The Wu-Tang Clan and Cultural Resistance

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Over a gritty, up-tempo RZA beat, Ghostface Killah ends *Winter Warz* with “In Born Power, born physically, power speaking / The truth in the song be the pro-black teaching.” While this bar is a tiny wave in the vast ocean of the group’s catalog, it brings their politics to the surface. This is a rare moment, because Clan members’ politics remain buried in other facets of their lyrics.

The Wu-Tang Clan are not usually considered overtly political, or conscious, rappers—like Public Enemy. Instead, hip-hop scholarship focuses on other aspects of the group. Some scholarship omits the Clan or gives the group a cursory mention.¹ Other works cover the Clan’s business model (Charnas 2010; George 1998). Several scholars identify a few elements of the group’s lyrics but lack detailed analysis. The monographs on the Wu-Tang Clan use a chronological narrative to explain the group’s rise and fall (Page 2014; Blanco 2011). As a whole, this scholarship fails to analyze the group’s music as a site of resistance because they lack the contextualization and historici-zation necessary to fully understand their buried politics. Doing so reveals three facets of the Clan’s sound—kung fu movies, Five Percent Nation of Islam theology, and street stories as sites of resistance to American racism, or as a well-hidden transcript, to paraphrase James C. Scott (1992).

When they burst onto the hip-hop scene in 1993, the Wu-Tang Clan featured nine members: RZA (Robert Diggs) the group’s leader
or abbot, GZA (Gary Grice), Ol’ Dirty Bastard or ODB (Russell Jones), Method Man (Clifford Smith), Raekwon (Corey Woods), Ghostface Killah (Dennis Coles), Inspectah Deck (Jason Hunter), U-God (Lamont Hawkins), and Masta Killa (Elgin Turner). The Clan came together over several decades. Growing up, members met in school, by proximity, and sometimes through kin. The group’s first album, Enter the Wu-Tang, put the Clan on the hip-hop map. With virtually no marketing, it sold more than two million copies. The Source’s Ghetto Communicator wrote that for fans of hardcore hip-hop, as opposed to pop rap like the recently popular Vanilla Ice and MC Hammer, “this is the hip-hop album you’ve been waiting for. Simply put: ‘The Wu-Tang Clan ain’t nuthin’ to fuck with.’” The Source rated it four and one-half out of a possible five mics (Ghetto Communicator 1994). More than a decade later, critic Jared Dillon offered, “[T]here is no denying it is an essential and classic hip-hop album that, thanks to its originality and sheer talent, will go down in history as one of the key albums of the 1990s” (Dillon 2007). The combination of record sales and critical acclaim made the Clan major players in hip-hop.

Their next group album, Wu-Tang Forever, hit stores in 1997. It debuted at number one on both the “Billboard Top 200” and “R&B” charts. Forever sold more than four million copies and remains one of the top fifty selling hip-hop albums of all time. It also received favorable reviews. Neil Strauss of the New York Times reports that, with Forever, the group “retains its mantle as rap’s standard bearers” (Strauss 1997). The album received a nomination for best rap album at the 1998 Grammy Awards. In 2000, they put out The W, the group’s third album; and, shortly after, the group succumbed to internal squabbles. Members fought over creative differences and royalties. These problems were compounded by the overdose death of Ol’ Dirty Bastard in 2004. While crew members continued to
produce music and release group albums, they never achieved the success they experienced from 1993 to 1997.2

The Wu-Tang’s success during the 1990s made them one of the most important groups of the decade. When they debuted, the Wu had a distinct sound, separating them from the competition. Gritty street tales, stories about events they lived or witnessed, serve as the foundation for the music. Wu-Tang’s use of street tales serves several purposes. They demonstrate the Wu-Tang’s authenticity by narrating the struggles they suffered growing up. This makes the group’s lyrics real and therefore acceptable and believable to casual and skeptical hip-hop fans. Street stories also have a political purpose. Scholar and activist Angela Davis argues, “critical aesthetic representations of a social problem must be understood as constituting powerful social and political acts” (1998, 101). In this light, they can be read as illuminating the problems, including drugs and violence, faced by African Americans on Staten Island in attempts to bring about the social change needed to create a solution. They also provide a cinematic quality, which enlivens the listening experience.

Clan members’ formative years created these street tales. All members were born within a six-year span ranging from 1966 to 1971. They, then, came of age during the late 1970s and early 1980s, a period of poverty and hardship for African American residents of New York City. Hip-hop scholar Tricia Rose argues, “Hip Hop’s development in relationship to New York cultural politics in the 1970s is not unlike the relationship between other major cultural expressions and the broader social contexts within which they emerged. . . . [O]ther musically based cultural forms have developed at the junctures of major social transformation” (1994, 24–25). During the 1970s, major American cities experienced a transition. Information-based businesses replaced factories, which moved elsewhere for tax breaks and cheaper labor (ibid). The federal government cut funding
for social services. In addition, corporate developers aggressively built luxury housing. As a result, working-class city dwellers were left with limited housing choices, few job opportunities, and minimal social services.

By 1975, New York City faced bankruptcy. It was saved by an agreement between the City and New York State, which obtained a federal loan in exchange for drastic cuts in city services and stringent repayment terms. As a result, 30 percent of the city’s Hispanic population and 25 percent of the Black population lived in poverty (Rose 1994, 25–29). Historian Daniel Walkowitz observed that New York had become divided between white-collar workers and “an unemployed and underemployed service sector which is substantially Black and Hispanic” (1994, 29). Historian Jason Sokol describes New York City in the 1980s: “Streets were awash in crack cocaine and homelessness. The crime rate soared. The AIDS epidemic ravaged the city. New York was no longer the nation’s urban gem” (Sokol 2014, 205).

The resulting gritty street tales offer insights into life on Staten Island. In “Cash Rules Everything Around Me (C.R.E.A.M.),” Raekwon (Wu-Tang 1993b) discusses his childhood:

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I grew up on the crime side, the New York Times side
Staying alive was no jive
Had second hands, moms bounced on old man
So then we moved to Shaolin land
A young youth, yo rockin’ the gold tooth, ‘Lo goose
Only way I begin to G off was drug loot
And let’s start like this son, rollin’ with this one
And that one, pullin’ out gats for fun
But it was just a dream for the teen, who was a fiend
Started smoking woolas at sixteen
And running up in gates, and doing hits for high stakes
Making my way on fire escapes
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No question I would speed, for cracks and weed
The combination made my eyes bleed
No question I would flow off, and try to get the dough all
Sticking up white boys in ball courts.

Raekwon had a bleak childhood. Abandoned by his father, his family moved to Staten Island; and, thanks to his family’s poverty, he was forced to wear secondhand clothing. To alleviate his poverty, he turned to the drug trade, robberies, and smoking *woolas* (marijuana cigars mixed with cocaine) at sixteen years old.

In “Tearz” (Wu-Tang 1993e), RZA narrates the story of Rakeem, the main character, and the murder of his brother:

(Hey, Rakeem!) What? (Your little brother got shot!)
I ran frantically, then I dropped down to his feet
I saw the blood all over the hot concrete
I picked him up then I held him by his head
His eyes shut, that’s when I knew he was . . .
Aw man! How do I say goodbye?
It’s always the good ones that have to die
Memories in the corner of my mind
Flashbacks, I was laughing all the time
I taught him all about the bees and birds.

RZA’s lyrics paint a vivid picture of his brother’s murder and the ensuing grief. He expresses an all-too-common sentiment among those who have had a relative murdered, a sadly common occurrence during the time.³

The Wu-Tang Clan did not originate street stories. This form of “reality rap” was introduced by Grand Master Flash and the Furious Five. In 1982, they released “The Message,” the first commercially successful hip-hop song to discuss the struggle of African Americans in New York City. The first verse describes:
Broken glass everywhere
People pissing on the station
Y’know they just don’t care
I can’t take the smell
I can’t take the noise
I got no money to move out
I guess I got no choice
Rats in the front room
Roaches in the back
Junkies in the alley with a baseball bat
I tries to get away but I couldn’t get far
Cos a man with a truncheon re-possessed my car.

The rest of the song continues to address problems plaguing the Black community, including drug use, poor quality of education, and crime. The song, as hip-hop historian Dan Charnas notes, “reinforced the idea that rap could be serious, too, even meaningful” (2010, 88). This led Melle Mel (a member of the Furious Five) to record the anti-drug song, “White Lines (Don’t Do It),” in 1983. Emerging around the same time, Run DMC, the first hip-hop superstars, adopted reality rap to broadcast life in Queens (Charnas 2010, 93–119). With the success of Run DMC, street tales became a staple of hip-hop.

Rapper and CEO Jay-Z once wrote, “Great rap should have all kinds of unresolved layers that you don’t necessarily figure out the first time you listen to it” (2011, 54). Kung fu movies provide one of these layers. These movie samples are incorporated into the music, play a large part in the group’s identity, and make a political statement. References to kung fu can be found in many songs. For example, “Bring the Ruckus” begins with a gravelly voice: “Shaolin shadowboxing and the Wu-Tang sword style / If what you say is true, the Shaolin and the Wu-Tang would be dangerous / Do you think your Wu-Tang sword can defeat me? En garde, I’ll let you try my Wu-Tang
style” (Wu-Tang 1993a). This quote comes from the 1983 kung fu movie, Shaolin v. Wu-Tang. In “Da Mystery of Chessboxin’,” Masta Killa claims he is “moving on a nigga with the speed of a centipede” (Wu-Tang 1993c). The centipede is a martial arts style found in the movie Five Deadly Venoms.

The meaning of these kung fu movie samples is often misunderstood or goes unexplained. For example, Steve Juon in his review of Enter the Wu-Tang asserts, “There is a pure ‘comedy’ element to these films with their bad English translations and overdubbed dialog, but these films feature gifted athletes performing spectacular feats of strength and dexterity” (2001). Juon offers an Orientalized understanding of kung fu movies, which belittles the fact that they were not produced in English, does not analyze the plot, and fails to offer any ideas about the movies’ larger meaning. This interpretation obscures their political implications.

During the 1970s, the Clan members’ formative years, kung fu movies came to be understood differently in New York’s Black community. Longtime hip-hop journalist Nelson George argues that kung fu movies served as a cultural response to Blaxploitation films, which relied on harmful Black stereotypes, such as the pimp and the gangster, to attract audiences. As an alternative, “Kung Fu [movies] provided a nonwhite, non-Western template for fighting [racial] superiority” (George 1998, 105). This reading is based on a common plot arc found in most kung fu movies: A marginalized character or group has an injustice done to them by a powerful ruler or group. To get revenge, the marginalized use their anger, determination, and martial arts skills to dethrone, kill, injure, or humiliate the powerful ruler or group. This postcolonial understanding was so common that in many Black households, a picture of Martin Luther King Jr. could often be found hanging near a poster of Bruce Lee, who George calls “a truly worthy nonwhite icon” (1998, 106).
As a youth, RZA understood kung fu movies as a metaphor for the plight of African Americans. He remembers,

[When I was a kid the only knowledge the media ever showed about Black history was about either slaves or pimps—Roots, The Mack, and that was basically it. So in a way films like Thirty Six Chambers reflected our experience and solidified it, drew people like me to our own history. And after that martial arts films became serious to me. (2009, 53)"

In 1989, a kung fu movie cemented the group’s identity. One day, RZA assembled a group of his friends, including Ghostface, ODB, and GZA, to smoke marijuana and watch Eight Diagram Pole Fighter, a kung fu movie in which a large family is betrayed by a military general. As a result, the family goes to war against the general. Eventually, six of the family’s eight children are killed. Of the remaining two, one goes insane, and the other becomes a monk. About an hour into the movie, the viewers became quiet, and some started to cry. RZA explains, “You see this kind of thing happening in the ’hood every day. We were living in a place torn apart by wars . . . where the bonds you make are almost stronger than blood.” As a result, the group “had to be called the Wu-Tang Clan. The name says we’re Wu-Tang warriors, we’re from Shaolin, and we’re a Clan, which means family. The last part’s crucial because it’s a connection to something bigger than yourself, which is where the greatest strength always comes from” (2009, 57–58). Incorporating kung fu themes into their identity makes the struggle against American racism a foundation of the group.

One of the most misunderstood facets of the Wu-Tang is the influence of the Five Percent Nation of Islam (also called the Nation of Gods and Earths or the Five Percenters). The Five Percent Nation is an offshoot of the Nation of Islam (NOI). The group, founded in
1964 by Clarence Smith (also known as Clarence 13X), gained a following primarily among poor and working-class African Americans in northeastern cities, particularly New York.

Clarence 13X formed the Five Percent Nation to improve the lives of his followers. After working his way up the ranks at the Nation of Islam’s Temple #7 in Harlem, he was expelled. The reason for his expulsion remains unclear. Some claim it resulted from Smith’s gambling, drinking, infidelity, or conflicts with high-ranking mosque members, namely Louis Farrakhan and Malcolm X. While these reasons are difficult to substantiate, it is clear that Clarence 13X developed his own theology, which differed from the Nation of Islam’s. The NOI taught that W. Fard Muhammad, the organization’s founder, was God or Allah. Scholar Yusuf Nuruddin argues that 13X determined “Fard could not be God because the NOI lessons stated that the Original man or Black man was God and by appearance Fard was not Black. He reinterpreted the lessons and began to teach that it was not Fard, but the Black man collectively, who was God.”

The idea that the Black man is the original man and, therefore, God comes from the group’s origin story. According to the teachings, the Black man is the maker, father of civilization, God of the Universe, and the original “inhabitor” of the planet (thefivepercentnation 2011b). One of these original men, a mad scientist named Yacub, broke from the group and created the white race (devils) who ruled the Black man for 6,000 years. After 6,000 years, Allah will destroy the devils to prove that he is all-powerful (thefivepercentnation 2011a).

To readers who are not members, their origin story may seem confusing. It should not be interpreted literally. Instead, it is better understood as an allegory about the experience of African Americans in the United States. Not all whites are devils. The devil is the racism that oppresses nonwhites in the United States. To combat
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racism, Allah made Black men God, thereby giving them the power to bring the devil’s 6,000-year reign to an end. Making Black men Gods provides a sense of empowerment that combats the damaging psychological effects of racism and encourages Black men to break the structural barriers that limited Black economic and physical mobility. After all, Gods can do anything.

13X named the group after a foundational teaching found in “Lost and Found Muslim Lesson No. 2” (thefivepercentnation 2011a), an important NOI theological text. The Lesson explains that the world is divided into three groups. Eighty-five percent of the earth’s population are uncivilized, do not follow the correct God, and are easily led in the wrong direction. Ten percent of the population make slaves of the poor by teaching them to follow a false god. The last five percent are the wise who understand that the Black man is God and teach freedom, justice, and equality to all humans (Allah 2009, 122). The mission of the Five Percent is to teach the eighty-five percent to follow the Five Percent Nation.

Since the Black man himself is God, he is free to interpret the world as he sees fit. To do so, Five Percent members memorize a series of NOI religious texts collectively called the “120 Lessons.” They are composed of five documents: “Student Enrollment 1–10,” “Lost Found Muslim Lesson No. 1,” “Lost Found Muslim Lesson No. 2,” “Actual Facts,” and “Solar Facts.” The first three documents are written in a question-and-answer format to teach new followers the group’s dogma. In combination, these documents provide a basic education in the group’s theology and interpretation of race relations, science, geography, and philosophy. They provide the often-undereducated members with elements of a formal education.

In addition, Five Percenters study the Supreme Mathematics and Supreme Alphabet, a pair of systems created by Clarence 13X in which a number or letter is substituted for a word, phrase, or
concept. The world is then interpreted through numerology. The Supreme Mathematics is as follows:

1) Knowledge
2) Wisdom
3) Understanding
4) Culture or Freedom
5) Power
6) Equality
7) God
8) Build or Destroy
9) Born
0) Cipher

(Allah 2009, 118–9)

When these numbers appear to Five Percenters, they provide guidance. For example, if a follower won eight dollars, he might give to a charity that helps build homes for the poor. The number eight means “build” and serves as a sign for the money’s purpose. RZA explains, “Mathematics is what we live. And the numerology side of it makes you aware of the connections between everything” (RZA 2009, 41). The Supreme Alphabet offers a similar means of interpretation through letters.

More generally, the 120 Lessons reinforce the Five Percent Nation’s nine tenets. They are:

Black people are the original inhabitants of the planet.
Black people are the mothers and fathers of civilization.
The Supreme Mathematics provides understanding of man’s relationship to the universe.
Islam is a way of life, not just a religion.
Education should be used to make Black people self-sufficient.
All followers should teach others.
The Black man is God and his proper name is Allah. Children are the future and should be loved, protected, and educated. A unified Black family is the key to building the nation.

These tenets offer a self-help plan similar to the one espoused by Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X during the early 1960s. The plan is pragmatic and well within the tradition of Black nationalist thought. It promotes conservative ideas such as education, self-sufficiency, and a strong family, which serve to create a strong and independent Black community. It also includes several radical ideas. The first two tenets contradict the feeling that African Americans belong at the bottom of society by teaching that they are the originators of civilization and should therefore hold themselves in high esteem. The promotion of Islam challenges the idea that the United States is a Christian nation. Instead, Black nationalists commonly cast Christianity as the slaveholder’s religion and Islam as its revolutionary antithesis. Finally, rather than creating loyal citizens, it calls for an education that will teach Black people to free themselves from dependence on whites. In combination, they offer a means to combat racism.

The Five Percent Nation’s teachings resonated with young Black men. Ethnomusicologist Christina Zanfagna (2015, 74) observes:

For young Black men, Clarence 13X’s teachings provided the structure in the midst of the chaos associated with everyday life on the streets. Furthermore, young Five Percenters are renowned for their tremendous oral skills, gained through drilling lessons and through street preaching. This skill set meshed well with the verbal dexterity and performative charisma required in Hip Hop MCing.
This proved to be true for a young Robert Diggs. RZA recalls that in 1981, his cousin GZA introduced him to the Five Percent Nation’s theology. “That snapped a revelation inside my head. That was the first time I heard something that made sense externally and internally. Being in poverty and one of the oppressed people in America, you know you are limited, but feel like you shouldn’t be” (RZA 2009, 41). A year later, at age twelve, RZA committed all 120 Lessons to memory. He then began teaching others, including his cousin ODB. After hearing his teenage peers recite some of the teachings, Five Percent Nation historian Wakeel Allah (2009, 17) recalls,

[T]o a young impressionable mind that was seeking the truth and knowledge of Black History it was captivating. Especially, when you seen [sic] one of your peers embrace this teaching and then blossom to become very cool with a newly loaded vocabulary that made them appear smarter than the school teachers.

For Allah, these teachings challenged the idea that young Black men lacked the desire to succeed. Instead, “the message we received was be all that you can be . . . you are GOD” (Allah 2009, 17). The teachings injected a sense of pride into the difficult lives of poor Black men.

The Five Percent Nation’s theology is common in Wu-Tang lyrics. “Wu Revolution,” the first track on *Wu-Tang Forever*, features Clan affiliate Papa Wu reciting the Five Percent Nation’s origin story (Wu-Tang 1997). In “Protect Ya Neck” (Wu-Tang 1993d), Raekwon explains that he has “thoughts that bomb shit like math!” This line references the power of the Supreme Mathematics to change listeners’ worldview. During a skit at the beginning of “Wu-Tang: 7th Chamber” (Wu-Tang 1993f), Ghostface Killah announces that he arrives to get his “culture cipher.” Here he is referring to the Supreme
Mathematics, where four means culture and zero means cipher. In the skit, Ghostface enters the room to get his forty-ounce beer.

Wu-Tang is not the first crew to be influenced by the Five Percent Nation. As music scholar Felicia Miyakawa (2005) demonstrates, throughout hip-hop’s history, rappers, including Pete Rock and C. L. Smooth, Rakim, and Big Daddy Kane, have incorporated Five Percent teachings into their lyrics. She argues these “Five Percent MCs bring their doctrine to the public’s ears by presenting themselves as authoritative teachers; offering personal testimonials; and quoting, paraphrasing, and interpreting Five Percenter lessons and other teachings . . . to both reach out to the ‘uncivilized’ masses and share communal messages with listeners already familiar.” 5

Overall, the Wu-Tang Clan’s music can be understood as a site of resistance against American racism. Through contextualizing and historicizing three important facets of the group’s lyrics, fans can understand how they are used to fight racism. Given the Wu-Tang Clan’s popularity and continuing influence, these are powerful forces in this struggle. In terms of hip-hop scholarship, this analysis provides a different reading of the group’s lyrics, demonstrates another reason for the group’s success, and extends the chronological scope of the “golden age of rap nationalism” as put forth by scholar Charise Cheney. 6

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Notes


2. Because this is a conference paper, I have limited its scope to focus on *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)* and *Wu-Tang Forever*. Additional analysis of the solo albums released during this period would expand the paper well beyond the page limit.

3. The frequent use of street stories is part of the Clan’s authenticity. Hip-hop scholar Jeffery O. G. Ogbar argues that authenticity is hip-hop’s “essential character.” However, authenticity is a “nebulous nation,” which is created, “negotiated, interrogated, and articulated in a world where gendered and racialized stereotypes are pervasive” (Ogbar 2007, 1, 5) For the Wu-Tang Clan, their listening experience provides authenticity. It combines well-established means of proving realness, namely street stories and slang, with previously unseen facets, kung fu movies, and RZA’s production to provide their own take on authenticity.

5. The Wu-Tang’s incorporation of the Five Percent nation pushes the study of religion in hip-hop. Beyond the first wave, which debated the relationship between pious religion and profane hip-hop, the Clan pushes scholars to examine the multiple functions of religion in their lyrics. It is political, literary, and an important part of the group’s identity and authenticity (Monica Miller, Anthony Pinn, and Bernard “Bun B” Freeman, eds., Religion in Hip Hop: Mapping the New Terrain in the US).

6. The Wu-Tang Clan’s continued promotion of the Five Percent Nation extends the chronology of Charise Cheney. She claims that “gangsta rap ended the golden age of rap nationalism.” However, the Wu-Tang preached Black Nationalism vis-a-vis Five Percent Nation theology, at least, through 1997. The Wu-Tang Clan’s music was popular at the same time as several seminal gangsta rap albums, including Dr. Dre’s The Chronic, Snoop Doggy Dogg’s Doggystyle, and Ice Cube’s Lethal Injection, demonstrating that rap nationalism and gangsta rap existed simultaneously (Charise Cheney, Brothers Gonna Work It Out: Sexual Politics in the Golden Age of Rap Nationalism, p. 150).
Bibliography


