Tang is the sound of the sword hitting an object, that's why we say protect ya' neck. [166]

Although the Clan developed a number of alternative meanings behind the name, the most frequently used explanation revolved around the martial arts metaphor they derived from Hong Kong action cinema.[167] This concept was put forth as more than just an attention-grabber; it was meant to be an integral part of the group's identity. People

seemed to go along for the ride since critics wrote rave reviews and concert-goers continued to turn out in large numbers to see the Clan perform.

Hong Kong cinema drew heavily from Chinese folklore and pulp novels for film topics, and the legend of the Shaolin Monastery appeared frequently.[168] In a nutshell, the legend heralded the geographically isolated Shaolin Temple as the birthplace of kung fu. Over time, the monastery's remoteness provincialized its occupants and they became extremely wary of the outside world. The Wudang were Shaolin monks who reacted to this isolationist mentality by leaving the monastery to develop their own distinct style of martial arts.

The Wu-Tang Clan felt Staten Island was the birthplace of their rap style, so they viewed Shaolin as a metaphor for their homeland while kung fu represented their rapping. Additionally, they connected their sense of isolation living on the "forgotten borough" to that of the Shaolin Temple.[169] Furthermore, they engaged in so many rap battles all across New York City that they gained a greater sense of how their own rhyme styles differed. The Clan claimed that these travels gave them a better sense of how to cultivate their distinct styles, just as the Wudang monks developed their own style of kung fu after leaving Shaolin.[170]

The metaphor was creative, coherent, and still relevant to the experiences of the young black New York audiences for whom it was intended. Initially, there were skeptics who questioned whether this bizarre concept would resonate with people or become stigmatized as a gimmick. For example, Bonz Malone, who was a writer for *Spin* and an A&R man for Island Records when he heard the Clan's first single "Protect Ya Neck,"

voiced his reservations about the kung fu concept when RZA first explained it to him. Malone stated,

> ...I thought it ["Protect Ya Neck"] was incredible... but, I gotta be totally honest... I did not understand what the hell they were trying to do at all... I remember laughing—laughing like hell when he [RZA] was telling me about like Staten Island was Shaolin, and the name of the group was called Wu-Tang Clan, and just what the ideology was. And I was like, nigga, who the hell is gonna fall for that?[171]

In spite of Malone's skepticism, people went along for the ride with the Wu-Tang Clan's gimmick for several reasons. It was novel, but it was actually backed up by talented rappers. The concept was complicated and unusual, but not overly complicated and unusual. It seemed like a good 'B' movie plot, clever and complex, but not so much so as to pass over the heads of most viewers. The Wu-Tang Clan constructed an origin story with fully developed characters as if they were making a martial arts movie. RZA approached the production of *Enter the Wu-Tang* cinematically, like it was the score for an underground film.[172] By merging image, identity, and music in this way, the Clan was able to legitimize their martial arts-inspired concept, producing positive publicity for their brand.

For the most part, the Clan's assertions of their own artistic integrity held up under the critical microscope of music critics and hip hop heads. *Spin* magazine writer, Chris Norris—who would later co-write RZA's books, *The Wu-Tang Manual* and *The Tao of Wu*—summed up the Clan's appeal when describing their first single, "Protect Ya Neck." Norris stated that the Clan developed a massive fan base through "Lo-fi yet cinematic atmospheres; chess and chop-socky imagery; a tag team of raucous, wildly talented MCs; and a militantly self-directed path to the people."[173] Depending on the context, the word "chop-socky" can have negative connotations, but in this description of the Clan's style,

it stands alongside a number of positive qualities. Clearly, in this case, the Clan's employment of Hong Kong cinema is viewed another unique layer in their identity, helping to set the group apart from the competition.

Gerard Butler reasoned that they were a "hip hop version" of the classic 1978 martial arts film, *Five Deadly Venoms*.[174] In the film, each of the five main characters has a regular identity but can slip into 'venom' mode whenever they needed to utilize their highly specialized fighting technique, such as toad-style—which made the fighter's skin nearly impenetrable. Similarly, the members of the Clan had distinctive identities: GZA the intellectual; ODB the clown; Method Man the pot-smoking heartthrob. "Everyone loves the alter ego… they're almost like superheroes" said Barclay about the charm of exaggerated identities. "It appealed to a lot of people because—they introduced characters."[175] Yet, the martial arts concept was rarely perceived to impair the Clan's focus on innovative lyricism with subject matter relevant to peoples' lives. Barclay highlighted that with Wu-Tang, "it was skills without really gimmick. They sat down and wrote lyrics that you had to like rewind it—three or four times to get it."[176]

Likewise, an article in the *Source* exclaimed, "Kung-Fu movies are definitely a big influence on the Clan's image, but don't mistake these kids for the Fu-Schnickens—these kids take it seriously… They treat rapping as a skill, like a martial art, that can be honed, sharpened to lethal intensity, and passed around from member to member."[177] The Fu-Schnickens, made up of Brooklyn MCs Moc Fu, Poc Fu, and Chip Fu, predated the Wu-Tang Clan in terms of incorporating extensive martial arts references in their rhymes and image. After an initial run of critical and commercial success, the Fu-Schnickens quickly became symbols of gimmick rap. The groups' prominent sense of humor, propensity for

donning Chinese silk jackets and conical hats, nonsensical rhymes delivered in an extremely idiosyncratic fashion, and decision to record a Bugs Bunny-inspired single with NBA star Shaquille O'Neal titled "What's Up Doc?" all but ensured the group would be labeled a gimmick, whether it was totally deserved or not.[178]

Either way, the tastemakers at the *Source* gave *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)* a four and a half out of five 'mic rating', an extremely high honor at the time. They invoked the Fu-Schnickens in order to pose the Wu-Tang Clan as their artistic opposites: authentic rappers who have come "to reincarnate and bring back the verbal killing techniques of a forgotten hip–hop era."[179] The Clan claimed that their understandings of East Asian culture resided on a deep artistic level rather than on that of a superficial pop cultural novelty, and they bolstered this intensity with realistic narratives of ghetto life and hardcore battle rhymes.[180] Simon Price put his finger on the appeal of this formula, writing "the patina of faux-Orientalism, which at first glance might have appeared a bolt-on gimmick, took the album beyond the noir and lent the Wu sound a precious otherness."[181] The fluidity with which the Clan melded martial arts with hip hop was a testament to the accessibility of Hong Kong Cinema in New York, the Clan members' participation in the 'B' film culture of such movies, and the possibilities engendered by the postmodern (hip hop) aesthetic of sampling from a wide variety of sources to construct one's identity.

From Hong Kong to Staten Island

The economic, social, and technological forces that shaped the "paths of filmic circulation" for Hong Kong Cinema to reach New York City arose from each city's status as multicultural centers of global trade—that is, "global cities."[182] Migration patterns between the cities created opportunities for cultural exchange and film industries took full advantage of these networks. The development of the martial arts genre proves instructive as to how foreign audiences influenced the productions of the Hong Kong film industry. Martial art themed films were crafted with the Chinese diaspora and inquisitive foreigners in mind, since those consumers assured profits for the studios. The turn towards hypermasculine martial arts movies was a conscious move on the part of Hong Kong studios to take advantage of global movie-watching trends, especially in the United States, which favored heroic male leads. By looking at the background of martial arts films in addition to the reasons and motives behind their transmission to New York City, it becomes easier to explain their appeal beyond Hong Kong. With this, a discussion can proceed about why a film culture developed around Hong Kong action cinema specifically among African American (mostly male) audiences. The East Asiaphilia coursing through black culture during and after the Black Power Era (not to mention the entire United States) did much to make martial arts movies appealing for black male audiences. More simply, the allure of the cinema as a site for excitement and adventure certainly attracted black audiences in urban centers. Once they were inside the theaters, black spectators such as the Wu-Tang Clan—who represent a segment of post-Black Power African American youth culture—gave meaning to the films within their own

lives, but did so through a "black Orientalist" perspective. This is meant to shed a glimmer of light on why martial arts movies became a staple of black popular culture beyond the kung fu craze in 1973.

Before the onset of the kung fu craze, Cantonese Hong Kong films (mostly based on operas) already played in Chinatowns across the U.S. including in New York City.[183] The export of Hong Kong cinema was made possible by patterns of Chinese migration from the mid-1800s onward gave rise to viable markets in Southeast Asia, Britain, and the United States. Also, "the emergence of Hong Kong as the most important financial center of the Chinese diaspora provided crucial access to capital and other commercial resources," as Michael Curtin put it.[184] Conscious that their movies had appeal in foreign lands, filmmakers tended to tailor images and messages to their perceived audiences: the Chinese diaspora and curious foreigners. Sheng-mei Ma called Hong Kong "the epicenter" of "the nostalgia industry on Chineseness" that built upon China's ancient storytelling traditions and also those of serial novels.[185] Although Hong Kong was the leading producer of Chinese cinema in the second half of the twentieth century, it did not always hold that status.

The earliest filmmaking enterprises in China were financed by an American investor who set up businesses in both Hong Kong and Shanghai in the early twentieth century.[186] The latter emerged as the dominant location for movie production during the "golden age" of Chinese cinema in the 1930s, due in large part, to their use of the Cantonese dialect.[187] However, a ban placed on Cantonese films by Nationalist ruling party in China, the Kuomintang, coincided with the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937, convincing much of the industry talent to relocate to Hong Kong,

a protected British colony. [188] From the end of WWII onwards, Hong Kong cinematic output grew exponentially. [189] A significant portion of these films focused on martial arts themes, which carried on the Hong Kong tradition of making motion pictures that appealed to the Chinese diaspora. Hong Kong filmmaker and critic, Roger Garcia, observed,

> Almost all postwar martial-arts films that constitute the genre have been produced by and for the Chinese communities outside mainland China. And to this end, they can be read as films of mythic remembrance, an emigrant cinema for an audience seeking not only its identity and links with an often imaginary cultural past, but also its legitimization.

The romanticized quality of martial arts movies is significant because this had an impact on the ways non-Chinese audiences interpreted the images and messages portrayed onscreen.

The martial arts film originated with Tianyi Studios, a Shanghai company best known for producing the first Cantonese talkie movie, a Cantonese opera entitled *White Gold Dragon*.[190] In the 1920s, under the direction of Runje Shaw, Tianyi gained success making movies cheaply and efficiently by utilizing stories from the Chinese folk genre *wuxia.* By the time Runje's youngest brother, Run Run, opened Shaw Brothers Studio in Hong Kong in 1956, *wuxia* films were an established and successful movie genre in China, Singapore, and other regions in Southeast Asia.[191] In his Master's thesis on heroes in Hong Kong cinema, Ma Ka-Fai described the martial hero of *wuxia* as driven by an unwavering sense of loyalty, usually for one's master, father, friends, or brothers, but not for a woman.[192] Traditionally, *wuxia* depicted both female and male heroines and heroes, respectively, but by the 1970s, when *wuxia*-inspired films reached the United States, they almost exclusively featured men in the lead roles.[193]

As David Desser pointed out, female stars dominated the silver screen in Mandarin-language Hong Kong cinema before the mid-1960s. But, thanks in large part to the success of *The One-Armed Swordsman,* directed by the influential Zhang Che, the Shaw Brothers began producing "New Style Martial Arts Pictures" after 1967 that portrayed an idealized masculinity known as *yanggang*.[194] In explaining his motivation for this shift, Zhang Che demonstrated his acute awareness of the potential earnings to be made in the international market. Zhang stated, "I felt that in movies around the world, male actors were on top. All the important parts were played by men. Why is it that Chinese movies didn't have male actors? If male actors could stand up, the audience would double…That's why I advocated male-centered movies with *yanggang* as the core element."[195] Zhang went on to produce dozens of martial arts movies for the Shaw Brothers, one of which, *Five Deadly Venoms*, would be an especially important influence on the members of the Wu-Tang Clan.[196]

At his Hollywood-esque "Movietown" complex, Run Run Shaw created a cinematic assembly line that was capable of churning out movies at a frenetic pace. The studio's Publicity Department handled international marketing while the production unit made different versions of a single film in order to comply with the censorship laws of various countries. The versions exported to the United States were always the movies that were most leniently censored by the studio. As a result of these strategies and market trends, many of the films that gained popularity in America during the kung fu craze were the hypermasculine swordplay motion pictures and post-Bruce Lee kung fu flicks of the Shaw Brothers' "New Style Martial Arts Pictures."

Sophisticated promotional strategies notwithstanding, the appeal of Hong Kong cinema in the U.S. was also fostered by the rise of the counterculture movement in the 1960s, as people began viewing the East as a rich source of 'alternatives' to the West. In addition to the Asiaphilia of the counterculture—a product of anti-war sentiment about Vietnam, the widespread rejection of parents' systems of faith in favor of Eastern-inflected philosophies, and the rise in general of leftist politics—a growing fascination with East Asia was evident by the runaway success of the television series, *Kung Fu*, starring David Carradine.[197] Warner Brothers produced the Western-kung fu mashup and in the ensuing success, they scrambled to pick up Hong Kong produced films to distribute in the United States to markets outside America's Chinatowns.[198] However, apart from the movies starring Bruce Lee, Hong Kong action cinema failed to gain the support of mainstream critics, who dismissed the genre because of its generally low production quality, hackneyed English dubbings, and formulaic storylines.[199]

In New York City, a strong kung fu movie culture developed in spite of the mostly negative reviews in the American press. This may be due, in part, to the trends within New York's highly regarded art film culture, which began leaning towards amateurism over professionalism throughout the 1960s.[200] Independent film productions were rising in popularity on a national scale as on-location movies became increasingly common, but New York motion picture connoisseurs made it a special point to reject commercial films and embrace "underground film."[201] These preferences for the noncommercial meant that independent filmmakers and savvy theater managers (sometimes one and the same) secured or provided venues for alternative cinema. In the 1970s, martial arts movies were screened in locations like the 42nd Street Theater in Manhattan and the St. George Theater

on Staten Island alongside other 'B' genres such as horror, Blaxploitation, and pornographic films. In the 1980s, the resurgence of Hollywood and the decline of many NYC movie theaters pushed kung ku films onto weekly television broadcasts and VHS tapes, which helped open up a market for second-hand or bootlegged copies. The cult following that latched onto kung fu movies included the members of the Wu-Tang Clan, and this film culture proved to have major influences on the future development of the Clan as a musical group and brand.

According to cinema specialist David Desser, the 1973 kung fu craze in the United States did not start and finish with Bruce Lee, as many film critics and scholars assume. In the early summer of 1973, a string of Hong Kong produced films entered the U.S. market and shot to the top of the box office rankings, the first of which was a Shaw Brothers produced film entitled *Five Fingers of Death*.[202] Bruce Lee cemented the place of kung fu movies in American popular culture and cinematic history, but shortly thereafter, the craze died down in mainstream American media and culture. Kung fu movies maintained a strong cult following in the decades after the 1973 craze, and black Americans were well represented among the fans.

The exact demographic breakdown of those consuming martial arts movies is unknown, but judging by the marketing of kung fu-flavored Blaxploitation films (notwithstanding the frequently racist assumptions that were involved in such strategies) there is an indication that there was a recognized market among African Americans for martial arts movies.[203] Black movie-goers made up one third of the market by 1967, and case studies of areas such as New Brunswick, New Jersey, has shown how Blaxploitation

and martial arts films were packaged alongside one another in the heart of the kung fu craze.[204]

Although this connection may seem fuzzy, it becomes much sharper when looking at the legacy of martial arts in African American popular culture. The most famous overlaps may be Bruce Lee's inclusion of black martial artist Jim Kelly in *Enter the Dragon* as well as his student, black basketball star Kareem Abdul Jabaar, in *Game of Death*.[205] Also, a number of well-known Blaxploitation films—including *Superfly*, *Dolemite*, and *Cleopatra Jones and the Casino of Gold*—contained black protagonists that practiced martial arts.

In 2002, Amy Abugo Ongiri wrote "African American culture is replete with images drawn from popular cultural representations of Asian and Asian American culture, particularly images drawn from early martial arts films."[206] Ongiri pointed to Carl Douglass' 1974 hit song "Everybody was Kung Fu Fighting," NBA player Marcus Camby's Chinese character tattoos, the release of Jim Jarmusch's samurai-inspired movie *Ghost Dog* in 2000, and the Wu-Tang Clan all as prominent manifestations of martial arts' influence within black popular culture.[207]

Black Orientalism and Spectatorship

As early as the late nineteenth century, African Americans have viewed Asian nations like Japan and China as political allies in the global struggle for racial and social equality. African American interest in Asian martial arts can be traced to the proliferation of Japanese karate throughout the United States after WWII. By the mid-1960s, a number

of black martial arts masters—Victor Moore, Thomas LaPuppet, Moses Powell, and the members of the Black Karate Federation, to name a few—were world-renowned fighters who had developed unique styles and opened studios in the U.S. During the Black Power era, the study and development of African-derived or African-inspired martial arts styles became a way to express pride in one's racial identity and cultural heritage. As a matter of fact, RZA's uncle, Dr. King Ogun Ali Muhammad, is a well-respected martial artist who developed the Universal African Fighting Arts Systems. Although the legacy of black martial arts is significant for contextualizing the Wu-Tang Clan's attraction to Asian culture, there is no denying that Hong Kong action cinema remained the primary means of cultural exchange.

In fact, several of the most prominent members of the second wave of black martial arts masters—including Ron Van Clief, who acted in Hong kong movies; Dennis Brown, who remembers driving from Washington D.C. to New York City to watch multiple kung fu movies; and Donald Hamby, who grew up in Los Angeles, CA, all cited Hong Kong action movies as the thing that sparked their interest in martial arts. While RZA and Ghostface Killah went on to study martial arts themselves, their primary motive for incorporating this theme into their music, was for economic gain. Although the kung fu films could serve as a springboard for developing deep and meaningful cultural understanding—exemplified by the aforementioned black martial arts masters—the medium's accessibility did not necessitate this. The Wu-Tang Clan capitalized on this fact by enacting a form of black Orientalism that appropriated aspects of the films that seemed marketable to rap audiences in the U.S. In doing so, they tapped into both the 'B' movie culture that developed around kung fu movies as well as the rising interest in

practicing martial arts among black Americans from the 1970s onwards. Thus, there was an implication that authentic cultural exchange was taking place when the Clan talked about the "philosophy" or "discipline" of kung fu flicks, yet this was largely an illusion devised to arouse an orientalist curiosity in their music and exploit nostaligia.

The term "black Orientalist" is taken from Ellie Hisama's article "'We're All Asian Really': Hip Hop's Afro-Asian Cultural Crossings," wherein she argued that African American cultural exchange with Asia differed from that of Euro-Americans.[208] Building off of the work of Amy Abugo Ongiri, Hisama portrayed black Orientalism in hip hop as not simply a derivative of white conceptions of East Asia as a "passive and mystical force," but also from the "East Asiaphilia" that is unique to the history of black popular culture.[209] To demonstrate this, Hisama provided an incisive, albeit brief analysis of the Wu-Tang Clan's adoption of Asian culture as a way to enhance their art, brand, and masculine identities. She concluded,

> The Wu's Afro-Asian fusions are grounded in their longstanding interest in East Asian culture and philosophy; a desire to establish a masculine, physically powerful persona for the Clan; a playful, postmodern inclination to re-present sound bites from their favorite Hong Kong action films; and a stake in creating a successful entertainment conglomerate.[210]

As Hisama made clear, the Wu-Tang Clan represent a particular manifestation of black Orientalism, fashioned by screens projecting moving images, and later embraced for artistic and commercial purposes. The forces shaping New York black working class male youth culture at this specific point in history set the framework for the Clan's film consumption. In the words of the Clan members themselves, the dangers of urban life brought on by poverty, drugs, and police intervention were internalized at a young age but counteracted through hip hop culture, African American leftist politics, and a spiritual

awakening brought about by the Nation of Islam offshoot, the Nation of Gods and Earths (also known as the Five Percenters). These influences are an important backdrop for understanding why the Clan saw the commercial potential in a marriage between kung fu films and hip hop.

Kung fu movies may represent a novel site for what Jacqueline Stewart has termed "reconstructive spectatorship," referring to the process by which black viewers "reconstitute[d] themselves as viewing subjects in the face of a racially exclusionary cinematic institution and social order."[211] Although Stewart conceptualized reconstructive spectatorship by looking at segregated Chicago during the 1910s, her emphasis on the "public dimension of spectatorship" permits scholars to imagine how the space of the theater itself can produce both shared and competing identities among viewers, depending on one's interpretation of the experience.[212]

Stewart contended that African American audience members were constantly aware of the social space of the theater, mainly due to the fact they were relegated to certain seating sections or denied access altogether by certain theaters. The theater played an important social role because it served as a public location for recent black migrants seeking ways to balance their new lives with their old. They could build community and exercise modern urban identities by partaking in a form of mass entertainment at the cinema, which often involved denouncing, reinterpreting, or poking fun at films not intended for black audiences. Film scholar Mary Carbine—who also looked at black movie-goers in early twentieth century Chicago—noted that these practices did not necessarily imply intentional resistance, but they were meant to "disturb and harass the hegemony of 'mainstream culture' and prevent those with economic, social, or discursive

power from molding the disenfranchised into their own image."[213] Carbine viewed black Chicagoans who attended black-owned theaters (these movie theaters often included black musical performances on the bill) as part of a collective effort to craft a "black-oriented entertainment culture."[214]

This model of the movie theater experience as "a stage for modernist black performance" is useful for understanding black consumers of Hong Kong movies in the 1970s, although one must be careful not to conflate the historical context of 1910s Chicago with that of post-Black Power New York.[215] The changes brought on by the civil rights and Black Power movements made complex black characters more visible in commercial movies, something that rarely occurred in the 1910s. However, mainstream cinema remained an arena dominated by white directors, writers, and producers, many of whom were unaware or unwilling to present African Americans as multilayered personalities. As it was in the 1910s, the theater remained an important site for black audiences to challenge and evaluate problematic depictions of black people while simultaneously asserting their place in mass culture.

In the case of the Wu-Tang Clan, their patronage of theaters playing Hong Kong films can be read as an extension of the spectatorship patterns exhibited by African Americans in pre-depression Chicago. Most martial arts films were pilloried by mainstream tastemakers as were the Blaxploitation films packaged alongside. Thus, the consumption of these 'B' movies challenged mainstream culture and passé Hollywood formulas. At the same time, African American consumers took an active role in shaping a new black-oriented film culture that reflected their interest in cultures apart from the American mainstream. The films themselves were not the only thing that was

noncommercial; the locations of the theaters playing Hong Kong cinema in New York were clustered in Times Square, where the underground economies of sex and drugs carried on quite visibly.

Martial arts movies likely became popular among young black audiences because they were screened at accessible theaters, they were heavily marketed towards black youth, but also because they were affordable forms of entertainment that featured non-European narratives, actors, aesthetics, and modes of thought.[216] RZA, GZA, and ODB of the Wu-Tang Clan noted that they consistently traveled to "The Deuce" (the nickname given to the Manhattan's 42nd Street Theater) and several years later, to the 24-hour theaters in Times Square, to catch the latest martial arts movie release.

It cannot be forgotten that most black youth did not consume Hong Kong action cinema until the 1980s, when the films played on weekly television programs.[217] Other members of the Clan did not become fans of kung fu until they viewed it in RZA's apartment on video.[218] It is clear, however, that the experience of seeing movies in a theater versus at one's house produces different reactions from viewers. In *The Wu-Tang Manual*, RZA differentiated between those in their circle of friends who "really knew the true meaning of what we were dealing with…" and those who did not comprehend kung fu films as deeply.[219] Those he cited as ones who understood "the philosophy" were the same people with whom he attended the theaters (with the exception of Ghostface): ODB and GZA. This shows that RZA held the social environment of the theater in esteem, for those experiences, in his mind, shaped one's capacity to fully grasp the morals in martial arts movies. It is not important whether this is actually true or not. It is significant that RZA believed fans would view the consumption of kung fu movies in the supposedly

tough environment of Times Square as a more meaningful experience than viewing them in the privacy of one's own home.

RZA recalled that he could pay $1.50 to enter a theater in the morning, and remain all day to watch primarily kung fu films, although pornography, Blaxploitation, horror, and mainstream Hollywood films also graced the screens regularly. Sometimes, he would have to pay the "local glue-sniffer" an extra dollar to buy his ticket for the R-rated movies, but in the unregulated environment of Times Square, youth consistently found ways to take part in activities that were generally reserved for adults.[220]

RZA wrote and spoke in detail about the act of going to the movies in Times Square.[221] The seductiveness of Times Square was a strong draw for young males seeking excitement and entertainment in an urban environment, especially one that already held dangers for black youth in the form of police brutality and racial profiling, as well as gangs and crime. Attending these movie theaters was a form of homosocial bonding predicated on activities that could be deemed risky or immoral by mainstream American society. The risk involved in attending a martial arts film at two a.m., while a homeless man slept in the theater and drug dealers and prostitutes worked outside, certainly could serve as a rite of passage of sorts for those taking part in the experience. As bell hooks wrote, "Movies remain a perfect vehicle for the introduction of certain ritual rites of passage that come to stand in for the quintessential experience of border crossing for everyone who wants to take a look at difference and the different without having to experientially engage 'the other'."[222]

While the environment itself of Times Square theaters was a kind of social border crossing, the members of the Clan also claimed to engage in a mental border crossing in

an attempt to discover the "true meaning" of the films. bell hooks argued that "… giving audiences what is real is exactly what movies do not do. They give the reimagined reinvented version of the real. It may look like something familiar, but in actuality it is a different universe from the world of real."[223] RZA's contention that one can discern truth from movies not only illuminates the incisiveness of hooks' words, but also points out the extreme complexity of his black Orientalist reading of Chinese culture. The ability to see through the 'B' movie production quality, the gaps in the narrative, and the 'otherness' of those onscreen—to locate the humanity within the plots and the sacrifices made by those who performed the almost unimaginably difficult bodily stunts, suggests that RZA and the other members of the Clan possibly did discover nuggets of the real amidst the mounds of artificiality. This reinforces to cult followers of kung fu films that RZA should be counted among them; a select group that consume the movies because of a more authentic passion than casual fans hold.

The members of the Clan, who all embrace the label of 'B' movie aficionados, engaged in debates with one another about the intended meanings of the films.[224] These in-depth readings of martial arts films served an important purpose. They offered a new medium through which young black men could come to understand their place in history, develop strategies to negotiate their immediate social circumstances, and exercise their imaginations. In other words, they reconstructed their identities through habits of spectatorship. In turn, these early discussions contributed greatly to the coherency with which the Wu-Tang Clan later conceptualized their musical and brand identity. GZA indicated the in a 1994 interview, the concept "took years to build" and it materialized through a combination of their love of kung fu movies, their adherence to the tenants of

the Five Percenters, and their desire to rise out of poverty.[225] In other words, they claimed that their martial arts gimmick was more than a shallow marketing ploy, it was thoroughly grounded in their real life experiences and had practical applications to life.

Conclusion: The Relevance and Realness of Hong Kong Action Cinema

Sociologist Norman Denzin wrote, "The postmodern society… is a cinematic, dramaturgical production… Representations of the real have become stand-ins for actual, lived experience."[226] In terms of the Wu-Tang Clan's consumption of Hong Kong Cinema, Denizen's observations concerning the "cinematization of contemporary life" bear out. In *The Wu-Tang Manual*, RZA described watching the 1983 Shaw Brothers film *8-Diagram Pole Fighter* with a group of men, some of whom break into tears, moved by the tragedy of the storyline and resilience of the characters. RZA believed the movie had that kind of power "because that movie is *real.* It's a kung-fu movie, but it's a real story [italics in original]."[227]

In saying the movie was real, RZA was referring to the emotional content of the film, which operates within the context of the mid-thirteenth century Song Dynasty during the Mongol invasions. A Song general double-crosses a powerful Song family who resisted the Mongols, killing the father and six out of the eight warrior brothers. The movie focuses largely the two surviving brothers; one has lost his mind, and the other, played by Gordon Liu, trains at a monastery to perfect a pole-fighting technique that will give him the ability to avenge his family.[228] RZA succinctly described the movie as a "story of brotherhood."[229]

In the age of crack-cocaine in the mid-1980s, a sense of brotherhood was an important thing for a lot of poor male youths to have, for many had dealt drugs in the past, currently, or knew somebody who had been killed or imprisoned because of it. In an underground economy where territory, addiction, gangs, and extreme poverty all play a role, having a group around you that has your back no matter what was crucial for survival. All of the Clan members had experience dealing drugs, and the uncertainty that lifestyle brought made the concept of brotherhood powerful to the Clan. Whether or not they actually related their personal experiences to Hong Kong action films is uncertain, but the suggestion that they did only strengthened their brand identity as street philosophers who overcame the dangers of their social environment.

Consistently, the Wu-Tang Clan maintained that they were attracted to the mental aspects of kung fu movies more so than the physical stunts.[230] By making this distinction, the Clan were asserting more so that they had the patience and wisdom to look beyond the things that made Hong Kong cinema easily dismissible to mainstream critics. The things that made kung fu inaccessible—the poor production and bad dubbings—were simply a mask for the greater spiritual beauty held within. Rather than passively accept the images shown to them, they read in-between the lines of the visual texts to ponder the extreme amounts of mental and physical punishment, discipline, and strength required of martial artists. Sheng-mei Ma noted how bodily harm in kung fu movies could take on a spiritual quality, saying "…the body is always made to undergo rigorous training and trials tantamount to torture to obtain victory, which often verges on the spiritual rather than merely the physical; the body, with all the pain it must endure, becomes a vehicle for higher goals."[231] Through this complex reading of the philosophy of martial arts as told

through Hong Kong action cinema, the Clan understood Chinese masculinity as an identity that valued discipline, brotherhood, and loyalty; all values they believed men should possess within their own social context.[232]

The appeal of kung fu to working class youth, surmised Vijay Prashad, was due to the fact that they live in a "calculus of respect and disrespect, wanting the former, but alert to challenge the latter."[233] If the philosophy behind kung fu can be understood as a way to manage these dueling forces, then it fits neatly within the philosophy of hip hop culture. Respect is everything in hip hop. As a rapper, you require discipline to practice rhyming enough to where you gain respect; once you are respected, the more likely it is that people will show you respect; and you are shown loyalty when you reflect respect back at those around you. For those with even a vague understanding of hip hop culture, the Wu-Tang Clan's martial arts concept seemed proper. The Clan defended their philosophy with such confidence that there seemed to be weight behind their words.

Putting martial arts philosophy into music was not the primary intention of the Clan when they went to work on their first album, *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers).* The goal was to entertain in the hopes of creating a buzz, which would land them record deals, and help them make money. The philosophy became a means by which to set themselves apart from a sea of other talented rappers and exploit the popularity of kung fu films among African Americans in New York City. With these commercial exigencies in mind, the Clan created a strange mixture of kung fu samples, ghetto realism, dark humor, and lyrical precision. Somehow, the combination worked.

ENDNOTES

ENDNOTES

[154] Meir Shahar, *The Shaolin Monastery: History, Religion, and the Chinese Martial Arts* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), 176-7.

[155] Janet Harbord, *Film Cultures* (London; Thousand Oaks, CA; New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2002), 3.

[156] Amy Abugo Ongiri, "'He Wanted to be just like Bruce Lee': African Americans, Kung Fu Theater and Cultural Exchange at the Margins," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 5, no. 1 (2002), 34.

[157] Hisama, "'We're All Asian Really'," *Critical Minded*, 2.

[158] Marley Marl is considered one of rap music's first super-producers. His innovative use of sampled drumbeats instead of drum machines gave his percussion a less-robotic timbre that more closely resembled the sounds of live drums. This new sound catapulted Marley to stardom in the rap world, and he was able to attract some of the most talented rappers from his native Queensbridge neighborhood to record with him. These included MC Shan, Roxanne Shanté, Biz Markie, and the Brooklynite Big Daddy Kane among others. A Tribe Called Quest were largely responsible for assembling the Native Tongues collective

[159] Raekwon, interview by Alvin Blanco, "5x5: Wu-Tang Clan Interview," *Red Bull Music Academy*, September 7, 2012, accessed October 11, 2013, http://www.redbullmusicacademy.com/magazine/wu-tang-clan-interview.

[160] The politics of the Wu-Tang Clan's collective identity are dealt with in detail in Amy L. Chasteen, "Rap and Resistance," *Challenge – A Journal of Research on African American Men*, 1-24.

[161] For more basics about the structure of the Wu-Tang deal see RZA, *The Wu-Tang Manual*, 76; RZA, *The Tao of Wu,* 108; Eskenazi, "Interview: Mitchell Diggs, a.k.a. Divine," *Time*; Mike Eskanazi, "Interview: Robert Diggs, a.k.a. the RZA," *Time* November 17, 2000, accessed October 8, 2013, http://content.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,88614,00.html; "Nine Rappers, One Wu-Tang Clan," narrated by Joel Rose, All Things Considered, *National Public Radio*, Jan 4, 2011, accessed August 21, 2013, http://www.npr.org/2011/01/04/132653524/nine-rappers-one-wu-tang-clan; For more detailed discussions of the deal, see "Raekwon at the Breakfast Club Power 105 1," YouTube Video, 22:39, posted by 1051BreakfastClub, November 19, 2012, accessed September 29, 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fZDD0w6YONM; Charnas*, The Big Payback*, 449-50.

[162] Gerard Barclay, "Behind the Wu with Director Gee Bee," in "Special Features," of *Wu: The Story*. Butler directed several of the group's earliest music videos, and later made the documentary *Wu: The Story of the Wu-Tang Clan* from exclusive footage he recorded early in the Clan's career.

[163] RZA, *The Tao of Wu*, 104.

[164] For the story of the logo's evolution and images, see RZA, *The Wu-Tang Manual*, 41 & 63.

[165] For an in-depth discussion with Hastings about this event, see "UNCOVERED: The Making of the Wu-Tang Clan's Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers) Album Cover (1993) with Photographer Daniel Hastings," *Egotripland.com*, November 8, 2013, accessed September 2, 2013, http://www.egotripland.com/making-of-wu-tang-clan-36-chambers-album-cover-photographer-daniel-hastings/.

[166] This same speech, sometimes in smaller parts, can be heard in numerous interviews and in RZA's writing. See "WU-TANG CLAN: Wu Tang Nation (1993)," YouTube Video, 60:10, posted by 4th60secSyndicate, July 23, 2013, accessed September 2, 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UTB46KwtoM4; RZA, *The Wu-Tang Manual,* 67.

[167] Many acronyms were created for "Wu-Tang." The two most commonly used were "Witty Unpredictable Talent and Natural Game," and "We Usually Take All Niggas' Garments." See RZA, *The Tao of Wu,* 5; For even more acronyms, see RZA, *The Wu-Tang Manual*, 132.

[168] Roger Garcia, "Alive and Kicking: The Kung Fu Film is a Legend," *Bright Lights Film Journal,* January 2001, accessed November 17, 2013, http://brightlightsfilm.com/31/hk_alive.php. Originally published in *Bright Lights Film Journal* 13 (1994).

[169] Staten Island was the "forgotten borough" for a number of reasons. It was not connected to the subway system, so Staten Islanders had to take a Ferry across five miles of New York Harbor in order to reach the south side of Manhattan. The Verrazano-Narrows Bridge connected Staten Island to Brooklyn in 1964, it was only traversable by motor vehicle. Politically, Staten Island was the most conservative borough, which often put Island politicians at odds with their more liberal counterparts from Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx. Most notably, Staten Islanders strongly opposed the New York City Mayor, John Lindsay (who held office from 1966-1973), because he was too accommodating of blacks and Hispanics and he was soft on crime. The Island's mostly white population generally viewed Staten Islanders as defenders of small town virtues, and they resisted making changes that would make the Island more like the rest of New York City. In their study of Staten Island's recent political history, political scientists Daniel C. Kramer and Richard M. Flanagan reasoned that Islanders held this

conservative mentality because they thought of it as a "suburb trapped inside a global city." In 1989, a bill was introduced to make Staten Island an independent city, reflecting the growing popular support for secession. (Kramer & Flanagan, *Staten Island: Conservative Bastion*, 10).

[170] RZA, *The Tao of Wu*, 108-9.

[171] *Wu: The Story*.

[172] RZA, *The Wu-Tang* Manual, 107-8.

[173] Chris Norris, "Wu-Tang Clan," in *The Vibe History of Hip Hop*, ed. Alan Light (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1999), 332.

[174] Barclay, "Behind the Wu with Director Gee Bee."

[175] Ibid.

[176] Barclay, "Behind the Wu with Director Gee Bee."

[177] Cheo H. Coker, "Wu-Tang Clan 36 Chamber of Death… Choose One," Rap Pages, *Source,* February 1994.

[178] For the artist biography of the Fu-Schnickens, see Steve Huey, "Fu-Schnickens: Artist Biography," *Allmusic*, accessed November 10, 2013, http://www.allmusic.com/artist/fu-schnickens-mn0000741431/biography.

[179] The Ghetto Communicator, "Wu-Tang Clan. *Enter the Wu-Tang 36 Chambers*," The Record Report, *Source*, February 1994.

[180] "OLD Wu-Tang Clan Interview part 1," YouTube Video, 7:32, posted by Vinny141, February 17, 2008, accessed August 30, 2014, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0g8UyK8KQhw.

[181] Price, "20 Years On," *Quietus*.

[182] For the original conception of the global city, which focused on economic institutions, see Sakia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); For Hong Kong as a global city, see Stephen Chiu & Tai-Lok Lui, *Hong Kong: Becoming A Chinese Global City* (New York; London: Routledge, 2009).

[183] Desser, "Introduction," in *The Cinema of Hong Kong*, 3.

[184] Michael Curtin, "Chinese Media Capital in Global Context," in *A Companion to Chinese Cinema*, ed. Yingjin Zhang (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 183.

[185] Seng-Mei Ma, "Kung Fu Films in the Diaspora: Death of the Bamboo Hero," in *Masculinities in Hong Kong*, 102; Garcia, "Alive and Kicking."

[186] Stephen Teo, *Hong Kong Cinema: The Extra Dimensions* (London: The British Film Institute, 1997), 3.

[187] Ibid., 5.

[188] Lisa Odham Stokes & Michael Hoover, *City on Fire: Hong Kong Cinema* (London: Verso, 1999), 19.

[189] David Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 3.

[190] Lar Kaw & Frank Bren, with the collaboration of Sam Ho, *Hong Kong Cinema: A Cross-Cultural View* (Oxford, UK: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2004), 60-61.

[191] Stokes, *City on Fire*, 18.

[192] Ma Ka-Fai, "Hero, Hong Kong Style: A Structural Study of Hero Films in Hong Kong" (M.A. Thesis, University of Chicago, 1990), 22-43.

[193] David Desser, "Making Movies Male: Zhang Che and the Shaw Brothers Martial Arts Movies, 1965-1975," in *Masculinities in Hong Kong Cinema*, eds. Laikwan Pang & Day Wong (Hong Kong University Press, 2005), 20-21.

[194] Ibid., 17.

[195] Qtd. in Desser, "Making Movies Male," 22. Originally published in Winnie Fu, ed., *The Making of Martial Arts Films—As Told by Filmmakers and Stars* (Hong Kong Film Archive, 1999), 43.

[196] RZA cited *Venoms* as the first kung fu movie he saw in 1978, and from then on, he was "hooked." *The Tao of Wu*, 51-52.

[197] Paul Bowman, Kung Fu Cinema and the Transformation of Global Popular Culture," *SL*, Winter 2008/2009, 50.

[198] Desser, "The Kung Fu Craze," 24-5.

[199] Ibid., 25.

[200] James Kreul, "New York, New Cinema: The Independent Film Community and the Underground Crossover, 1950-1970" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2004), 11.

[201] This phrase was taken from a *New York Times* article written by Vincent Canby. In it, he described the efforts of Jonas Mekas—a filmmaker and critic, organizer of the New York Film Festival, and board member of the Anthology Film Archives museum—to promote film as a form of artistic expression. Canby notes how Mekas and other artists in New York defend foreign films, maintain or open theaters that play noncommercial cinema, and fight to uphold the purity (aka lack of corporate influence) in filmmaking. (Vincent Canby, "Now You Can See the Invisible Cinema," *New York Times*, Nov 29, 1970).

[202] David Desser, "The Kung Fu Craze: Hong Kong Cinema's First American Reception," in *The Cinema of Hong Kong: History, Arts, Identity*, eds. Poshek Fu & David Desser (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 19-21.

[203] Desser, "The Kung Fu Craze," 25. Desser writes that Warner Brothers, the major distributor for Blaxploitation and kung fu movies, realized the audiences for each "were rather consonant."; Amy Ongiri states, "The low-budget action film, along with low-budget horror film, was traditionally thought by the film industry to be the strict domain of 'ethnic' audiences and the industry would often create low-budget films specifically for this audience… It is easy to see the implicit and explicit racist assumptions that guide the idea that 'ethnic' audiences crave violence, cannot sit still for films that highlight interiority or a life of the mind, and cannot 'read' a film that is not driven by the most primitive of actions in its narrative structurings." (Ongiri, "'He Wanted… Bruce Lee'," 33-4).

[204] For "[b]lack movie-goers," see Jacqueline Bobo, "'The Subject Is Money': Reconsidering the Black Film Audience as Theoretical Paradigm," *Black American Literature Forum* 25, no. 2, Black Film Issue (Summer 1991): 425; For the analysis of New Brunswick's black movie theaters, see Demetrius Cope, "Anatomy of a Blaxploitation Theatre," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Cinema*, no. 9 (October-December 1975): 22; For a synthesis of these findings, see Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua, "Black Audiences, Blaxploitation, and Kung Fu Films, and Challenges to White Celluloid Masculinity," in *China Forever: The Shaw Brothers and Diasporic Cinema,* ed. By Poshek Fu (Champagne: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 214.

[205] Ongiri, "'He Wanted… Bruce Lee'," 33.

[206] Ibid., 32.

[207] Jarmusch contracted RZA to compose the soundtrack for *Ghost Dog* and make a cameo appearance near the end of the film because the Wu-Tang Clan embodied the hip hop-East Asian aesthetic that Jarmusch wanted to convey. For interviews with Jarmusch

and RZA about the project, see "Ghost Dog: The Odyssey," in "Special Features," *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai*, directed by Jim Jarmusch (1999; Santa Monica, CA: Lions Gate, 2001), DVD.

[208] For another perspective on "black Orientalism" in music, visual arts, and films within hip hop culture, see Deborah Elizabeth Whaley, "Black Bodies/Yellow Masks: The Orientalist Aesthetic in Hip-Hop and Black Visual Culture," in *AfroAsian Encounters: Culture, History, Politics* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 188-203. Whaley reasoned "people of African descent via mass-produced production invoke Asia as a signifier to fulfill Occidental desires." Yet, she also recognized that black Orientalism "can exist as a formidable site of transformation within the realm of representation and in social relations." In her discussion of black Orientalism specific to rap music, Whaley examined music videos, and concluded that rap artists tend to present the Far East in ways that romanticize, overgeneralize, and ultimately marginalize Asian culture as a whole.

[209] Hisama, "'We're All Asian Really'," 2.

[210] Ibid., 6.

[211] Jacqueline Stewart, "Negroes Laughing at Themselves? Black Spectatorship and the Performance of Urban Modernity," *Critical Inquiry* 29, no. 4 (Summer 2003), 661.

[212] Stewart, "Negroes Laughing at Themselves?," 653.

[213] Mary Carbine, "The Finest Outside the Loop': Motion Picture Exhibition in Chicago's Black Metropolis, 1905-1928," *in Silent Film*, ed. Richard Abel (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press), 235.

[214] Carbine, "The Finest Outside the Loop', 236.

[215] Stewart, "Negroes Laughing at Themselves?," 675.

[216] Desser, "The Kung Fu Craze," 25.

[217] Reggie Ossé, interview with Spike Lee, *The Combat Jack Show*, podcast audio, August 13, 2013, accessed October 5, 2013, http://thecombatjackshow.com/category/show/#.Us-kZ459nww; Reggie Ossé, interview with DMC, *The Combat Jack Show*, podcast audio, August 6, 2013, accessed October 13, 2013, http://thecombatjackshow.com/category/show/#.Us-kZ459nww; *Wu: The Story*, Barclay.

[218] RZA, *The Wu-Tang Manual*, 62.

[219] Ibid., 63.

[220] "The RZA Interview 36th CHAMBER OF SHAOLIN," YouTube Video, 9:57, posted by SisterKickAss Martial Arts Action Channel, April 18, 2012, accessed October 5, 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MavHcZOOKzc.

[221] Ibid.; RZA, *The Wu-Tang Manual*, 58-60;

[222] bell hooks, *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 2.

[223] Ibid., 1.

[224] RZA and other members of the Clan write and speak frequently about the importance of these discussions and the extensive time they spent doing this. RZA, *The Wu-Tang Manual*, 60-64.

[225] GZA, "Enter the Wu-Tang," documentary directed by Joe Perota, in "Extras" of *Legend of the Wu-Tang: The Videos*, compilation produced by Matt Grady & Jim Parham (2006; New York: Sony BMG Heritage, 2006), DVD.

[226] Norman K. Denzin, *Images of Postmodern Society: Social Theory and Contemporary Cinema* (Sage London; Newberry Park, CA; New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1991), ix-x.

[227] RZA, *The Wu-Tang Manual*, 62.

[228] *Eight Diagram Pole* Fighter, directed by Chia-Liang Liu (1984; Hong Kong: Shaw Brothers Studios, 2010) DVD.

[229] RZA, *The Wu-Tang Manual*, 63.

[230] *Wu: The Story*, Barclay; "OLD Wu-Tang Clan Interview part 1"; Q with Jian Ghomeshi, "GZA on Q TV," YouTube Video, 22:11, August 27, 2009, accessed October 25, 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=osLjwSH76yI&list=RD02JfliUn6G73E.

[231] Ma, "Kung Fu Films… Diaspora," 107.

[232] RZA, *The Wu-Tang Manual*, 63; "OLD Wu-Tang Clan Interview part 1."

[233] Vijay Prashad. *Everybody was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of the Culture of Purity* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2001), 132.

CHAPTER 4
"CHECK THE BANGIN' SOUNDS THAT I INVENT": SAMPLING TECHNOLOGY AND THE MAKING OF THE WU-TANG SOUND

> Its arrival held three explosive changes for hip-hop. Lyrically, it kick started the "reality" phenomenon – rap's bragadoccio and polemic ripped apart by a relativism and millennial anxiety that placed no limits on the rapper other than the life he leads, the fantasy and egotism of gangsta shot down and dragged through streets of doubt, fear and claustrophobia. Stylistically, it was the most complete concept since Public Enemy – a union of look, language and intent fused in ancient martial arts ideas (discipline, brotherhood, technique) and put in the Shaolin Staten present, the Clan appearing as faceless assassins on the sleeve, that perfect sublime logo everywhere and imprinted in your mind forever. Musically, and most importantly, 36 Chambers was like nothing you'd ever heard.
>
> Like all shifts in hip-hop (the only music form to progress less through revolutions than alien invasions), this was beyond fusing familiar sounds to create a new whole. The Wu bought completely new sounds to the mixing desk, and then mashed them together in an order, shape and mood you couldn't reproduce with an infinite number of monkeys, unlimited turntables and an eternity to play with.
>
> From the brutal murk of Bring Da Ruckus, the smoky funk of Shame on a Nigga, through the lush insanity of Clan in da Front, C.R.E.A.M. and Tearz, to the staggering distorto-groove of 7th Chamber, Enter the Wu-Tang shocked hip-hop back to life when it was in danger of falling off the bench. It changed the lexicon of word and sound that the form could investigate, and crucially, was the first LP in too long that you learned by heart, that you let infect your everyday walk and talk.[234]
>
> – Neil Kulkarni on *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)*

In New York City during the early 1990s, the pendulum of rap music taste was swinging back towards the aesthetics of the old school. With some exceptions, the majority of rap songs on the Billboard singles chart from 1985-1990 were danceable pop hits, many by one- or two-hit-wonder artists. Most of these songs succeeded because of their catchy choruses and familiar samples that were meant to rock a party. Of course, the Billboard charts do not entirely reflect what kind of rap music Americans consumers preferred. Hardcore artists like N.W.A., the Geto Boys, and Public Enemy with darker

lyrical content less danceable beats found considerable success in the same time frame, yet there was a mounting feeling that the forces of the pop music industry and cultural outsiders were co-opting rap music. To hip hop culture's self-appointed guardians in New York, this feeling was especially palpable. What New York rap generally tried to capture, then, was the essence of hip hop when it was simply a block party phenomenon. MCs spit braggadocio verses steeled in rhyme battles over scratchy samples usually taken from local record stores or one's parents' collections. This was backed by simple drums from the catalog of sounds stored in an electronic drum machine, or sampled drum sounds played in new patterns, or simply a sample of a drum break that was taken from a few seconds of a song.

Around 1986, hip hop DJs began mastering samplers, creating collages of borrowed sound that they were unable to create in live settings with two turntables. As producers, hip hop DJs utilized samplers like live instruments in ways the inventors did not envision. This opened up massive creative possibilities for rap music as an art form. Producers crafted more complex collages, complementing rappers' increasingly complex rhyming styles while pushing them to their artistic limit. The Wu-Tang Clan emerged at the tail-end of this artistic renaissance in hip hop, commonly referred to as the "Golden Age of Rap."[235]

While the unprecedented availability of digital sampling initiated a great change in the way music was being made, it also opened up rap music to a slew of lawsuits over copyright infringement. As arguments erupted in the late 1980s over the legal issues inherent in sampling from commodified musical artifacts, artists were forced to utilize samples in new ways. RZA's production on *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)*

represented a significant break from the past in how samples were utilized, arguably placing the Clan in the category of avant-garde rap.

Possibly the most important aspect of the Wu-Tang sound is that fans believed it captured the spirit of pre-commercial hip hop. The production on *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)* contained a virtuosic do-it-yourself (DIY) aesthetic. It contrasted greatly with the danceable productions of new jack swing, an emergent but dominant genre in the early 1990s that blended rap with R&B to attract pop audiences. The advancement of sampling technology opened possibilities to RZA that weren't available to the DJ pioneers of hip hop, but the audible crackle of his soul samples, the unorthodox sounds weaving in and out of the background, and the rhyme styles exhibited the qualities of hip hop's aesthetic roots. The battle rhymes utilized unorthodox vocabulary and creative metaphors that were clearly forged in the competitive rhyming ciphers across New York City. The sonic quality of RZA's production harkened to the days of cassette tapes, when kids recorded rap music from the radio and crafted homemade demos. Bonz Malone explained, "They're beats made the show… It's that old school shit man, that—that you hear in somebody's basement. They're beats is always like a cassette tape; like a—a TDK sixty minute—like a Memorex ninety minute cookie that you got from back in '81 [or] '82."[236] Described by many as "grimy," "raw," "old school," Wu-Tang reminded New Yorkers who remembered only being able to hear rap music on late-night radio programs, at block parties, and in boomboxes.

The alternate mixes of RZA's EP *Ooh We Love You Rakeem* hinted towards a grimier sound, comparable to that of the Wu-Tang Clan's sound. They precipitated the style of production that would be heard on *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)*. A major difference, however, between RZA's work as Prince Rakeem and his work with the Wu-Tang Clan, was the lyrical content around which he constructed his soundscapes. He and GZA's disillusionment with how their labels handled their respective marketing and promotion led them to adopt styles and personas that were less concerned with appealing to the broadest possible audience. Instead, they understood that there was a niche market for an edgier underground style. They had been around other artists who attempted to capitalize upon this market; some succeeded and some did not.

But by 1992, the Wu-Tang Clan believed New York audiences were fed up with the offerings of commercial rap music and were craving something more "authentic." The Wu-Tang sound attempted to capture this rejection of mainstream aesthetics by celebrating DIY artistry, similar to how punk music tried to capture the sound of a live garage band to reject the trend among professional rock musicians in the 1970s for making incredibly complex, almost orchestral music, that was difficult to reproduce in a live setting. The catalyst for this new DIY aesthetic among rap producers was the digital sampler, which was more affordable and provided a wider range of artistic possibilities than previous models of samplers.

The Wu-Tang Clan's sound could not have been achieved without sampling technology. A sampler is a musical instrument that has the ability to record sound and

play it back in specific rhythmic patterns or different pitches as determined by the musician. An important forerunner of the modern digital sampler was the Chamberlin keyboard, first developed by Harry Chamberlin in the late 1940s.[237] Chamberlin submitted a patent for a "Magnetic Tape Sound Reproducing Musical Instrument," on October 16, 1953, stating "[m]y invention relates in general to sound reproducing apparatus, and relates in particular to a device whereby any one of a plurality of selected sounds may be instantaneously and repeatedly reproduced."[238] The Chamberlin keyboard contained preset instrument sounds on strips of analog tape that corresponded with each note on the keyboard. In other words, if a player pressed a 'C' note on the keyboard, a recording of a real instrument (such as a cello) playing a 'C' note came through the speakers.

Chamberlin himself envisioned making the tape strips attached to each key easily interchangeable so that any instrument tone or non-musical sound effect could be loaded into the machine and played. The purpose of the Chamberlin keyboard, in its inventor's own words, was to make "it possible for any person capable of playing the piano to reproduce… the tones of other instruments on which he may not be a skilled performer."[239] In fact, musicians' unions in the United States fought to limit the number of instrument sounds available on the Chamberlin for they feared acoustic performers' jobs were jeopardized by the new technology.

They pressured Chamberlin enough for him to discontinue his M-4 model, which "featured four keyboards and 32 instrument/voice/sound effect/rhythm tracks."[240] The Chamberlin keyboard on the market contained three presets. The concerns of unions came somewhat to fruition when affordable digital synthesizers made it possible for any

person, regardless of formal musical training, to produce coherent pieces of music. Samplers appealed not just to people "capable of playing the piano," it was a perfect tool for tech-savvy individuals with an ear for music. It was a tool for the producer. Great producers could be educated in music, or be gifted self-taught musicians, or they could have no musical ability at all, relying solely on their ability to pick out sounds they liked and thought would sell. The sampler became a significant democratizing force in the realm of music production.

Synthesizers gained popularity in the late 1960s thanks largely to the Chamberlin keyboard's successor, the Mellotron, which copied the analog tape-to-piano keyboard design.[241] Many psychedelic and progressive rock artists such as the Beatles, the Moody Blues, and King Crimson, employed the Mellotron rather than bring orchestral instruments into the studio. However, the machine was unable to match the sound quality of real instruments. For this reason, the Mellotron fell out of favor with some artists, but others found the strange timbre desirable.[242] Rick Nielsen, lead guitarist for the band Cheap Trick, remarked "it sounded like strings played through an old radio that was scratchy." The Swedish progressive metal band Opeth incorporated the Mellotron into their music because, as frontman Mikael Åkerfeldt stated, "all the sounds sound, like, straight out of a horror film." [243] The imperfectness of sampling technology became a tool for artistic expression and new sonic textures.

RZA championed the imperfectness of sampling technology on *Enter the Wu-Tang*, crafting a sound that seemed to have been crafted in a basement (unprofessional) setting. Much like the New York punk music scene that grew alongside hip hop in the 1970s, RZA's DIY style symbolized a rejection of commercialized music. It was

perceived as music created by real people in basements, garages, and apartments; it was not music endorsed by faceless corporations and polished for mass consumption. Ironically, this style of production served as a launching pad for Wu-Tang Corp. and helped *Enter the Wu-Tang* sell over one million copies a little over a year after the album was released.[244]

The DIY aesthetic exhibited in RZA's production style also had roots in the stripped down sound of Jamaican Dub, an important aesthetic predecessor to hip hop. In a typical dub song, an engineer manipulated a single pre-recorded song using a professional mixing board to drop vocals, add effects, fade instruments in and out, and emphasize the drums and bass. RZA's process was similar in many ways, but he patched together numerous pre-recorded songs instead of just one, and he used a digital sampler (not a mixing board) to add effects and texture to the soundscape. Thus, the proliferation of cheap digital sampling put many of the same powers of professional studio equipment into the hands of everyday people.

Compared to analog equipment, digital sampling greatly simplified the act of layering sound to create musical collages and maintained the integrity of the sound, but most importantly, digital sampling made the technology affordable. Songs could be pieced together without any instruments besides a sampler and record player. But since almost *anything* could be sampled, artists were able to explore vast new territory that was previously unobtainable. The collage music created using samplers combined bricolage and pastiche in ways that challenged mainstream American definitions of music. In other words, sound clips from record collections, movies, television, radio, or any other

recordable noise at hand could be assembled in nearly endless variations, making new songs from largely recycled fragments.[245]

Sampling became a hot-button issue in the late 1980s as sampled artists increasingly voiced their opposition to the practice. Musicologist Joanna Demers noted that the copyright controversies in the age of "mechanical reproduction" (quoting Walter Benjamin) arose from the fact that recording technology "enlarge[d] the gray zone between plagiarism and allusion."[246] By the 1990s, some of these artists—and more importantly, records labels—took legal action to exact royalty and licensing fees for sampled songs credited to their name or label.

This had a two-pronged effect on rap music production. One trend was to use fewer or no samples. This style was epitomized by Dr. Dre's G-Funk sound. In many tracks on his debut solo album, *The Chronic*, Dre used only one or two samples in a song to simplify the sample clearance process. Moreover, Dre often employed a live band to recreate the samples he wished to use, in essence creating a cover version that avoided plagiarism.

The other trend was to render samples unrecognizable or sample from extremely obscure records. If those who owned the rights to the original could not decipher their own sounds, they could not sue. Also, if a sample was taken from an artist who was not very well known, that sampled artist was less likely to have powerful connections in the music industry willing to fight for them. Therefore, it was less likely that the record companies would sue. Also, it was more likely that the original artists had moved on to other careers, reducing their dependence on royalty checks as a primary source of

income. This did not prevent litigation, but the length of the legal process and the resources necessary to carry out a lawsuit certainly made it an unattractive option.

Production of the Wu-Tang Sound

The specter of litigation hung heavy over rap music, forcing producers to be more conscious of how they employed their samples. Apart from the economic motives for sampling from obscure musicians, there was a social incentive for the practice too. Especially in New York, where early hip hop DJ culture celebrated one's ability to "dig in the crates" for rare records, DJs coveted obscure breakbeats. DJs sometimes concealed or marred the title and album artwork from such records to make it harder for onlookers to identify the source of the beat and use it themselves.

RZA blended aspects from each approach. He used fewer samples so he would have to spend less money clearing them. For example, "C.R.E.A.M." only utilized a single sample for the entire song. He also used obscure samples that were unlikely to be challenged in court. The samples of Hong Kong action films best illustrated this tendency. Finally, he chopped, distorted, and twisted samples to render them almost unrecognizable, as was the case the simple bass line from "Can It Be All So Simple." The notes he sampled were from the middle section of a 1975 Labi Siffre song called "I Got The.." RZA's sparse sampling of the record stands in stark contrast to Dr. Dre's sampling from the same song for Eminem's hit song "My Name Is," which appropriates the entire instrumental verse.

This approach helped the Wu-Tang Clan equate their music with "rawness," and it ended up being perhaps the greatest asset of the Wu-Tang Clan. In early 1990s New York City, the pendulum of rap music taste was swinging back towards the aesthetics of the old school. With some exceptions, the majority of rap songs on the Billboard singles chart from 1985-1990 were danceable pop hits, many by one- or two-hit-wonder artists. Most of these songs succeeded because of their catchy choruses and familiar samples that were meant to rock a party.

Of course, the Billboard charts do not entirely reflect what kind of rap music Americans consumers preferred. Hardcore artists like N.W.A., the Geto Boys, and Public Enemy with darker lyrical content less danceable beats found considerable success in the same time frame, yet there was a mounting feeling that the forces of the pop music industry and cultural outsiders were co-opting rap music. To hip hop culture's self-appointed guardians in New York, this feeling was especially palpable. What New York rap generally tried to capture, then, was the essence of hip hop when it was simply a block party phenomenon. MCs spit braggadocio verses steeled in rhyme battles over scratchy samples usually taken from local record stores or one's parents' collections. This was backed by simple drums from the catalog of sounds stored in an electronic drum machine, or sampled drum sounds played in new patterns, or simply a sample of a drum break that was taken from a few seconds of a song.

These productions also often included a DJ scratching and mixing records live in the studio. Since DJ culture spawned hip hop in New York City in 1973, DJs remained an integral part of New York rap. Not that this did not happen in rap scenes elsewhere, but the DJ was, historically, the most prominent representative of hip hop culture. Lest, we

not forget that the creator of hip hop, Kool Herc, was a DJ, as were Grandmaster Flash and Afrika Bambaataa, who were the other two most significant innovators of hip hop in the 1970s. DJs were the initial stars of the new York hip hop scene, with MCs serving as a supporting cast of sorts. But as rappers experimented with more complex lyrics and as record companies found more success marketing rappers than DJs, the rapper emerged as the focal point of hip hop music in the 1980s. In spite of these changes, the DJ remained a respected figure among hip hop purists and casual fans alike. DJs-turned-producers, from Marley Marl, to Pete Rock, to RZA, utilized their skills honed as competitive DJs to make the switch to creating beats and handling other talented musicians in a studio environment.

The role of the rap producer, in short, was to craft the musical backdrop for the rappers. Among New York producers, drums usually followed a four beat per measure pattern (or, a 4/4 time signature—typical of most American pop, blues, rock, and funk music), which was conducive to the nascent art of rapping because it was relatively easy to rhyme on beat. The distinctiveness of New York producers' drums came from the way the percussion emphasized the beat. Boom Bap, as it came to be known, almost always utilized a kick from the bass drum on beats one and three and the snare on beats two and four. This created a pattern that, at its most basic, sounded like "boom bap, boom bap" (boom being the low register bass drum, and the bap being the high register snare drum).

Boom Bap producers varied their drum sounds through a number of techniques. This included layering sound, adding distorting effects, speeding up or slowing down the tempo to shift the pitch, and tweaking the equalization to highlight higher (treble),

middle, or lower (bass) tones. Once the beat was in place, producers tended to really express their creativity thorugh their sampling choices.

RZA cited Prince Paul, an innovative DJ and the producer of De La Soul's first album *3 Feet High and Rising*, as a formative influence on his production style because Prince Paul sampled from anything: disparate musical genres, television, movies, and even cartoons. RZA explained that this enlightening experience led him to consider sampling the kung fu movies he enjoyed so dearly. Also, like De La Soul, RZA incorporated skits in between songs on *36 Chambers*, although the humor was much darker than the lighthearted *3 Feet High and Rising*. Moreover, the Wu-Tang Clan's focus on street level themes and hardcore rhyming styles influenced what kinds of songs RZA sampled, as well as the way he sampled them.

RZA sampled liberally from obscure soul and jazz records and recorded them at a lower quality setting so he could extend the amount of time he could sample but it made the sample sound muffled and gritty. Sampling technology was limited at this point in time in that one could only record a few seconds at a time if the user recorded at the optimal quality. RZA used this limitation to his advantage by crafting his entire production sound around longer samples and with a 'lo-fi' sound. This sound was viewed as the antithesis of mainstream rap music, which was generally very slick and professional, adding to the Wu-Tang Clan's image of musicians who refused to compromise their art for commercial gain.

Much like the way an extensive record collection could signify a hip hop DJ's passion for music, kung fu movie collections embodied a passion for this alternative film genre. Collecting records or movies were very similar acts and RZA was arguably the

first rap producer to thoroughly combine the *aesthetics* of the hip hop DJ with those of the movie buff.

Without the ability to record Hong Kong cinema from television or rewind, fast forward and pause the tapes, RZA could not have sampled so heavily from martial arts movies. In New York City, kung fu films moved from theatrical venues to television broadcasting networks by the early 1980s because the theater district in Times Square was at its nadir, but there was still a perceptible niche market for Hong Kong produced films. The introduction of the Video Home System (VHS) in 1976 gave Americans unprecedented control over how they consumed movies.[247] Taking a cue from media scholar Lucas Hilderbrand, who said this change represented a "partial reorientation of power," the Wu-Tang Clan gained significant cultural capital from their extensive use of VHS recorded martial arts movies.

The advent of VHS allowed RZA to sample dialogue, music, and sound effects from the films, lending a completely new aesthetic to the Wu-Tang sound. The fuzzy, distorted sounds produced by the worn magnetic tape of RZA's VHS cassettes fit well into the hip hop aesthetic, which often held the crackles and pops heard on old records in high regard. This "raw" sound, as it was characterized, was the aesthetic of the B movie. It was also that of the DIY spirit of early hip hop and of an increasingly nostalgic early 1990s New York rap scene. Wu-Tang documentarian, Gerard Barclay stated "What RZA ended up doing was taking all of the elements that most New Yorkers were aware of, we all came from the hip hop era of it being raw, then he took the martial arts elements and he combined those two."[248]

The Wu-Tang Clan's celebration of this particular "phonographic effect" reflected their desire to access cultural and commercial products outside of the mainstream.[249] Musicologist Mark Katz coined "phonographic effect" to describe the many ways that recording technology has influenced how humans understand sound, and in this case, the noticeable imperfections of the VHS audio carry a number of positive connotations within the context of African American poor and working-class youth during the 1970s and 1980s. As GZA explained in an interview,

> The movies are underground, just like with our sound, that's why, we (like) relate to those flicks because those flicks are so much underground, you can't go to Tower Video and rent one of these movies, 'cause that's how deep it is. That's how it is with our music—it's like, everything we do comes from the heart: whatever we do on record, it came from the house; it came from the crib; like, dealing with the things we do everyday.

Thus, 'underground' is equated with artistic integrity; with authenticity. RZA expanded upon this in an interview with *Wired* magazine, asserting "..there's something unique about those old films and the old recording, the quality, you know as a DJ and a producer, I just wanted to add that flavor—to my music."[250] Yoram Vazan, the owner of the studio at which the Clan recorded *Enter the Wu-Tang*, claimed the sound built off of similar lo-fi aesthetics that were common in rap music during the time. Vazan remembered, "It was nothing different than what we did at the Firehouse at that time. They used to call it 'basement flavor', where it's a low-budget studio doing hip-hop music that sells a hundred thousand copies. It was that early-'90s sound."[251]

"C.R.E.A.M.": An Analysis

"C.R.E.A.M.," perhaps the iconic song of the Clan's musical canon, does not necessarily exhibit the full range of RZA's producing capabilities, nor does it showcase the full talents of each MC. The song does, however, carry the distinctive qualities that make up the Wu-Tang sound, and helps explain why the song became a relative hit and the group's unofficial anthem.[252] At a very basic level, the song's hook, chanted in a gruff sing-song by Method Man, appealed to anyone living in a capitalist society, "cash rules everything around me, cream! Get the money, dolla dolla bills y'all."[253] As a slogan, 'cash rules everything around me' made sense to a culture that embraced the motto "greed is good," paraphrased from a famous line by Gordon Gecko, the villain from the 1988 movie *Wall Street*. It was not necessary to know or appreciate the Clan's background to sing and bob one's head along with "C.R.E.A.M."

For those who listened more closely, they discovered "C.R.E.A.M." was hardly the celebration of capitalist excess that some perceived. It was a stark cautionary tale of the pitfalls one may encounter in pursuit of the American dream. When placed in proper context, the seemingly innocuous line, "dolla dolla bills y'all" transforms into an all out denouncement of capitalism. The phrase refers to eccentric rapper Jimmy Spicer's 1983 single, "Money (Dollar Bill Y'all)," which masterfully describes some of the most abusive aspects of American economics. Spicer criticizes the immense monetary penalties one incurs for committing crimes motivated poverty, landlords unsympathetic to families struggling to pay rent on time, as well as those wealthy enough to skirt paying their fair share of taxes. Therefore, the Clan's employment of the line in conjunction with

‘cash rules everything around me’ took a jab at the exploitative foundations of capitalism. And the Clan’s ability to make money in such a system positions them as winners of a game that is stacked to their disadvantage from the start.

The track is driven by the haunting piano intro from The Charmels’ 1964 recording, “As Long As I Got You.” RZA sped up the sample slightly (about a half note) to make the keys twinkle with a faintly ethereal timbre, complimenting the foreboding theme of the lyrics.[254] RZA kept the other instruments from the original intact presumably because it was an obscure sample not yet mined by hip hop DJs and producers, and also because it may have been difficult to improve upon. The minimalistic bass line consisted of only a B whole note (B flat in the original) on the first beat of each measure, directing the listener’s attention towards the piano melody. The drums featured active bass kicks on the first and third beats punctuated by a sharp snare hit on beat two and a reserved hit on beat four. The rhythm was a fairly simple boom bap variation, but the original recording was sonically nuanced and became even more so once RZA and the engineers of *Enter the Wu-Tang*, reworked the sonic texture.

One of the two fattened up the bass drum kicks, and seemingly increased the treble on the first snare hit of each measure to boost its crack while drawing it back on the second hit to increase the snares dynamic range. The changes are subtle, but they add a more forceful backbeat than what existed in the original. RZA later stated he intentionally avoided over-adjusting the equalization to lend his music a Dr. Dre-like “wide-EQ produced quality,” because he liked the sound of beats that were not slick and professional.[255]

RZA also admitted that if a sample was "incredible" and it was from a record "most people didn't have," he may simply "Xerox" the section without much alteration.[256] This unabashed copying reflected how RZA's pop sensibility mixed with hardcore aesthetics to create a world famous track. He was aware that relatively few whites would recognize a less-than-ten second segment from an obscure Stax/Volt group, bringing fresh music to their ears. Meanwhile, if black listeners even had the faintest memory of this music it could spark a nostalgic response. On another level, RZA's proclivity for choosing samples from the Stax-Volt vault artistically aligned his stripped down production aesthetics with those of the label. The "raw" "gritty" sound attributed to Stax, in turn, became RZA's motif.

RZA's Xerox strategy and low-EQ range on "C.R.E.A.M." is a reminder to not forget about the importance of the engineers in bringing *Enter the Wu-Tang* to life. Yoram Vazan, the owner of the studio at which the album was recorded, remembered "[t]he recording was very crude because they [knew] how to make beats, [but] they [did not] necessarily know how to record, and the sound was terrible…"[257] Chris Gehringer, the mastering engineer for *Enter the Wu-Tang,* corroborated Vazan's claims, saying that when he brought the final mix to the record company representatives, they were perplexed that this was the finished product. Gehringer had to break the news that the sound could not be improved based on the way it was recorded, but that was the sound the Clan wanted.

Conclusion: Rap's Avant-Garde

Despite his sense that the Clan were amateurs compared to professional studio musicians, Vazan admired the group's experimental approach. For example, he noted that, for a time, they brought in milk crates full of records, but the legal issues surrounding the use of samples drove RZA to come up with new ways to create a distinct sound. The Ensoniq sampling keyboard became his primary tool for innovation. With the Ensoniq, RZA could sample any sound and sequence it into a beat and distort the sound.

Describing his production style from *Enter the Wu-Tang*, RZA stated in 1997 that "[i]t's not samples. I hate samples. We use one note and change it to anything we want. It's all noise, my beats are noise, noises put together over heavy drums."[258] Though RZA overstated his hatred of sampling records (case in point, "C.R.E.A.M."), RZA's experimentalism with samples from sources other than pre-recorded music cannot be disputed. Vazan remembered RZA bringing a guitar into Firehouse to sample sounds from the instrument even though he did not know how to play it. RZA himself wrote that he had no musical training on the piano, but he ended up playing most of the piano parts on *Enter the Wu-Tang* because he liked the way it sounded when he tried to emulate Thelonious Monk.[259] "It was anything goes" Vazan said, "[b]ring it in, we'll sample it and we'll use it."[260]

The effect of the Clan's avant-garde approach was evident when a listener really paid attention. Inspectah Deck noted, "[t]here were mistakes on" *Enter the Wu-Tang*, which were "on purpose, to show that we weren't robotic."[261] RZA's preference for a keyboard sampler, as opposed to the finger-drum sampler, worked to his advantage in

achieving this end. By forcing his personality upon the technology, RZA crafted an intensely personal sound that demanded listeners' attention. By "[r]educing the beat to a shuffling stumble, killing the soundscape with two huge gothic bass-slabs, filling in what space was left with shards of Bernard Hermann soundtracks," noted music critic Neil Kulkarni, RZA's production "was the eeriest thing you'd heard in years because it was so impossible to predict."[262] And this soundscape perfectly matched their image and attitude. As Simon Price put it,

> Like all the great groups, the Wu-Tang Clan had created their own universe around them. They had an aura, a self-created mystique, a distinct aesthetic (laid out in the *Wu-Tang Nation* documentary, which incorporates lengthy clips from martial arts exploitation movies), a philosophy (albeit one largely borrowed from the aforementioned movies), their own slang vocabulary that made you feel like an insider once you'd cracked it, and that ineffable quality of FUCKINGHELLNESS where simply knowing that a certain group exists in the world can alter the way you see, think, talk, walk.[263]

The Wu-Tang image gave fans something to latch onto on one level, while the sound connected fans to the group in a much more visceral fashion, as only sound waves can do. As good as the Clan's marketing scheme was, it was their bold, experimental sound that moved people's deepest emotions and, in the end, explained the group's devoted following.

ENDNOTES

ENDNOTES

[234] Neil Kulkarni, "Wu-Tang Clan – 'They changed the lexicon of word and sound'," *Guardian*, September 4, 2013, accessed February 23, 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/music/2013/sep/04/rocks-backpages-wu-tang-clan. Originally published in *Melody Maker*, 1997.

[235] While the periodization of the Golden Age is contested, the general consensus puts it from about 1986 to 1994.

[236] *Wu: The Story*.

[237] Len Epand, "A Phantom Orchestra at Your Fingertips," *Crawdaddy!* April, 1976.
[238] Harry C. Chamberlin, Magnetic Tape Sound Reproducing Musical Instrument, US Patent 2,940,351, filed October 16, 1953, and issued June 14, 1960.

[239] Ibid.

[240] Ibid.

[241] Ibid.

[242] Dianna Dilworth, interview by John Alderman, "Interview with Mellotron Documentary Filmmaker Dianna Dilworth," *Rhizome*, February 11, 2009, accessed February 3, 2014, http://rhizome.org/editorial/2009/feb/11/interview-with-mellotron-documentary-filmmaker-dia/.

[243] Rick Nielsen, Mikael Åkerfeldt, *Mellodrama: The Mellotron Documentary*, directed by Dianna Dilworth (2008; Brooklyn, NY: Bazillion Points, 2010), DVD.

[244] Blanco, *The Wu-Tang Clan and RZA,* xi.

[245] This was not a new concept by any means. Throughout the early-mid-twentieth century, avant-garde composers and novelty musicians experimented with radios and phonographs, pre-recorded sounds, and non-musical sounds to create new compositions. In 1930, Paul Hindemith and Ernst Toch premiered a set of compositions under the title *Originalwerke für Schallplatten* at a music festival in Berlin titled *Neue Musik Berlin*. Showcasing their conceptions of new music, Hindemith and Toch each manipulated the phonograph to make original compositions. In Toch's works, called *Gesprochene Musik*, he tried to push the phonograph to its rhythmic limits, weaving together differently pitched voices to create strange stereophonics and polyrhythms. Hindemith altered the pitch of his own recorded voice by speeding up or slowing down the revolutions per

minute (RPMs) of the phonograph, producing distorted harmonies. He also experimented with layering sounds, presumably by playing and manually manipulating a recording of a viola on one phonograph, a xylophone on another, and recording them on a third phonograph. These experimental works foreshadowed the use of recording and playback technology as tools for making music. (Mark Katz, *Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music, Revised Edition* (Berkeley & Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2010), 109-113). For other prominent examples of early collage music, see John Cage, *Imaginary Landscape, 1-5* (1939-1952) and Pierre Schaeffer, *Étude de bruits* (1948).

[246] Joanna Teresa Demers, *Steal This Music: How Intellectual Property Law Affects Musical Creativity* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006), 29.

[247] Derek Kompare, *Rerun Nation: How Repeats Invented American Television* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 206.

[248] Gerard Barclay, "Behind the Wu with Director Gee Bee," *Wu: The Story of the Wu-Tang Clan*, directed by Gerald Barclay (2007; Hollywood, CA: Paramount, 2008), DVD.

[249] Mark Katz, *Capturing* Sound, 3-6.

[250] RZA, interview by Steven Leckart, "Wu-Tang Clan's RZA Breaks Down His Kung Fu Samples by Film and Song," *Wired*, October 23, 2007, accessed December 9, 2013, http://www.wired.com/entertainment/music/magazine/15-11/pl_music.

[251] Yoram Vazan, interview by Phillip Mlynar, "Clan in Da Back," *SPIN.*

[252] "C.R.E.A.M." Only reached number 60 on the Billboard Hot 100 Charts and number 32 on the Hot R&B/Hip-Hop Singles & Tracks, but this is the highest position on either chart for a Wu-Tang song.

[253] "C.R.E.A.M.," Wu-Tang Clan, *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)*, Loud/RCA / Loud, 1993.

[254] Speeding up the sample to achieve a higher pitch or to match the tempo of the sample with the beat was common among rap producers, but RZA took this technique to the extreme on the group's 1997 *Wu-Tang Forever* album. He sped up voice samples so fast that the singer sounded as if they had inhaled helium, but he employed it not as a novelty, but as an important contrasting timbre in his dark dissonant soundscapes. This became a popular and enduring production method in rap music afterwards.

[255] Wasim Muklashy, "Wu-Tang Clan: Shaolin Secrets," *Electronic Musician*, November 1, 2007, http://www.emusician.com/gear/1332/wu-tang-clan-shaolin-secrets/38731.

[256] RZA, *Wu-Tang Manual*, 192.

[257] Yoram Vazan, interview by Philip Mylnar, "Clan in Da Back: The Behind-the-Scenes Oral History of '(36 Chambers)'," *SPIN,* November 5, 2013, accessed January 13, 2014, http://www.spin.com/articles/wu-tang-clan-enter-the-wu-tang-36-chambers-oral-history/.

[258] RZA, quoted in Kulkarni, "'They changed the lexicon," *Guardian*.

[259] RZA, *The Wu-Tang Manual*.

[260] Vazan, quoted in Mlynar, "Clan in Da Back," *SPIN*.

[261] Brian Coleman, *Check The Technique: Liner Notes for Hip-Hop Junkies* (New York: Vintag Trade Paperback Edition, 2007) 459.

[262] Kulkarni, "They changed the lexicon," *Guardian.*

[263] Simon Price, "20 Years On," *Quietus*.

CHAPTER 5
PUBLIC MASCULINITIES IN THE FIRST WAVE OF WU-TANG SOLO ALBUMS

In an editorial in the August 1994 issue of the *Source*, journalist Cheo Hodari Coker revealed that Masta Killa punched him in the face and took his tape recorder on May 12th of that year. Coker met with the Clan to interview RZA and GZA for a piece in teen magazine *Mouth 2 Mouth*. Expecting to discuss Staten Island rap, Coker was met, instead, with violence and intimidation, which stemmed from an article Coker contributed to the February issue of *RapPages.* The Clan took offense, not to the content of the article, but rather to the accompanying illustrations.[264]

Attributed to Elika, the cartoonish drawings depicted the Clan members in costumes and poses that were meant to exaggerate their rap alter-egos. For example, Ghostface Killah was drawn draped in a white sheet with a goofy grin, resembling a cheerful Halloween ghost. Method Man, on the other hand, appeared in a tightfitting superhero outfit with his hips cocked to one side and a coy expression on his face. In short, he looked effeminate.[265] Coker claimed the Clan felt Masta Killa's assault was justified because the illustrations "made them look like faggots."[266]

In Coker's article in *RapPages*, he quoted Inspectah Deck as saying "[w]e're here to die for this shit [we're in the music industry to die for our art]. Ain't nothing comical about it. Whatever we have to do to prove that to people, we're gonna do it. We've come in peace, but we're prepared for war."[267] The Clan, clearly, was willing to go to extreme measures to protect their public masculine identity. About Coker's editorial in the *Source*—which detailed the incident and included a photocopy of the sixty-dollar check Wu-Tang Productions gave to Coker for his tape recorder—GZA explained,

> It's like this. It was just a misunderstanding. That was just some shit that he blew up out of all proportion. He over-exaggerated it. He's a mouse, and he should be a man, because a real life man don't go out trying to exploit bad things about fucking people. He came from a different side of the tracks, and he probably just thought, 'oh shit, this muthafucka hit me'. And he couldn't understand that shit.[268]

Placing the onus on Coker for letting the situation get out of hand, the Clan drew attention to his class status and profession as evidence of his diminished masculinity. Journalists were not self-sufficient breadwinners, they leached off of the hard work of others. "We givin' them jobs…" Method Man said of Coker's ilk.[269] This event established a precedent in hip hop journalism, wherein writers began to boycott individuals or groups that committed violence against fellow writers. The *Source's* editorial staff refused to cover the Wu-Tang Clan in the aftermath of the attack on Coker.[270] The effect this had on the Clan's publicity was noticeable. Method Man complained that the media was "scared to deal with us… they think we're uncontrollable, and that's not the case."[271]

It did not matter that Coker's article—one of the first pieces written about the Clan in a major publication—was extremely positive. The cartoonish illustrations attacked their manhood at its core by infantilizing their public image, and the Wu-Tang brand was well aware that they needed to protect their manhood at all costs if they were to succeed as rap artists. Method Man continued, "in certain situations they treating us like babies and we're grown men. You wanna treat us like a baby and shit, we're gonna show you it ain't sweet jack."[272]

This situation illustrates a critical tension that existed in the rap music industry following the rise of N.W.A. Namely, rappers had to conform to certain standards of masculinity in order to be considered marketable. The gangsta image exuded by N.W.A.

was not the only option for rappers, but it was fast becoming the industry standard by the early 1990s, especially following the success of former N.W.A. member Dr. Dre's first solo album, *The Chronic*, in 1992. The nationwide prevalence of this formula, though controversial, pointed to the future of how the most successful rap artists would be promoted: violent criminals who regularly engaged in bacchanalian orgies involving an endless supply of drugs, alcohol, and women. New York rap remained particularly resilient to this stereotypical masculinity in the early 1990s due in large part to the success of De La Soul's 1989 album *3 Feet High and Rising.* The group satirized the gangsta persona and promoted a collective masculinity that drew largely from the peace and love activism of the 1960s counterculture. The Wu-Tang Clan fit somewhere in between these two constructions of masculinity.

In 2013, RZA claimed that around the time of *Enter The Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)*, he remembered "telling GZA, you'll get the college crowd. Raekwon and Ghost, all the gangstas. Meth will get the women and children. Myself, I was looking more like that I bring in rock and roll."[273] Indeed, the Clan very consciously crafted individual images to work both within the context of the group and without. Each member would corner a niche market, but when all were together as a group or guests on solo records, it would promote the overlap of these markets. Masculinity was crucial to how the Clan marketed themselves as both individuals and as a group.

Each member of the Clan expressed his own masculinity in a unique way. Likewise, they policed the boundaries of acceptable expressions of masculinity in hip hop and beyond very differently. Prior to the group's second album—1997's *Wu-Tang Forever*—Method Man, GZA, Ol' Dirty Bastard, Raekwon, and Ghostface Killah (in

chronological order) released solo albums that further honed their respective personas. Crafting rugged masculine identities was essential to all of these projects, yet each man pursued this task uniquely in order to capture the attention of certain audiences. As Imani Perry's *Prophets of the Hood* has demonstrated, the formulaic presentations of masculinity in rap music during the 1990s allowed artists seeking to set themselves apart from their predecessors to challenge these representations. The Wu-Tang Clan subverted the criminal-gangsta image prevalent in rap music post-N.W.A. and reinforced by Dr. Dre's *The Chronic*. This chapter explores how each man (besides GZA, see Chapter 5) drew upon historical and immediate precedents to construct an image of manhood that set them apart from others in the music industry.

Method Man: No Sell Out?

Even before the *Enter the Wu-Tang*, the group was trying to make Method Man a solo star. His character was tailored to reach a number of demographics: he had sex appeal to attract female fans; the cartoon and pop culture references he incorporated into many of his rhymes appealed to younger audiences; rap critics and serious fans were appeased by his undeniably skillful flows and hardcore wordplay; also, reports of his ability to consume massive amounts of marijuana brought him respect among the oft-forgotten 'stoner' demographic. By 1991, the song "Method Man" was recorded and shopped to record labels willing to sign Method Man as a solo artist. This effort was unsuccessful, but the following year, as a part of the Wu-Tang Clan the track served as the B-side to the second incarnation of the "Protect Ya Neck" single.[274] Even before the

Clan finalized their group deal with Loud Records, both Ol' Dirty and Method Man had inked deals with Elektra and Def Jam respectively.

Method Man's *Tical* became the first Wu-Tang solo record released post-*Enter the Wu-Tang*, when it hit store shelves on November 15, 1994. By July of the following year, *Tical* had shipped over one million copies. The success of the album can largely be attributed to the crossover hit "I'll Be There For You/You're All I Need To Get By," which was remixed by RZA for the music video and by Puff Daddy for the radio edit.[275] For the remixes, Mary J. Blige—who was the hottest R&B artist at the time—was brought in to sing the choruses, bringing Method Man's music to a much broader pop audience. The content of the song made it palatable to a wide array of consumers because it espoused the virtues of monogamy. This was a significant departure from most rap musicians, who celebrated their seemingly endless sexual conquests.

But Method Man was not easily persuaded to release these remixes. When presented with the idea of collaborating with Mary J. Blige, RZA claimed that he had to persuade Method Man. Citing his worry over appearing "soft" by releasing a duet, Method Man only capitulated to RZA's request if he was compensated with a new car.[276] That he considered it more of a risk to his career to perform his song with an acclaimed hit-maker like Blige than to maintain a 'hard' image says much about the kind of masculinity rappers felt they needed to cultivate in order to stay relevant in the rap music industry. The need to appear 'hard' is rooted in rap artists' desire to appear authentic. Rap artists maintained authenticity, Murray Forman asserted, by rapping about "situations, scenes, and sites, that comprise the lived experience of the 'hood."[277] This practice was often more than just lip service to prevent accusations of selling out; it celebrated "the

value of places and the people that build community within them."[278] What Forman does not elaborate on, was how conceptions of race, space, and place were constructed in rap music largely through a male-gendered lens.

This helps explain why Method Man had reservations about working with Mary J. Blige—who was born in the Bronx, raised without a father, and grew up in a crime-ridden housing project just north of her birthplace; all signifiers of an authentic 'hood experience. Yet, Blige's status as a successful female R&B singer, threw up red flags for Method Man. For one, affiliating oneself with an established crossover pop artist could be perceived as compromising artistic integrity for commercial gain.

From the start, the Wu-Tang Clan prided themselves on 'keeping it real' and presenting their image as the antithesis of 'R&B rap', better known as new jack swing. New jack swing was a genre of music most closely associated with producer Teddy Riley, who started using R&B singers to croon over danceable hip hop beats. Riley produced beats for numerous artists at Uptown Records, the same label that released Mary J. Blige's first two albums. Under the direction of Andre Harrell, the music and image of Uptown were meant to evoke a sense of upper class refinement. The name Uptown referred to the ritzy section of Harlem that sat atop an incline (the same neighborhood that inspired the name for Sugar Hill Records and the first professionally recorded rap group, the Sugarhill Gang). Dan Charnas wrote that "Andre Harrell and Uptown established a counterpoint to Russell Simmons and Def Jam. While Simmons sold street culture to suburban White audiences, Harrell sold a smooth, upscale take on hip-hop to Black America. Harrell called his more mature outlook 'ghetto fabulous'."[279]

Although Charnas oversimplified the racial makeup of each labels' targeted audience, he accurately pinpointed the lifestyle each company tried to represent.

After RZA and GZA's disillusioning experiences working for major labels that pressured them to make music in the style of new jack swing, the Wu-Tang Clan aligned themselves against labels like Uptown. To distance themselves from their past forays into R&B rap, the Clan attacked such music along class lines and gender expectations. They associated R&B rap with middle class suburbanites who only experienced hip hop culture through the media as opposed to physically participating in the culture in New York City. Such men were viewed as soft because they were supposedly not willing to risk venturing into dangerous territory to experience hip hop. Thus, when R&B rappers made rap music, they were simply exploiting a culture they had no hand in making. This threatened the masculine identity of hip hop, according to the Wu-Tang Clan. Men who paid their hip hop dues (such as themselves) did not necessarily get proper recognition nor compensation. RZA summed up the Clan's feelings in a 2012 interview,

> When we finally got into the industry, we was against all the soft R&B rappers because… some of these guys went to college, some of these guys are from suburban homes, you know, some of these guys would never come to my neighborhood to come to a block party." Goes on to talk about going from Bronx, to Brooklyn, to Staten Island to battle MCs. Went Pink Houses Projects, a very dangerous place, full of dudes with guns, just to DJ battle.[280]

Thus, if Method Man collaborated with an Uptown R&B artist like Blige, he would risk losing his credibility in the 'hood, which was akin emasculation. Although this did not necessarily portend the death of one's career, many rappers' record sales depended on expressing a tough masculine identity, which in turn, depended upon their association with the 'hood. As the Def Jam model proved, representing 'street culture' gained one respect in the 'hood and often led to massive sales in the suburbs. But if one's

connections to 'street culture' were claimed in the wrong way, an artist risked having his authenticity publicly questioned. Oftentimes, their masculinity went on trial too. And the impact to a rapper's career throughout such an ordeal could range from catastrophic to revival.

White rapper Vanilla Ice's career famously crashed and burned after his claims of hailing from the ghetto were discredited. On the other hand, Dr. Dre and Eazy-E's very public feud served to boost each others' record sales. After the bitter break up of N.W.A. in 1991, Dr. Dre insulted Eazy-E on his album *The Chronic*, referring to him with feminized pejoratives like "bitch" and "ho" while asserting that Eazy-E lost his credibility in the 'hood by fabricating his connections to Compton gangs and striking a backdoor business deal with their white manager, Jerry Heller. In the song "Bitches Ain't Shit," Dre likened Eazy-E's deference to white authority to the stereotypically submissive gay man. Using the pronoun 'she' to refer to Eazy-E, Dre rapped, "But she was hanging with a white bitch doing the shit she do/sucking on his dick just to get a buck or two."[281] In doing so, Dre linked the act of exploiting one's people or one's 'hood (selling out) with a loss of one's tough heterosexual masculinity.

Eazy-E retaliated in the 1993 song and music video for "Real Muthaphuckkin' G's." In the video. pictures of Dr. Dre flashed on the screen from when he was a member of the World Class Wrecking Cru in the mid-1980s. Eazy-E rapped that "on his old album cover he was a she-thang," referring to the form-fitting, sequined outfit and eye shadow that Dre donned for the Wrecking Cru's 1985 album, *World Class*. The EP on which "Real Muthaphuckkin' G's" was released, went on to sell more than two million copies in less than a year.[282] By labeling Dr. Dre a "bitch-ass nigga" and providing

evidence to back up the claim, Eazy-E defended his own masculinity by tearing down that of his most vocal critic.

The year before, former N.W.A. member Ice Cube similarly criticized Eazy-E and the rest of the group's actions by questioning their heterosexuality on the track "No Vaseline" from his solo album *Death Certificate*. In 1989, Ice Cube left N.W.A. because he disagreed with the terms of the group's contract, which Eazy-E had struck with Heller unbeknownst to the other members. N.W.A. mocked Cube in the media and on their album *Efil4zaggin*, released in May of 1991. They referred to Cube as "Benedict Arnold," and "punk mother fucker"; again, conflating selling out with effeminacy and homosexuality. On "No Vaseline," Ice Cube responded to these insults using the same strategy. Like Dr. Dre on *The Chronic* the following year, Cube accused Eazy-E of making a deal with the devil in exchange for personal riches. "Half-pint bitch/fuckin' your homeboys, you little maggot, Eazy-E turned faggot/with your manager fella, fucking MC Ren, Dr. Dre, and Yella/but if they were as smart as me, Eazy-E [would] be hanging from a tree." In this verse, "turning faggot" corresponded with selling out, and the way Eazy-E cheated the other members of N.W.A. out of their fair share of money amounted to symbolic rape.

This trend continued through the 1990s into the 2000s. A prominent example of the connection between losing credibility in the 'hood and emasculation appears on Jay-Z's album *The Blueprint.* Released in 2001, *The Blueprint* contains a famous 'dis' track (short for 'disrespect') called "Takeover" where Jay-Z accuses Prodigy of the rap duo Mobb Deep and NaS of exaggerating their involvement in ghetto life to achieve success in the music industry. Jay-Z brought up the fact that Prodigy took ballet lessons as a child

to illustrate his point, simultaneously emasculating Prodigy and questioning his credibility. He then asserted that NaS was too cowardly to own a gun or participate in drug dealing, instead content to stay in his mother's apartment and write rhymes wherein he imagines himself taking part in the lifestyle.

Mobb Deep was unable to shake the stigma of inauthenticity and they never regained the commercial success they achieved before *The Blueprint*. NaS, on the other hand, was able to resuscitate his career and his masculinity by firing back at Jay-Z on the song "Ether" from his 2001 album *Stillmatic*. In the song, NaS accuses Jay-Z of selling out because of his crossover success. He also attacks Jay-Z's tough heterosexual masculinity, calling him "Gay-Z," "phony," "pussy," "Tae Bo ho," and "dick-riding faggot" among other things. It is clear that authenticity in rap music has been constructed and policed in terms of tough heterosexual masculinity.

With similar consequences in mind, Method Man's trepidation about releasing an R&B tinged single makes more sense. Artists and fans, as much as record executives, dictated the boundaries of both acceptable content in rap songs and acceptable behavior for artists outside of the recording studio. Yet, Method Man did agree to collaborate with Blige. And while a new Lexus supposedly motivated Method Man to sign on to the project, this could just be face saving strategy employed by RZA to help Method Man maintain his tough masculine identity. After all, the song was written about Method Man's longtime girlfriend (and later his wife), Tamika.[283] To express not just physical, but emotional and spiritual devotion to one partner was an anomaly among rappers who identified themselves with street culture. In the late 1980s into 1990, Big Daddy Kane pioneered the idea that a hardcore rapper could rhyme about love, but his fourth studio

album delved too far into R&B for most fans' comfort. Accusations that he had gone soft or sold out alienated those who supported Kane's earlier work. Method Man did not want to repeat the same mistake.

Ol' Dirty Bastard and Minstrelsy

Ol' Dirty Bastard, for many, was the face of the Wu-Tang Clan. With the possible exception of Method Man, ODB was the member most responsible for bringing the Wu-Tang Clan to a wide, diverse audience. ODB's solo effort, *Return to the 36 Chambers: The Dirty Version*, released on March 1, 1995, moved 500,000 copies within five months.[284] Several months later, ODB made a guest appearance on the remix of Mariah Carey's lead single "Fantasy," from her album *Daydream.* Also present in the music video, ODB cemented Wu-Tang's place in the mainstream, as *Daydream* went on to sell millions of copies worldwide.[285]

During the Clan's 1993 tour of the U.S. and his own tour in support of *Return to the 36 Chambers*, ODB gained a reputation as an outrageous performer. B-Real of the rap group Cypress Hill remembered seeing Ol' Dirty curl up in a sleeping bag onstage until it was his turn to rhyme.[286] Cappadonna recalled being shocked by hearing ODB declare "the black man is God" during a performance on the Arsenio Hall Show.[287] An article in the *New York Beacon* praised ODB's performance on the 1995 live compilation album *Illstyle Live! Music from the Elektra Entertainment Group*. The author described it as the "best performance of the year (on record at least), simply because it combines a multitude of reactions: laughter, agreement, shame, befuddlement, impatience, frustration, and a

host of others."[288] ODB forgot lyrics, crooned R&B hits a cappella to a female audience member, and complained about getting dragged out of bed naked to make it to the show on time; but all the while he was "entertainingly obnoxious." ODB characterized his own performance style as "free," but there was an undeniably minstrel-esque quality to his theatrics.[289] ODB was known as someone who would do anything to entertain.[290] Thus, he played up the wild, intoxicated image that fans expected in order to excite.

In ODB's life outside rap, he seemed to continually reinforce the most extreme stereotypes of black men as inarticulate, sexual deviants who abused substances and engaged in criminal activities. Rather than trying to cover up his indiscretions, ODB reveled in them, often turning misfortunes into publicity for himself and the Clan. He proudly lifted his shirt in the music video for "Shimmy Shimmy Ya," to reveal the belly-length scar that remained after getting shot three times in 1993. This affirmed his connections to life in the ghetto, while also projecting the sense that he was unafraid of, or even enjoyed this lifestyle.

The allure of ODB lay in the fact that nobody could figure out how much of his public personality was an act and how much of it was real. For example, MTV News agreed to do a segment with Ol' Dirty in the spring of 1995 to promote *Return to the 36 Chambers*. The cameras proceeded to capture Ol' Dirty (drink in hand) and his family riding in a limousine to pick up food stamps, with ODB rhetorically asking "why would you not want to get free money?"[291] Wu-Tang Clan members have since defended his actions, arguing that ODB was trying to eliminate the social stigma of accepting welfare. Children of parents on welfare, ODB showed, had nothing to be embarrassed about. It was a sign of intelligence to accept welfare because you were using the system to your

advantage; a system that, historically, worked decidedly against the interests of black people.

At a time when poor people were increasingly categorized as 'deserving' or 'undeserving' of government assistance, the stunt epitomized the latter for many onlookers. Although ODB may have been trying to point out that 'undeserving' was an arbitrary and callous label that clouded the multiple and interrelated causes of poverty, his statements in the MTV feature seemed more like uninformed opinions than fully developed arguments. "Do you know how hard it is for people to live without nothing?" ODB said without explanation. Defending his continued use of food stamps despite his wealth and fame, ODB announced "you [the government] owe me forty acres and a mule anyway."[292] dream hampton questioned ODB's usefulness as a symbol of radical politics, asking, "can insanity be revolutionary if it lives within the Black body of an unpredictable crazy motherfucker?"[293] More so than not, Ol' Dirty's actions proved a political liability for African Americans than a source of inspiration. ODB, in many ways, embodied what Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar has referred to as the "modern hip hop coon."[294]

In describing pioneer L.A. gangsta rapper Ice Cube's "thug rebel" public persona, Ogbar could very easily have been talking about Ol' Dirty Bastard: "a post-Black Power-era minstrel figure, complete with an impulsive, oversexed, violent, and generally pathological image…"[295] Although ODB noted that he was trying to create an album that reflected his true personality, he was clearly indebted to Ice Cube's "documentary" style of rap. In 1989, Ice Cube explained his "I want to stay right on the streets… the kids are going to relate to you more if you've got on a t-shirt just like they do. I'm still the same person, I still dress the same way… I don't want to move out, to be honest, because I

don't want to lose touch."[296] Similarly, ODB was extremely vocal about being from "the streets," receiving welfare, and "keeping it real" so as not to alienate those with whom he grew up. Yet, the overriding component of ODB's image was that of an entertainer, one willing to do or say anything to draw attention from others.

ODB often performed freestyle raps (extemporaneous rhymes) in various stages of inebriation for interviewers and television cameras. Rather than coherent displays of verbal dexterity, these tended to be a series of bizarre non-sequiturs mixed with mumbling and vocables.[297] Although ODB's freestyles were not virtuosic, they were performed with such confidence, recklessness, and drunkenness that they became legendary. *Rolling Stone* contributor, Touré, characterized ODB's lyrics as "largely forgettable… but his vocal impact, when rhyming or rap singing or whatever, is undeniable."[298] When Ol' Dirty Bastard claimed that he took on that moniker because there was "no father to his style," he backed it up with an innovative approach to rap lyricism. ODB's unrestrained rhyme style, often conveyed extemporaneously in a state of inebriation, fed into the mythic figure of Ol' Dirty Bastard as an unpredictable, uncontrollable, but endearing entertainer. Many people close to him believed the pressure to live up to this mythical character of his own creation—the Ol' Dirty Bastard—drove Russell Jones to indulge in even more intoxicants than usual to keep his public performances entertaining for audiences.

The appeal of Ol' Dirty Bastard in the mid-1990s also lay in the fact that people could read his behavior in multiple ways. Sometimes, his actions seemed like a clever publicity stunt; other times, he was simply out of control, which added to the anticipation for his concerts and television appearances; and, at worst, he embodied the pathological

behavior of the urban underclass, which fueled racist and classist discourse. Dante Ross, the man responsible for signing ODB to Elektra, noted that Dirty was "a favorite among [white] hipsters…because they liked someone to laugh at." He continued, "Some people think it's poetic to watch a black man self-destruct."[299] However, Ol' Dirty's appeal did not begin and end with comical tragedy; he could be interpreted as an iconoclastic figure in the business of rap. At the beginning of his performance for Elektra's *Illstyle Live!* album, ODB presented fans with a glimpse into how he understood his place in the music industry.

> Fuckin' record companies be usin' niggas as fuckin' puppets man. I ain't no muthafuckin' puppet man. I'm the Ol' Dirty Bastard, man [laughs]… How the fuck you gonna use me as a muthafuckin' puppet man?... Shit got to change man… Let niggas just do what the fuck they wanna do man. Only one[s] that understand this music is niggas!... And the white people gonna like it any-muthafuckin'-way, 'cause white people like anything a nigga do. You know what I'm sayin'? Straight up and down, it's real like that, right?… Let a nigga be free… That's why Ol' Dirty Bastard is the baddest muthfucker, 'cause a nigga got to be free… My mind is my home… what you see, is what you get…[300]

Essentially, Ol' Dirty justified his outrageous actions by portraying them as a form of resistance against the tendencies of record companies to standardize the products of their artists. His minstrel-esque performances, in a similar vein, were warranted because white Americans consume black culture regardless of how it was presented to them. This way, ODB had license to behave however he wanted, and remain within the 'keeping it real' ethos. "ODB was using his dysfunction to make performance art," wrote his unofficial biographer Jamie Lowe, "[h]is work was more about him and his stage time than his product; he had become the product."[301]

Rumors of ODB's antics on and offstage abounded in informal channels of communication as well as in the media. The story of how he was shot the first time

became legendary in Brooklyn, before making its way into a national discourse. In the 1994, several men ODB knew robbed him of his jewelry. He responded the following night by breaking into their apartment alone through the window, hoping to reclaim his possessions by threatening the thieves with a broken forty-ounce bottle. He was shot as he tried to escape. "Whether it's true or not is unimportant," dream hampton observed, "the important thing is it's believable."[302] There is little evidence to substantiate this sequence of events, but the fact that the story circulated as if it were entirely plausible demonstrated how ODB cultivated an image of reckless energy, bordering on pathology.

Ghostface: A Baad Man with Soul

Based on what can be gleaned from interviews, Ghostface Killah has experienced a number of traumatic events in his life, each of which are important to note in order to contextualize his performance of masculinity. It is difficult to draw definitive conclusions from these experiences, but when examined in connection to his rap persona, such events may provide some insight into why Ghostface constructed his public gender identity the way he did.

Growing up very poor in the Stapleton Houses, Ghostface was the eldest of eight children, two of which had muscular dystrophy. His mother was an alcoholic and his father left the family when Ghost was six years old, forcing the young boy to take on adult responsibilities at a very early age. He remembered,

> The father plays an important role and he wasn't there to sit down with me with my homework or whatever. So it was like times I ran away from too much pressure from me being the oldest—runnin' back and forth to the store. Two brothers in a wheelchair and I'm takin' 'em and forth to the bathroom, pickin'

> 'em up. It was a lot of pressure. At the same time my moms never had it for Christmas and certain holidays [when] you might want a gift or something.[303]

Around the age of eleven, Ghostface had perhaps his first sexual experience with a girl he claimed was about sixteen at the time. "I was scared, I was nervous… she felt me shaking and all that," he explained, before determining "that's too young though, she shouldn't have did that to me." When pressed as to whether or not he was raped, Ghostface replied "I wouldn't say that [I was raped] because I still did what I did." The interviewer probed "who's idea was it?" he responded "ours," but quickly backtracked, "it was hers though, but…she invited me… but it was like, you know, I had to follow suit… you don't know how to say no at that [age]… I didn't know how to say no."[304]

When Ghost was "younger" (as he described on a reality show in 2014), "one of my first loves… messed around and cheated on me." He conjectured about the effect this had on his outlook, saying "I just threw a guard up… like, with females I don't really trust 'em." Connecting this uneasiness with relationships to his present-day fame, he worried that "with my life as me being who I am—name is everywhere and I'm getting money— its like, not knowin' like yo, is this person—do she really like me for me?... or that money?"[305] Whether or not this story was true, it served as a justification for his present-day distrust of women as a famous and wealthy entertainer.

At fifteen, he was sent to "upstate New York for robbing and stealing," because the family had been really "struggling" for a couple years.[306] Although this was where he met Mitchell 'Divine' Diggs—who would introduce Ghostface to his brother RZA—Ghost returned from prison and began using the powerful hallucinogen Phencyclidine (usually referred to as PCP or angel dust) while selling drugs and committing robberies.[307]

During this time—probably around 1986-1987—he dropped out of school but was also starting to make demos with RZA, who's mother allowed RZA to stay in her Stapleton apartment after she moved out of state.[308] Ghostface seems to have periodically lived with RZA over the course of several years, sometimes stealing food, committing robberies, and selling drugs to make ends meet. On his time spent with RZA, Ghostface noted they were "always together," and they had complementary masculine identities that made them compatible as friends and businessmen. "I always been the enforcer, he been the brains, so we worked together." That's my brother right there, and I love the shit out of him. I don't give a fuck if I know nobody in my life. Me just being around him is just a jewel and a blessing in itself."[309] From this, it is clear that Ghostface wanted to project an image of himself as one who commanded respect because of his ability to handle situations with his fists. His masculinity was validated by his ability to control situations using his physically imposing frame to his advantage. Yet, he was also completely comfortable expressing love and affection for another man, so long as these feelings were not acted upon sexually. Ghostface's ability to showcase his hard and soft sides through nostalgic stories became his dominant approach to music by the time his first solo album *Ironman*, made it to stores in 1996.

In collaboration with RZA, Ghostface shifted his drug dealing operations from New York to Steubenville, Ohio, probably sometime in early 1991.[310] While in Ohio, Ghostface was shot once in the neck and twice in the arm.[311] Ghostface has not addressed this incident publicly, except in the song "Can It Be All So Simple (Remix)," from *Only Built 4 Cuban Linx…* It is unclear how much of Ghost's verse is taken from his actual experience, but obviously, the on-record reenactment was dramatized to elicit emotion

from the listener. Nevertheless, Ghost's carefully crafted narrative served a dual purpose: authenticate Ghostface's drug dealing background and reinforce his image as a tough man.

As the rap artists, fans, and critics became increasingly obsessed with street authenticity, surviving gunshot wounds increasingly became a badge of honor for rap artists. In the intro to the song, Ghostface and Raekwon act out a skit that is meant to re-create the situation that led to Ghost being shot. They confront and rough up a rival drug dealer who has moved in on their territory. During the scuffle, shots ring out and Ghostface exclaims under his breath, "yo son I'm hit," but he soon collects his thoughts and tells Raekwon to leave before the cops arrive and he will take of himself.

In crafting this narrative, Ghostface assumed the role of an enforcer who could only be physically dominated by someone wielding a gun. This vulnerability must have made a large impression on Ghostface, though he chose only to acknowledge these feelings indirectly in his music and never in the media. In his verse on "Can It Be All So Simple," Ghostface provides details about the incident in a nightmare, though Ghost downplays it as a flashback.

> I doze off/catch a flashback on how I got trapped and got licked like Papsy[?] in a mob flick, I got hit/stumbling, holding my neck to the god's rest, opened flesh/burgundy blood colored my Guess/emergency trauma, black teen headed for surgery/can it be an out of state nigga tried to murder me?/I should've stayed in Job Corps, and now I'm an outlaw.

In spite of the severity of the situation he described, Ghost remained unnaturally calm in this narrative, as was expected of a baad man. However, Ghostface exhibits a measure of vulnerability in this verse not common to rap music, which is dominated by braggadocio to the extreme. Ghostface gets "trapped," suggesting that he was outsmarted and led into

dangerous circumstances without catching on to the set up. "Stumbling," he makes his way to a friends' house from which he is taken to a hospital to undergo surgery. Before he goes under the knife, Ghostface regrets choosing criminal activity over the vocational program, Job Corps, a program initiated by the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 to provide job training and education to low income youth. Although he leaves his tough image in tact, this verse from Ghostface revealed a sensitive side to his masculine identity that he continued to cultivate in the coming years.

In an interview with the rap magazine *ego trip* a few months before the October 1996 release of *Ironman*, the rapper disclosed a number of very personal details about his life. In the article—subtitled "Wu-Tang Clan's Ghostface Killah Unmasked"—Ghost admitted to being an alcoholic for over six years and he shared the fact that his two-year-old son had a twin sister named Destiny who died only five days after their birth. He discussed the extreme poverty he experienced as a child along with his mother's drinking problem and his brothers' physical disabilities. Ghost readily divulged his involvement in drug dealing and use, though this was punctuated by how RZA and rap music rescued him from that lifestyle. For someone who refused to show his face in all the music videos and promotions for *Enter the Wu-Tang* out of the fear he would be recognized by the police, how should one interpret Ghostface's seemingly boundless candor? The answer is quite simple: this was a carefully coordinated effort to reinvent his image.

The formerly secretive Ghostface Killah took on a Mafioso alter-ego for Raekwon's *Only Built for Cuban Linx…*, calling himself 'Tony Stark' (named after the main character in the Marvel Comics series "Iron Man"). Taking the cue from Method Man—an avid comic book reader with a vast collection; he called himself Johnny Blaze

for *Only Built* as an homage to the protagonist in the Marvel series "Ghost Rider"—Ghostface adopted the Iron Man persona to tap into the overlapping hip hop and comic book markets.[312] As a part of this reinvention, Ghostface chose to present himself as a tough rapper with a touch of soul. In an appearance on the television program "Rap City," Ghostface explained that he included hooks and beats from soulful artists such as the Force MDs, The Delphonics, Teddy Pendergrass, because he wanted his album to sound more "soul-ish."[313] This not only reflected the music he grew up with, but also gave him the sonic backdrop he preferred to craft emotionally meaningful lyrics.

The fifteenth track from *Ironman*, "All That I Got Is You," exemplified Ghostface's attempt to reinvent himself as a soulful, but hardcore rapper. With Mary J. Blige handling the choruses, Ghostface recalled his childhood hardships in vivid detail in one lengthy verse that resembled a stream of consciousness recollection.

> Dwellin' in the past, flashbacks when I was young
> Whoever thought that I'd have a baby girl and three sons
> But goin' through this difficult stage, I find it hard to believe
> Why my old Earth had so many seeds
> But she's her own woman, and due to me, I respect that
> I saw life for what it's really worth and took a step back
> Family ain't family no more, we used to play ball
> Eggs after school, eat grits cause we was poor
> Grab the pliers for the channel, fix the hanger on the T.V.
> Rockin' each others' pants to school wasn't easy
> We survived winters, snotty nose with no coats
> We kept it real, but the older brothers still had jokes
> Sadly, daddy left me at the age of six
> I didn't know nothin', but mommy neatly packed his shit
> She cried, and grandma held the family down
> I guess mommy wasn't strong enough, she just went down
> Check it, fifteen of us in a three-bedroom apartment
> Roaches everywhere, cousins and aunts was there
> Four in the bed, two at the foot, two at the head
> I didn't like to sleep with John-John he peed the bed
> Seven o'clock, pluckin' roaches out the cereal box
> Some shared the same spoon, watchin' Saturday cartoons

Sugar water was our thing, every meal was no thrill
In the summer, free lunch held us down like steel
And there were days I had to go to [Tek's?] house with a note
Stating "Gloria, can I borrow some food I'm dead broke?"
So embarrassin', I couldn't stand to knock on they door
My friends might be laughin', I spent stamps in stores
Mommy where's the toilet paper? Use the newspaper
Look, Ms. Rose gave us a couch, she's the neighbor
Things was deep, my whole youth was sharper than cleats
Two brothers with muscular dystrophy, k-killed me
But I remember this, moms would lick her finger tips
To wipe the cold out my eye before school with her spit
Caseworker had her runnin' back to face-to-face
I caught a case, housin' tried to throw us out of our place
Sometimes I look up at the stars and analyze the sky
And ask myself was I meant to be here... why?[314]

Ghostface described his approach as "from the heart," and he claimed that "All That I Got Is You" caused a lot of listeners to cry "because—they went through the same thing that I went through."[315] Using the numerous traumatic experiences in his past, Ghostface constructed a masculine identity that highlighted both his mental and physical fortitude, in addition to his softer, more introspective self. Through realistic narratives and apparently candid interviews, Ghost depicted his experiences with poverty in an urban setting with such acuity that they authenticated his connections to those who grew up in comparable circumstances. This, effectively, transformed the masked, relatively unimpressive Ghostface Killah of *Enter the Wu-Tang*, into Tony Stark—a superhero with an almost invincible suit of Iron, but also an emotional human being with a complex personality.

In establishing this authenticity, Ghostface was able to push the boundaries of acceptable expressions of masculinity in rap towards a more sensitive outlook, without compromising his toughness. Each member of the Clan negotiated this delicate boundary in their own way, drawing upon different models of manliness to authenticate their

images. In doing so, they expanded the possibilities for how male rappers could successfully market their masculinity.

Conclusion: Wu-Gambinos

Raekwon's first solo album, *Only Built 4 Cuban Linx…*, became available to the public on August 1, 1995. It featured Ghostface Killah on almost all of the songs, essentially making it a full-length release for both men. The album was heralded for the cohesiveness and scope of its Mafioso concept, in which the Clan assumed alter egos as high stakes drug lords. The album folded together numerous lyrical and sonic references to *Scarface* (Brian De Palma's ode to Cuban cocaine pushers), the Gotti's (the famous New York Italian mob family), and *The Killer* (the John Woo cop drama focused heavily on professional assassins). Raekwon and Ghostface somehow pull off these complex cultural mixings through the sheer force of their lyrical ability and RZA's astounding production.

The album played out like a cinematic epic and placed assertive masculinity at the center. Drug dealers, assassins, and gangsters were not new characters to rap music, yet these characters were carefully crafted to an extent not yet realized in rap music. As a result, *Only Built 4 Cuban Linx…* went on to have a profound influence on some of the most important rappers of the 1990s and 2000s, from the Notorious B.I.G., to Jay-Z, to Young Jeezy. The album stands as a representation of the Clan's willingness to take risks in constructing their public masculinities. Assuming the combined identities of Italian, Cuban, and Hong Kong mobsters, crossed racial, ethnic, and language lines in

complicated ways. And it took a deft handling to pull off. Much like Method Man's risky rap love song, ODB's minstrelesque character, and Ghostface's show of emotion, Raekwon's adoption of a multinational persona pushed touchy boundaries for men in rap music.

ENDNOTES

ENDNOTES

[264] Cheo H. Coker, "Shame on a Nigga?," *Source*, August 1994, accessed February 23, 2014, http://ifihavent.wordpress.com/2007/05/24/36-chambers-of-death…-choose-one-wu-tang-in-rap-pages-1994/.

[265] Cheo H. Coker, "Wu-Tang Clan: 36 Chambers of Death… Choose One," *RapPages*, February 1994, accessed February 23, 2014, http://ifihavent.wordpress.com/2007/05/24/36-chambers-of-death…-choose-one-wu-tang-in-rap-pages-1994/.

[266] Coker, "Shame on a Nigga?."

[267] Coker, "36 Chambers of Death…"

[268] GZA, interview by Agnus Batey, *Quietus*.

[269] Method Man, Ibid.

[270] Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop*, 427.

[271] Method Man, report and interview by Agnus Batey, "Wu-Tang Clan."

[272] Ibid.

[273] RZA, "The Wu-Tang Clan's 20-Year Plan," narrated by Frannie Kelly, Morning Edition, *National Public Radio*, April 8, 2013, accessed August 21, 2013, http://www.npr.org/blogs/therecord/2013/04/08/176519640/the-wu-tang-clans-20-year-plan.

[274] The original 12 inch single for "Protect Ya Neck" featured "After the Laughter Comes Tears" as the B-side.

[275] The album version, titled "All I Need," was produced by RZA and sounded quite distinct from remixes of the song. All of Method Man's verses are the same, but the bass line is less bouncy, Method Man and unidentified man rap the choruses instead of Blige singing them, and the production is stripped down.

[276] "dj derezon, tre the boy wonder & rza – 14 deadly secrets (2/6)," YouTube Video, 7:25, posted by revolutionarywarfare, September 12, 2008, accessed October 5. 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3FwKQ-e3tnI.

[277] Forman, *The 'Hood Comes First*, 180. Tracing the conception of "the 'hood," Forman noted how a racialized discourse developed in the 1970s that demonized black and Latino youth in inner cities as hopeless products of the "ghetto" or "poverty neighborhoods." These young people, in turn, subverted such labels by embracing their origins in the 'hood, and viewing their environment as a site for creativity and resistance. (56-65).

[278] Ibid., 181.

[279] Charnas, *The Big Payback*, 460.

[280] Mahbod Moghadam, interview with RZA, *Outside the Lines with Rap Genius*, podcast audio, June 5, 2012, accessed October 5, 2013, http://outsidethelinespodcast.com/episode/2/.

[281] Dr. Dre, "Bitches Ain't Shit," *The Chronic*, Death Row Records, CD audio, 1992.

[282] Searchable Database: "Eazy-E," under "Gold & Platinum," *RIAA*, 2014, accessed March 30, 2014, http://www.riaa.com/goldandplatinumdata.php?table=SEARCH_RESULTS&artist=Eazy%20E&format=ALBUM&go=Search&perPage=50.

[283] Blanco, *Wu-Tang Clan and RZA*, 30.

[284] "Searchable Database: "Ol' Dirty Bastard," under "Gold & Platinum," *RIAA*, 2014, accessed March 28, 2014, http://www.riaa.com/goldandplatinumdata.php?table=SEARCH_RESULTS&artist=Ol'%20Dirty%20Bastard&format=ALBUM&go=Search&perPage=50.

[285] *Daydream* would be certified 'diamond' (the highest honor) by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) on December 18, 1998, for having had over 10,000,000 copies shipped to stores in the United States alone. "Diamond Awards," under "Top Tallies," *RIAA*, 2014, accessed March 22, 2014, http://riaa.com/goldandplatinum.php?content_selector=top-diamond-awards.

[286] B-Real, *Dirty*, Allah & Turner.

[287] Cappadonna, Ibid.

[288] Steve Stancell, "FOCUS: Afrika Bambaataa, Das EFX & Ol' Dirty Bastard," *New York Beacon*, January 17, 1996.

[289] Ibid.

[290] *Dirty*, Allah & Turner.

[291] "Ol Dirty Bastard Pickin Up Food Stamps In A Limo," YouTube Video, 3:42, posted by dcarlo1981, September 6, 2010, accessed March 23, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lrvnLpLjTuA.

[292] Ibid.

[293] dream hampton, "I Like It Raw," *Village Voice*, May 30, 1995.

[294] Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar, *Hip-Hop Revolution: The Culture and Politics of Rap* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 31.

[295] Ibid., 25.

[296] Ice Cube, quoted in Mark Cooper, "NWA: 'Our raps are documentary. We don't take sides," *theguardian.com*, August 7, 2013, accessed March 22, 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/music/2013/aug/07/nwa-1989-classic-interview. Originally published as "NWA: Welcome to L.A.," *Sunday Correspondent Magazine*, October 1, 1989.

[297] "Ol' Dirty Bastard On YO! MTV Raps," YouTube Video, 3:59, posted by Folkert Leffring, February 11, 2013, accessed March 23, 2014, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ysYI1FkP6r0.

[298] Touré, "Rap-up –The Voice of Langston Hughes by Langston Hughes / Return to the 36 Chambers: The Dirty Version by Ol' Dirty Bastard," *Rolling Stone*, April 20, 1995.

[299] Dante Ross, quoted in Lowe, *Digging for Dirt*, 106.

[300] "Freestyle," Ol' Dirty Bastard featuring Buddha Monk and 60 Second Assassin, *Illstyle Live! Music from the Elektra Entertainment Group*, Elektra, 1995.

[301] Lowe, *Digging for Dirt*, 97.

[302] hampton, "I Like It Raw," *Village Voice.*

[303] Ghostface Killah, quoted in Chairman Mao, "The Iron Man Cometh: Wu-Tang Clan's Ghostface Killah Unmasked," *egotripland.com*, April 6, 2010, accessed February 28, 2014, http://www.egotripland.com/the-iron-man-cometh-wu-tang-clan's-ghostface-killah-unmasked/. Originally published in *ego trip* issue 8, 1996.

[304] Ghostface Killah, interview by Angela Yee and Leah Rose, originally aired on "Lip Service," *Shade 45/Sirius XM Radio*, September 14, 2009. Republished as "To Eat Or Not To Eat According to Ghostface on LIP SERVICE," YouTube Video, 5:27, posted by

angelayeerumors, September 16, 2009, accessed March 2, 2014, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=azhF_K-5MhQ.

[305] Ghostface Killah, *Couples Therapy*, "Love Hurts," episode 402, February 28, 2014 (originally aired January 10, 2014). The medium through which Ghostface divulged this information, the VH1 celebrity reality television show *Couples Therapy*, is extremely problematic because such shows are carefully crafted to create maximum drama for the viewing public. In addition, though Ghostface shared this recollection within the context of a 'group therapy session', he could have easily remembered the event incorrectly, exaggerated the story, blended several experiences together, or fabricated details. Therapist Jenn Berman leant an air of psychiatric authority to the situation, making the participants appear forthcoming and honest, yet these circumstances may do more to encourage dishonesty in some cases. Ghostface is ultra-aware that his actions and words are being broadcast to millions of people, many of which are his fans, who expect Ghostface to carry himself in certain ways. At the same time, he is acting more immediately within a small group of people who, ostensibly at least, have very heartfelt desires to solve their relationship issues. While the publicity to be gained from this show cannot be discounted as a significant motive for appearing on the show, Ghostface must have genuinely wanted to put some effort into resolving the problems between himself and his girlfriend, Kelsey. That being said, to avoid these thorny issues, I cite this source primarily to show how Ghostface used events in the past (regardless of their authenticity) to construct and reinforce his public masculinity in the present.

[306] Ghostface Killah, interview by Andres Vasquez, "Ghostface Killah: Peace, God," *Hip Hop DX - Cheri Media Group*, September 13, 2009, accessed March 3, 2014, http://www.hiphopdx.com/index/interviews/id.1406/title.ghostface-killah-peace-god.

[307] Ibid.

[308] It is unclear when Ghostface dropped out of school. This event is only mentioned in passing in Chairman Mao, "The Iron Man Cometh," *ego trip*; Also, it is unknown exactly when Ghostface and RZA became friends. Ghost said that after he returned prison around 1985 or 1986, he "hooked up with RZA," who then "moved down to [Stapleton] projects." (Ghostface Killah, interview by Andres Vasquez, "Ghostface Killah: Peace, God,").

RZA also suggested that they met around 1985 or 1986. He noted that he saw the film *Shaolin and Wu-Tang* in 1986, after which, Ghostface began using the term "Wu-Tang" in everyday slang. This implies that Ghost and RZA were already close friends by this time; however, RZA gave no indication as to how long after he saw the movie that Ghost began using the slang, only stating that the movie "caught on fast in the hood, and pretty soon a lot of Stapleton niggas were onto the Wu-Tang. Then the word was popping up in slang." RZA explicitly stated that Ghostface was not present when he and ODB saw the movie in the theaters in 1986, so a time lapse could exist between this original viewing and Ghostface's supposed propagation of the slang. (RZA, *The Tao of Wu*, 55-56).

Conversely, Ghostface claimed he "introduced him [RZA] to the Wu-Tang and Shaolin movies." Although this clashes with RZA's recollection of events (he claimed that he and ODB stumbled, by chance, into a theater showing the movie), it seems to lend further credence to the fact that Ghost and RZA were good friends by the time RZA first saw *Shaolin and Wu-Tang*. On the other hand, it cannot be verified whether or not this first viewing actually occurred in 1986. (Ghostface Killah, interview by Andres Vasquez, "Ghostface Killah: Peace, God,").

Adding a little more clarity to the timeline of this situation was RZA's little brother, Terrance Hamlin (aka 9th Prince), who remembered "staying with him [RZA] and Ghostface in Stapleton projects" although he did not say when this first happened. He did note that Raekwon, Inspectah Deck, U-God, Method Man—who were a part of a crew called D.M.D. posse—consistently came over to record music in 1987 and 1988. At the very least, this supports the idea that RZA and Ghostface were good enough friends to be living together by 1987. (9th Prince, interview by Phillip Mlynar, "Q&A: Rapper 9th Prince On His Older Brother RZA And The Early Days Of The Wu-Tang Clan," *Village Voice*, October 4, 2010, accessed January 22, 2014, http://blogs.villagevoice.com/music/2010/10/interview_9th_p.php).

[309] Chairman Mao, "The Iron Man Cometh," *egotripland.com*.

[310] RZA suggested this happened in early 1991. The following is pieced together from RZA's writings in *The Tao of Wu*: "Around 1991, things were bad for us in New York… We headed back to Steubenville… A lot of bad things happened quickly…Ghost got shot… In April of 1999 I got back to New York…" (RZA, *The Tao of Wu*, 89-101).

[311] Chairman Mao, "The Iron Man Cometh," *egotripland.com*.

[312] New York City was home to both Marvel and DC Comics, the two largest comic book companies in the United States.

[313] "Ghostface Classic Interview 1996 (Rare)," YouTube Video, 9:31, posted by noblechild456, February 19, 2013, accessed February 28, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wTkBXxaoPgE.

[314] "All That I Got Is You," Ghostface Killah featuring Mary J. Blige, *Ironman*, Razor Sharp Records/Epic/Sony Music, October 29, 1996.

[315] "Ghostface – Interview," SoundCloud Audio, 22:10, posted by user9199563, accessed April 12, 2014, https://soundcloud.com/user9199563/ghostface-interview. Originally aired on *P3 Soul*, interview by Mats Nileskär, radio broadcast, 2007.

CHAPTER 6
"THE GAME OF CHESS IS LIKE A SWORDFIGHT": A CASE STUDY OF GZA"S PUBLIC MASCULINITY

"Music, martial arts, and chess," are avenues to create "happy" and "self-fulfilled" young people. This was RZA's contention while serving on a discussion panel prior to the second Hip-Hop Chess Federation (HHCF) Chess Kings Invitational in 2014. RZA, who was acting as the Director of Outreach for the HHCF, successfully defended his championship belt from the same tournament in 2007. A year after that 2007 victory, RZA collaborated with executives at ChessPark.com to create WuChess, an online portal targeting the "hip hop community."[316] For a forty-eight dollar annual membership (a steep price considering some sites offer free memberships), WuChess offered subscribers updates about the Clan and new rap music packaged in a Wu-Tang inspired interface through which users played chess and communicated with one another. The impetus behind the fee was to fund RZA's solo tour that summer and also to raise money for scholarships awarded by the HHCF.[317] To explain why he felt strongly about promoting chess, RZA told the *New York Times*, "the way you have to think in chess is good for everyday thinking… especially for brothers in the urban community who never take that second look, never take that second thought."[318] Thus, the Wu-Tang Clan's embrace of chess contained a positive social message for the disadvantaged youth whom they sought to reach with their music.

Chess was an ancillary component to the image of the Wu Tang Clan, but the game had a double connotation that made it useful for their marketing campaign. Chess served as a visually striking allegory for warfare, which fit well within the context of hip

hop culture and rap music where masculine competition was coveted as a force that drove innovation. It also symbolically represented the Clan's intelligence. When Method Man said RZA had a mind "like a game of chess," he was lending a high compliment to the complexity of RZA's way of thinking.[319] Though traditionally associated with elites and intellectuals, the democratization of chess following the "Fischer Boom" of 1972 made the game extremely popular to many poor, working class, and middle class people. Thus, the Clan viewed it not as an elitist game that had no value in the lives of commoners, but a game that sharpened one's intellect without diminishing his tough masculine identity.

Chess figured prominently in their 1993 music video for "Da Mystery of Chessboxin'," in which members of the group rhymed on a human-sized chessboard. But chess took on an even greater role when GZA brought the human-sized chess battle to the next level, commissioning a team of professional graphic artists to create a vivid and violent scene for GZA's first solo album, *Liquid Swords*.

In crafting his own masculine identity, GZA utilized the imagery of chess to cast himself as a more hard-edged intellectual than his rap scholar persona on *Words From the Genius.* Instead of a playful picture of himself cramming volumes of books with a novelty quill pen, the cover art for Genius/GZA's 1995 solo album, *Liquid Swords*, was dramatic, violent, and filled with symbolism. It was more attuned with GZA's persona as elder statesman of the Wu-Tang Clan. As Method Man stated in a radio interview that made its way onto *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)*, "We form like Voltron and GZA happen to be the head." In conjuring the image of Voltron—a cartoon about a massive human-like robot made up of five separate robots that combine to form the arms, legs, and the head/midsection—GZA was positioned as the wisest member. In the midst of a

chaotic fight atop a large chessboard, GZA is pictured on the album cover with a bejeweled crown, possibly representing the twelve jewels of knowledge in Five Percent theology or simply his status as the king (although this is not clear). GZA is shown swinging a sword at another man's neck, signifying how GZA's lyrics are so sharp, they metaphorically chop off listeners' heads. GZA utilized the talents of Denys Cowan, a native of Queens and the chief artist of DC-Milestone comics, to illustrate a violent scene containing swords and flying guillotines that took place on a human-sized chessboard.

GZA said he learned chess from his cousin when he was nine years old, which was in 1975. After that initial experience, he did not pick the game back up until the early 1990s, claiming that they did not have a board on which to play.[320] He resumed playing "in the park" (which park, he did not say, but it was in East New York, Brooklyn) during the summer with Masta Killa in addition to other friends and rap artists like Afu-Ra, Jeru the Damaja, and True Master.[321] In 1992, GZA conceived the concept that would become the cover art for *Liquid Swords* while playing chess with Masta Killa. GZA recalled,

> We were playing a game, and we may have played like thirty games that night, and then the game was still in a checkmate position. And, I just started—you know I was smoking weed, and you know how you smoke weed, you really get all these thoughts and you start analyzing shit, and I started drawing the pieces how they were on the board like in that position and I'm not really that much of an artist… but… I drew it out that way, then I just started imagining how, 'what if this knight had a guillotine in his hand?' and 'What if this person had this sword swinging?' And I just thought of this whole war scene on the chessboard.[322]

This vision was half realized in the music video for "Da Mystery of Chessboxin'," directed by Gerald Barclay in 1993. In the video, images of RZA and GZA playing chess at a small table are interspersed between footage of men in white and black hoodies standing soldierly and members of the Clan saying their rhymes on a life-sized chessboard. Some wield weapons or perform acrobatic maneuvers, but the video also

heavily emphasizes the Clan members' gritty urban identities by showing them in the dingy corridors of a Staten Island salt mine.[323] At the end of the music video, RZA and GZA push all their chess pieces together and the camera fades into an overhead shot of the human 'chess pieces' tussling and shoving one another. GZA has not mentioned whether or not he had a hand in the making of this video, but the concept is very similar to what he claimed to have developed in 1992. However, GZA said he withheld the design that ended up on *Liquid Swords* from the promotional cover for the single "Da Mystery of Chessboxin'" because he felt it "was bigger than a single."[324]

When Mathematics, the Wu-Tang DJ and graphic designer who created the Wu logo, was unable to do the album artwork, GZA contracted Denys Cowan, a world-renowned comic and graphic novel illustrator. Not coincidently, Cowan co-founded Milestone Comics in 1993, the first black-owned and operated comic book company. Thus, GZA—much like Ghostface did with his first solo album *Ironman*—was tapping into the overlapping yet underutilized markets of comic book enthusiasts, chess players, and hip hop heads. Cowan's artwork for *Liquid Swords* brought GZA's vision to life, making his take on human-sized chess appear much more serious and imaginative than Barclay's portrayal in the "Chessboxin'" video.

African American Chess and New York City

The allure of chess to the Clan, several of which were avid chess players, was part of a larger historical trend known as the "Fischer Boom." This occurred as a result of the American media's vigorous coverage of the 1972 World Chess Championship, which

pitted the eccentric American Grandmaster, Bobby Fischer, against the reigning champion, Boris Spassky of the Soviet Union. To stir up excitement for the so-called "Match of the Century," the media highlighted Fischer's accusations against Soviet chess players at previous tournaments, in which he claimed they fixed matches with one another to guarantee a Soviet champion always prevailed. The patriotic fervor that erupted across the United States as a result of Fischer's dramatic victory vaulted chess to the status of international craze and contributed to the rapid democratization of the game. In 1972 alone, The United States Chess Federation (USCF) reported that their membership doubled.[325]

This passion for chess was strongly expressed in New York City, where Fischer spent the majority of his childhood and early adult life. New York was a hub for chess aficionados long before the Fischer Boom. A series of tournaments known as the First American Chess Congress convened in New York in 1857. Following the Congress, players and organizers formed the American Chess Association (ACA). The ACA later merged with several other organizations and evolved into the USCF. It also boasted a number of the most prestigious chess clubs in the country, including the now-defunct Manhattan Chess Club (established in 1877, it was the second-oldest chess organization in the country), the Marshall Chess Club, and the Brooklyn Chess Club. After Bobby Fischer's rise to prominence, the competitive chess culture already present in New York City rapidly expanded amongst people of all classes, races, backgrounds, and educational levels.

But chess in the U.S. was never confined to just one demographic, and African Americans figured prominently in the development of the game. Black participation in

chess was not a phenomenon unique to post-Fischer Boom American society. In fact, African Americans were directly involved in the professionalization of chess from the outset. James McCune Smith, the famed emancipationist and the first certified black physician in the United States, attended and wrote about the First American Chess Congress in 1857. He later published an essay celebrating the prowess of the Congress' winner, Paul Morphy. Morphy passed for white but was of African ancestry (a "Hekata-mulattin" in the words of Smith), and he has often been credited as the first modern chess player.[326]

Smith praised chess as a game that promoted physical and mental vigor in addition to cultivating good manners while serving as a positive alternative to vices like gambling or drinking. In other words, black elites believed chess produced rational and robust black males worthy of citizenship. Playing chess had social value because it was a tool for constructing a black masculinity that challenged the stereotypical depictions of blacks as lazy, unintelligent, and immoral. In the eyes of activists like Smith, this made the act of playing chess a political statement, or more precisely, an act of resistance to white dominance.

Though the political and social context would change dramatically over the next century, chess continued to serve as a form of resistance during the civil rights era. Chess was a civilized activity that showed blacks could compete on an intellectual level equal to, if not greater than, whites. The game was a viable arena through which racially unequal practices could be attacked, for the game conferred social respectability upon its practitioners. The dominant approach to civil rights activism at this time depended on portraying African Americans as respectable in order to gain the moral authority

necessary to challenge discrimination through the courts and though legislation. Chess fit well in with this agenda.

For example, Harlem native Walter Harris gained attention when he won the Junior-Senior tournament at the mostly white Marshall Chess Club. After the USCF adopted the Elo rating system in 1961, he became the first black person to attain the level of 'master' in 1963. Harris was only seventeen when he earned this title, by which time he was already the junior champion of the Marshall Chess Club and a member of the Manhattan Chess Club. In an article about "the nation's top Negro chess player," Sara Slack of the *Amsterdam News* described Harris as "an utterly charming and disarming 136-pound, 16-year-old Harlem school boy."[327] Portraying Harris in respectable terms leant credence to the Civil Rights cause, for he did not fit any popular stereotypes of young black men as violent, lascivious, brutes. Though Harris himself never considered himself a political activist, his success served as a symbolic victory for supporters of civil rights.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, many young African Americans seem to have embraced chess in correlation with the Black Power Movement. Chess player Eugene Brown recalled, "[t]he mood back then among most blacks was that they wanted to become enlightened about their history and their rights… Everybody was reading and learning. Chess was a part of all that."[328] Chess taught valuable life lessons like discipline and strategic thinking, and it served as an educational tool for young people. Washington, D.C., emerged as the epicenter of black chess in this time period, but New Yorkers, especially Brooklynites, were also developing a formidable reputation.[329]

Ronald Simpson, who attained the title of master from the World Chess Federation in the late 1980s, was introduced to high-level chess through a black barbershop in Crown Heights, Brooklyn.[330] Simpson remembered, "there weren't many kids playing chess in the late sixties," so when he discovered "men in the community played chess" at Melvin Brady's barbershop, the ten year old soaked it up. "It was like a local chess club," he stated, recalling that the players were well versed in various styles of play that required intensive study and practice. Though they were very skilled, the gatherings remained informal, and most "men in the neighborhood would stop in just to play a quick game before going home… while constantly glancing out of the barbershop window (hoping their wives wouldn't catch them playing chess)."[331] Despite these players' amateur status, they were a part of an established black chess culture that already overlapped with the world of professional white players.

Around this time, black chess players in Brooklyn seem to have both repudiated and sought admission to the white-run chess clubs. Brooklynite William Morrison another future International Master, gained a membership to the mostly white Marshall Chess Club around the age of twelve (circa 1972) after placing first in a local tournament held at the Brooklyn Public Library. As a part of this prestigious organization, the young Morrison gained experience against professionals, many of whom were masters. Ronald Simpson also played with predominately white chess clubs like the Marshall and the Manhattan.

By contrast, Maurice Ashley—who became the first African American chess grandmaster in 1999—steeled his chess skills not in predominately white clubs, but in New York City parks throughout the 1980s. Born in Jamaica in 1966, but raised in

Brownsville, Brooklyn, Ashley credits much of his chess talent to the extensive time he spent playing in parks such as Ronald E. McNair Park. Unofficially dubbed "Mount Olympus," this park—located adjacent to Prospect Park in Prospect Heights, Brooklyn—drew a strange mix of amateurs, hustlers, and masters. In these informal and often ultra-competitive settings, Ashley noted how a peculiarly working class chess culture flourished, with black participants exerting an especially strong influence on how games were conducted. It was here that Ashley gained access to the enigmatic and highly influential group of black chess players who called themselves the "Black Bear School of Chess."

This was in the 1980s, but the Black Bears had been around for at least a decade before Ashley discovered them. The Black Bears were well established by the time Morrison and Simpson first encountered the group of older players when they were still teenagers in the early 1970s. The Black Bears provided a sense of belonging to the young men that the white chess clubs did not offer. Morrison referred to the Black Bears as "good role models" and a "family, " much like Simpson's recollection that the Black Bears "were like an extended family."[332] Thus, the mostly white chess clubs offered a way for black chess players to play a wide range of opponents, interact with grandmasters (the highest FIDE ranking), and enter prestigious tournaments. Black chess clubs, on the other hand, strengthened players' sense of community and racial identity, while also challenging their chess skills in different ways than the white clubs.

The Black Bear School of Chess

The origins of the Black Bear School of Chess are unclear. No records exist detailing who founded the organization, when this occurred, nor what circumstances led to its creation. Maurice Ashley and Ronald Simpsons' recollections offer some clues, but they were much younger than the other members when they joined the group. The two have shed light on the group, but each have focused on their own introduction to the Black Bears without delving into the history that preceded their membership.

Simpson discovered the Black Bears in 1973, Morrison sometime in the mid to late 1970s, and Ashley around 1984. The Black Bears already had a reputation for being extremely knowledgeable and proficient at chess, suggesting that they existed as a club for years before. It is very possible that the Black Bears began similarly to Melvin Brady's unofficial barbershop gatherings, only becoming a serious organization after 1972 when chess became a more economically viable career option. Both Ashley and Simpson singled out George 'The Firebreather' Golden as the leader of the Black Bears during the early to mid-1970s, yet they made no mention of George being the founder.

The Black Bears provided an alternative to the stodgy elite chess clubs that were governed according to standards of conduct reflecting middle and upper class white values. Most significantly, the Black Bears ignored or worked their way around the "code of silence" demanded by most chess clubs and amateurs alike.[333] In addition, they played by specialized rules, developing esoteric playing styles that allowed them to dominate games in the parks and excel in tournaments. The Black Bears also may be easily situated within the rising tide of black political and cultural consciousness that spread across the

U.S. from the late 1960s to the mid 1970s. Thus, the organization provided an outlet for black men to express their political viewpoints, participate in culturally solidifying recreation, and enjoy leisure time.

In the public parks, the Black Bears carved out distinctly African American social spaces and became expert chess players in the process. Ashley described the scene in Prospect Park the first time he met the Black Bears: "Thirty African Americans—soul music blasting, and they're all around chess boards either playing or watching."[334]

Simpson, who joined the Black Bears as a teenager in 1973, wrote in his memoir that the organization was "a group of older men who took chess seriously!" Theirs was a formal club that engaged in "tournaments, chess study sessions, [and] passionate chess discussions." Their motto reflected the uneasy socio-economic circumstances in many urban black communities on the throes of deindustrialization, but also the respective optimism and defiance of the civil rights and Black Power movements: "The will to win is greater than material advantage." In addition, Ashley highlighted the homosocial bonds forged over chess boards, and the masculine virtues attained in the process. "We were fighters, gladiators," stated Ashley, "you couldn't enter this group without being ready to go to war. Nobody would leave until Sunday. They'd shower, sleep a little, and get up and play. Many a girlfriend was lost over weekend chess rumbles."[335] The war analogy—which was nothing new to chess—was important to black men in the 1980s because many still identified with the male Black Power and cultural nationalist leaders of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Leaders like Stokely Carmichael, Huey Newton and Booby Seale, and Maulana Karenga considered themselves the revolutionary vanguard and they were prepared to go to war to further the black freedom struggle. This powerful sentiment

reverberated throughout constructions of black masculine identity in the 1980s, and it showed up most prominently in the culture of hip hop.

The Black Bears played "blitz," an extremely rapid style more conducive to playing in public with strangers and to gambling. The form of blitz typically played in the parks also included several unorthodox rules that made it more difficult for outsiders to enter the parks and immediately dominate the regulars. These also allowed regulars to more easily defeat and take money from unwitting challengers who did not understand the rules. Maurice Ashley remembered watching Morrison aka 'the Exterminator' and others play game after game of blitz for money, but he said the gambling aspect was mainly a way to prevent "random pretenders from calling next game on the most competitive tables."[336]

For typical blitz games in the parks, each player used a clock to keep track of how long it took them to make each move; the total time could not exceed five minutes or else the player was disqualified. The emphasis on speed gave the advantage to blitz experts players over standard chess players, who were used to having as much time as necessary to find the best move.[337] Also, the blitz players did not notify their opponent if their king was in 'check' (in danger of being taken). If the one in check did not notice and made a move that kept their king in check—normal chess rules dictate that one must move out of check—then the opponent could take the king without having to put the king in checkmate (where no possible move can get the king out of check, ending the game).

Much like hip hop, competitive chess in public venues such as Manhattan's Washington Square Park or Brooklyn's Prospect Park were male dominated spaces where players could express themselves with their own unique playing styles and trash talk, they

could learn from other players and develop their skills, and they could partake in an intellectually stimulating activity that was a lot of fun. By word of mouth, these parks, especially Washington Square Park, gained a reputation as a preferred hangout for excellent chess players and fierce competition. This sense of competitiveness and intellectual prowess (gained through street knowledge rather than higher education) made chess a perfect fit for a hip hop reinterpretation. And a Brooklyn MC who grew up surrounded by this vibrant black chess culture would be the one to truly harness it.

The Wu-Tang Clan understood the power of chess among African American men in Brooklyn and New York City at large. The game was a test of one's wits, competitive drive, and preparation comparable to the same qualities necessary to excel as an MC. Also, the status of chess as a recognized and celebrated outlet for black youth was firmly established by the 1990s. Chess in Schools

The Clan drew on this intellectual tradition because it conveyed both wisdom and assertive manliness. They did not want to come across as "nerdy" (a concern that dated all the way back to GZA's first album) so they looked towards the history of hustling geniuses, homeless experts, and trash talking masters, which held the cultural capital necessary to be avoid the "nerdy" label. This was an underground chess scene of sorts, not yet co-opted by the forces of capitalism and mainstream culture despite the influence of *Searching for Bobby Fischer*, a film that brought this world to the popular consciousness. Historically, chess offered black men a venue for demonstrating intellectual prowess, but its appeal was never so narrow; chess symbolized the idea that America is a democratic meritocracy. As the "Chess in Schools" program expanded in New York City and beyond from the mid 1980s through the 1990s, it came to hold a

special place in the historical memories of a new generation of black women and, indeed, the children of many historically oppressed peoples of the United States.

The game's masculine roots, however, remained its most important legacy in the world of recorded rap music. GZA explained that "intelligence" was the key to succeeding in the New York rap scene during the Golden Age, hence, ODB went by "The Professor," RZA was "The Scientist," and GZA was deemed "the Genius."[338] By 1992, the Clan felt this aspect of rap had become secondary, if not completely obsolete to artists dominating the market. Certainly, party and gangsta rap were the chart toppers and platinum album sellers, neither of which put an explicit emphasis on intelligence as did prototypical Golden Age artists such as Rakim, KRS-One, or Big Daddy Kane. Portraying themselves as intelligent also fit within the Clan's image as realists. They were not going to put out any sort of mask that dumbed down their music to make it more palatable for mass markets.

Conclusion: The ODB Question

But what are we to make of ODB? His exaggerated clownish image contrasted starkly with the Clan's intelligent image. Perhaps he should be thought of as the outlet hat allowed the other members to feel they could remain serious.

Of course, this dichotomy was not so simple. Method Man's abundant references to weed, cartoons, and pop culture sound bites marked him the most un-serious of the other members, and probably explains his pop appeal. On *Enter the Wu-Tang*, the Clan

showcase their dark sense of humor in a couple ad-libbed skits while clips from live radio interviews demonstrate their wittiness.

For his part, ODB was not an uncomplicated clown. As an early interview with Fab 5 Freddy of *Yo! MTV Raps* made clear, ODB certainly took himself and his art seriously depending on the context. Rooting his artistic perspective in the ghetto, ODB declared "I come from the shelter, kid. I'm on welfare right now… we come from the ghettoes, we come from the streets, I come from where I have to put my—my milk and eggs out on my window sill 'cause I ain't have no refrigerator, so this is real."[339] Nevertheless, ODB's crude humor and wild antics overshadowed his serious side, but these iconoclast behaviors only magnified his popularity among youth who loved his rebelliousness.

Thus, ODB's headline-making actions drew people's interest in the Clan, and once there, the group administered a heavy dose of realism as counterbalance. This formula had precedence in the ultra-serious sounds of Public Enemy. Well-versed in Nation of Islam ideology, Chuck D doled out biting critiques of institutional racism, the U.S. government, and American culture backed by the bombastic production of the aptly named Bomb Squad. To make the heavy themes palatable to audiences, Public Enemy included Flavor Flav, an eccentric "hype-man" whose boisterous attitude, enormous clock necklace, and comic relief made the group more accessible. In a sense, ODB was the Flavor Flav of Wu-Tang Clan. ODB was a contradiction within the Clan, but his minstrelesque character was what attracted mainstream audiences.

Despite ODB's ostensible apathy towards appearing intelligent, the rest of the group maintained reputations as respected lyrical tacticians. Method Man's self-described

“Hudson on PCP” flows pushed the limits of how many different speech patterns a single emcee could pack into one verse. GZA painted vivid but often abstract portraits of complex topics using succinct and precise language. RZA injected social commentaries into his emotional, off-kilter flows. Raekwon and Ghostface each penned poetic narratives that strove to redefine rap storytelling while introducing an entire lexicon of slang words to recorded rap. U-God and Masta Killa contributed relatively few verses to the Wu-Tang canon from 1992-1997, but their rhymes were always thoughtful, if somewhat unpolished. Taken as a whole, the Clan were dedicated to the New York Golden Age aesthetic of intelligent rap, and chess placed them within that idiom.

ENDNOTES

ENDNOTES

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According to WuChess's President, Patrick Mahoney, ten to twenty percent of WuChess's proceeds went to HHCF scholarships. These scholarships were awarded through chess tournaments that were organized specifically for young people from "schools in diverse and often undeserved communities." Scholarships were to be used for textbooks, tutors, and to cover application and examination fees necessary to continue postsecondary education. According to the HHCF's website, twenty-one scholarships had been awarded to students with the understanding that high GPA's and educational track records were not the determinants of who did, and who did not, receive funding. For more on the HHCF scholarship program, see "Hip-Hop Chess Federation Scholarship Tournament," *Hip-Hop Chess Federation,* accessed May 18, 2014, http://hiphopchessfederation.org/scholarship.html.

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[336] Maurice Ashley, *Chess for Success: Using An Old Game To Build New Strengths in Children and Teens* (New York: Broadway Books, 2005), 31.

[337] To give some perspective, the World Chess Federation Handbook states that tournament events should allow "90 minutes for the first 40 moves followed by 30 minutes for the rest of the game with an addition of 30 seconds per move starting from move one." ("07 - Time Control," in Section C "General Rules and Recommendations for Tournaments," *World Chess Federation*, 2008, accessed March 15, 2014, http://www.fide.com/fide/handbook.html?id=39&view=category.)

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CONCLUSION
"WU-TANG FOREVER": DRAKE AND SHIFTING NOTIONS OF MASCULINITY IN RAP

> I just love when I'm with you, yeah, this shit is on ten
> We used to be friends, girl, and even back then
> You would look at me with no hesitation and you'd tell me baby, it's yours
> Nobody else's, yeah, this shit belong to nobody, it's yours
> Nobody else's, yeah, this shit belong to nobody in that
> Well, made me think about the game, girl
> And how I switched it up with a new thang
> Young nigga came through on his Wu-Tang
> And nowadays when I ask about who got it, they say it's yours
> Nobody else's, yeah, this shit belong to nobody, it's yours
> Nobody else's, yeah, this shit belong to nobody, it's yours
> It's yours, it's yours, it's yours, it's yours that's for sure[340]

Rapper Drake half rapped, half sang this chorus for the fourth track off of his third studio album, *Nothing Was the Same*, released in September of 2013. The following verse described Drake's success as a rapper, the enemies he accrued as a result of the former, and his subsequent alienation from his friends. He repeats the chorus once more and each time he sings the words "it's yours," a sample echoing the words cascades over the soundscape. Drake's voice and the sample gently fade away as the beat carries on for a couple measures longer, before succumbing to the same silence.

Entitled "Wu-Tang Forever," Drake's song brought about an interesting test case for the Wu-Tang Brand. Would they support Drake's repurposing of the Wu-Tang image for a song that ostensibly has little to do with the Wu-Tang Clan except for the sampled "it's yours?"[341] Or would they guard their brand's integrity and try to dissociate themselves from the rapper whom Ghostface Killah placed atop his top ten list of "the Softest Niggas in the Game," for four years in a row? While there was mild dissent at

first, eventually the entire Clan united in support of Drake. All but Inspectah Deck agreed to contribute a verse to an as of yet unreleased remix of the song.

What motivated the Wu-Tang Clan to affiliate themselves with an artist who was repeatedly cited as the representative of mainstream "soft" rap? More than just money, they sought youth. Drake was one of the biggest names in mainstream rap, consistently delivering hits on the Billboard Hot R&B/Hip Hop Songs list in addition to winning a Grammy for "Best Rap Album" for 2012's *Take Care*, an MTV Video Music Award for "Best Hip-Hop Video" in the same year, while even sharing an NAACP Image Award with Mary J. Blige for "Outstanding Duo or Group." The members of the Wu-Tang Clan, meanwhile, ranging in age from forty three to forty seven, wished to make their music more accessible to the younger generation of rap fans. Expressions of masculinity in mainstream rap music had changed from the Wu's dominant years in the mid 1990s. Rather than resist these changes, the Clan understood that times were different—Frank Ocean came out as the first openly gay rap artist about a year before Drake's "Wu-Tang Forever"—and they decided to jump onboard.

Drake represented a new form of hip hop masculinity, one that embraced introspection and sentimentality. Building off of Kanye West's re-assertion of middle class blackness in mainstream rap music—which began with his 2004 debut album *College Dropout*—Drake has made a career out of acknowledging and embracing his social privilege. He has come under fire from many old school rap artists and fans because of upbringing in Toronto, Canada, his prior work as an actor playing a wheelchair-bound high schooler for the teen soap opera *Degrassi: The Next Generation*,

his disinterest in freestyle rapping (extemporaneous rhyming), and his propensity for blending singing and rapping in his music.

Thus, when Drake's "Wu-Tang Forever" dropped, there was uncertainty as to how the Clan would react. As previously mentioned, Ghostface Killah was a harsh critic of what he perceived as Drake's effeminacy. The insults he piled upon Drake in his dozens-style list of the "Ten Softest Niggas in the Game" were unrelenting, colorful, sexist, and homophobic. "When he aint startin pillow fights on tour n pollinatin flowers n shit son stays spittin wit that tenderized Stephen Hawking voice," wrote Ghostface about "Aubrey" (Drake's actual first name).[342] Drake's singing was a frequent target of Ghostface's attacks, "The nigga got the most bitchmade voice on earth so its not like it takes son much effort to go FAM (Feminine As a Muthafucka) on a track."[343]

These insults were about more then policing the boundaries of acceptable masculinity in rap music, Ghostface was criticizing African American culture as a whole. He often articulated his critique using the language of the 1965 Moynihan Report, which traced the origins of inner city social problems to the weakness of black families. The report scapegoated single mother households for not adhering to the nuclear family model, which inhibited black men from serving as breadwinners and led to a lack of strong male role models in communities.

Ghostface stated, "First off this nigga had approximately zero male role models in his household to look up to while he was growin up. So it aint came as no surprise to his moms when son had a Jack Sparrow walk n stuck his pinky out when he held his teacups."[344] Ghostface transformed social critique into entertainment. "That muthafucka mussa got bit by a radioactive butterfly one day namsayin.[345] He based his critique

around masculinity, which has always been an extremely contested arena in rap music due to its connection with authenticity. Was Drake an authentic rapper because he sang? Or because he was a middle class kid from Canada? Clearly, Ghostface felt it was his duty as a protector of authentic rap, to say no.

Yet, when Drake released "Wu-Tang Forever," Ghostface backpedaled. He fully embraced Drake's song, stating "There's probably some fans that—that climbed on… it's like the 'W'… Now it's just all through Europe, I had—I had nine year old, eight year old babies—came to the shows knowin' words. So it's like… what Drake did, he just made the movement more bigger… So, I ain't turning down no fans… all it's doing is just addin' on."[346] In the end, when large amounts of money is involved, authenticity becomes a very opaque concept. Oli 'Power' Grant summed up the bottom line in a 2011 interview, bluntly stating, "No matter whatever the fuck they say, everybody is in business to make money. We're not here to twiddle our fingers; we're here to be creative and get money, make money and create money."[347] And to do this in the 2010s, the Wu is after the youth demographic.

In keeping with this mission, Wu-Tang Corp. became involved with several progressive initiatives for young people in order to cross-promote their brand. From GZA's partnership with educator Chris Edmin (beginning in 2012) to promote science education for black children and young adults, to RZA's launch of WuChess in 2008 and his advocacy of chess in schools, Wu-Tang Corp. appears committed to preparing disadvantaged youth to be successful in America; just as long as an album needs to be promoted (GZA's forthcoming album *Dark Matter* centers around themes of physics,

astrology, and chemistry) or a price tag can be added (an annual membership to WuChess online cost a not-insignificant sum of forty eight dollars).

The conscious effort to craft a "legacy brand" means that they are trying to crack the youth market while simultaneously appealing to parents who see Wu-Tang as a positive force in hip hop history and contemporary society. With these aims in mind, it is obvious that unpacking the history of hip hop is very much an exercise in deconstructing marketing campaigns. As more artists with major financial interests in the present, such as Jay-Z and the Clan, see economic opportunities in telling their personal histories, hip hop scholars must respond in kind. De-mythologizing and contextualizing these important contributors to American culture will produce deep insights into the intersections between race, class, gender, sexuality, and consumerism in American society from the 1970s to the present.

The Wu-Tang Clan, undoubtedly have a secure place in the history or rap music, as well as the history of American culture. They constantly explored new territory in terms of sound, image, theme, and masculinity but they never seemed to compromise their core identities. This melding of corporate and artistic flexibility without compromise helps explain their longevity and their popularity among new generation of rappers and rap fans alike. Drake entitled his song "Wu-Tang Forever" because their name evokes a sentiment of dominance. Drake's apparent love song was actually a metaphor for rap, so the use of Wu-Tang's hook "it's yours" was signifying that Drake felt he practically owned the rap industry. Since the Clan's name still held prestige for their underground roots and innovative business concept, Drake demonstrated that he appreciated the struggles the Clan went through so that he could succeed in the industry. In a way, he was

trying to confer the Clan's authenticity onto himself. And sure enough, the ploy worked. Bolstered by the track, Drake's album shot to number one on the Billboard charts and easily sold over a million copies. Certainly, this is proof that the Clan still hold an immense amount of cultural capital in the rap music industry, even after twenty years in the business.

ENDNOTES

ENDNOTES

[340] "Wu-Tang Forever," Drake, *Nothing Was the Same*, OVO Sound/Young Money/Cash Money/Republic, September 20, 2013.

[341] The "it's yours" was sampled from the Wu-Tang Clan's song "It's Yourz," from their 1997 album *Wu-Tang Forever*, which they had sampled from T-La Rock's 1984 single "It's Yours."

[342] B G (Big Ghost aka Ghostface Killah), "The 2nd Annual 10 Softest Niggas In The Game," *Big Ghost Ltd.*, posted May 9, 2011, accessed February 28, 2014, http://bigghostlimited.com/the-2nd-annual-10-softest-niggas-in-the-game/.

[343] B G (Big Ghost aka Ghostface Killah), "The 3rd Annual 10 Softest Niggas In The Game," *Big Ghost Ltd.*, posted July 7, 2011, accessed February 28, 2014, http://bigghostlimited.com/the-3rd-annual-10-softest-niggas-in-the-game/.

[344] Ibid.

[345] B G (Big Ghost aka Ghostface Killah), "The 4th Annual 10 Softest Niggas In The Game," *Big Ghost Ltd.*, posted September 21, 2011, accessed February 28, 2014, http://bigghostlimited.com/the-4th-annual-10-softest-niggas-in-the-game/.

[346] Ghostface Killah, "Ghostface Talks Drake Putting New Fans on to Wu-Tang," YouTube Video, 2:41, posted by djvlad, October 23, 2013, accessed April 14, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YadC91iLgWU.

[347] Oli 'Power' Grant, "The History of Wu Wear," *Complex*.

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