

Cash Rules Everything Around Me:

**Wu-Tang Clan's *36 Chambers*, Black Postmodernism and
Neo-Marxism**

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Introduction

One might think of several things when remembering Wu-Tang Clan's *36 Chambers* - a record whose influence still dominates much of the discourse surrounding important hip-hop releases throughout the 1990s. One might, for instance, echo sentiments which have been expressed by music critics, whose acclaim for the record sounds almost hyperbolic at times; for example, Ben Yew's review of *36 Chambers* as, decidedly, one of the most significant rap records of all time.¹ Similar accolades have been sown throughout the album's seventeen years of existence; aspects frequently highlighted are the group's free-associative, humorous and often violent lyrics, producer RZA's distinctively gritty and raw production style, and the group's novel attitude towards the music industry; presenting themselves as a hip-hop posse with *36 Chambers*, to then split into other labels and releases, with the intent of dominating the rap world.²

However, this thesis intends to offer a new perspective on *36 Chambers*, by observing how it may be perceived as an object of black postmodernism (integrated in a long-standing tradition of afro-diasporic traditions' troubled relationship with modernism), as well as a neo-marxist critique of neo-liberal, late capitalism.

For such, one must analyze, firstly, the material conditions under which not only *36 Chambers*, but hip-hop as a musical genre, was created, and how one can perceive the emergence of rap music under the guise of a marxist dialectic analysis of historical developments. Secondly, one shall attend to the record itself; from its conception, recording and production to its lyrical and sonic constituents. For this analysis, the expertise of several authors who have published thoughts regarding these subjects shall be employed, but the two main theoretical conductors of this analysis shall be Adam Krims and Russell A. Potter. Krims, through his essay 2002 *The Hip-Hop Sublime as a Form of Commodification*, published as a chapter in Regula Qureshi's *Music and Marx: Ideas, Practice, Politics*, will aid in exploring how RZA's production choices serve to both commodify and transform the ghetto portrayed in Wu-Tang Clan narratives into an unrepresentable object; whilst Potter's 1995 book *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism* will serve as a fundamental guide into exploring how a rap record such as *36 Chambers* may represent a peculiar form of postmodernism, that could only be bred in the context of late capitalist, post industrial cities such as hip-hop and *36 Chamber's* breeding ground - late 1990s New York City.

It is important to conclude this introduction by disclaiming that this thesis does not seek to prove that *36 Chambers* is, undoubtedly, a clear expression of a postmodernist neo-marxist

¹ Yew, Ben. 2005. *Retrospect for Hip-Hop: A Golden Age on Record?* Proud Flesh Journal.

² Erlewine, Stephen Thomas. 2007. *Wu-Tang Clan: Biography*. AllMusic. Recovered on 8 may, 2020. <https://www.allmusic.com/artist/wu-tang-clan-mn0000959876>

critique of the contextual surroundings under which it was produced and released. It seeks, instead, to carefully pick apart the record's material conditioning, as well as its lyrical and sonic content, in order to explore it in a new light and understand how its contradictions regarding the categories mentioned in the research question may very well result in its approximation to such.

Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework

The goal of this thesis is to incorporate Wu-Tang Clan's 1993 debut album, *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)* in a larger discussion regarding black postmodernism and neo-marxism critique. It is thus essential to devote this first chapter to assessing some useful propositions put forth by previous academics, whose fields of expertise vary greatly, as this thesis is one of multidisciplinary nature.

Hip-Hop Studies

As this thesis has chosen a hip-hop subject, it is fundamental to begin with an understanding of a rather recent, but not for that less relevant, area of Musicology, Hip-Hop Studies - in which, naturally, this project finds its main home.

Hip-Hop Studies emerged as an independent academic field of research in the early 2000s, as a field which encompassed a multitude of other theoretical grounds, such as Sociology, Anthropology, Communication Studies, Critical Race Theory, and, unarguably, Musicology itself. It is intrinsically multidisciplinary, which Miller, Hodge, Coleman and Chaney (2014) describe as “a conglomerate of diversity that continues to grow in both scope, content, and form”.³ Although the establishment of Hip-Hop Studies as a field of study was cemented in the twentieth-first century, a range of meaningful works were published as far back as the early nineties; namely, Tricia Rose's *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, which still retains relevance due to its poignant critique of the relationship between rap music and American society as a whole. There were also more niche academic propositions, such as Russell A. Potter's *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism*, whose reflections on the link between hip-hop, postmodernism and African-American arts will reveal themselves extremely useful for the forthcoming case study.

It is only natural that Hip-Hop Studies would organically emerge as a multidisciplinary field, mirroring its subject. Hip-hop is widely considered to have been born in the context of what authors such as Neal (1999) consider to be a radically altered New York City. It was bred in the wake of the emergence of the “*postindustrial city*” - in which several historical, social and economic conjectures in the mid to late 1970s led to what the author calls “a brutal process of [black] community destruction”.⁴ In this thesis, the contextual settings in which hip-hop first appeared will be expanded upon in **Chapter 2: Economic, Social and Historical Context**.

³ Miller, Monica, White Hodge, Daniel, Coleman, Jeffrey, and D. Chaney, Cassandra, 2014. The Hip in Hip-Hop: Towards a Discipline of Hip-Hop Studies in *The Journal of Hip-Hop Studies*, ed. by Daniel White Hodge, 9. Chicago: North Park University.

⁴ Neal, Mark Anthony. 1999. *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture*. 130. Routledge: New York.

However, for now, it is important to establish that, very much like its field of study, hip-hop is multidisciplinary by nature - crossing, according to Miller, Hodge, Coleman and Chaney, “five cultural modes (...) - rap music (oral), turntablism or djing (aural), breaking (physical), graffiti art (visual) and knowledge (mental)”⁵. Thus, this thesis shall follow suite - emerging, naturally, from the grounds of Hip-Hop Studies and the reflections of previous theorists who have tirelessly sought to review rap music as a meaningful academic subject, but also touching upon other fields, namely, African-American Studies, Sociology, Cultural Studies, and, of course, Musicology.

Marxist and Neo-Marxist Perspectives within Musicology

To ground the research question within the field of Musicology, it is also necessary to review the state of Marxist and Neo-Marxist texts within the field. Of course, Adorno’s seminal critical theory of modern capitalist society and the culture industry, in texts such as 1962’s *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, is one of the theoretical setting stones for a Marxist critique of culture as produced within the walls of capitalist societies.

However, Adorno’s dialectical analysis of culture, which seeks not to isolate the object from its cultural context, but to grasp it in the light of its relationship to it, is bound to be refuted, as it has already been by various academics, particularly when it comes to his distinction between *serious* and *popular* music. In an academic landscape like the one of Musicology in its most recent incarnations, Adorno’s disregard for this category (exposed perhaps better in his essay *On Popular Music*, originally published in 1941) appears to be dramatically outdated. As sociologist Peter J. Martin points out: “Adorno’s view of popular culture has been widely influential, not least because his critical onslaught derived from a radical, rather than a conservative, perspective. (...) Adorno’s ideas about popular music have themselves attracted strenuous criticism.”⁶

Alas, although Adorno’s thoughts on the distinction between “*popular*” and “*serious*” music seem, to most, dated, his dialectical analysis of the relationship between cultural production and its surrounding societal structures may remain partially insightful. However, he will be of little use to this thesis; it is simply important to establish that his seminal considerations on the relationship between arts, culture and capitalism will guide the following analysis.

In his essay *The Hip-Hop Sublime as a Form of Commodification*, Adam Krims diagnoses a lack of Marxist voices in the field. However, he goes on to list several academics as the carriers of Marxist notions within Musicology, such as Garofolo and Lipsitz. Even then, the

⁵ Miller, Monica, White Hodge, Daniel, Coleman, Jeffrey, and D. Chaney, Cassandra, 2014. The Hip in Hip-Hop: Towards a Discipline of Hip-Hop Studies in *The Journal of Hip-Hop Studies*, ed. by Daniel White Hodge, 6. Chicago: North Park University.

⁶ J. Martin, Peter. 1995. *Sounds and Society: Themes in the sociology of music*. 95. Manchester University Press: Manchester.

author goes on to state that Marxism in Music Theory and Musicology itself is remarkably absent, “even conspicuously so”⁷. This distancing stems from the fact that theoretical sources for Musicology on the eighties onward were themselves strongly “anti-marxist”, such as McClary and Tomlinson's borrowings from Foucault. Another factor is the post-structuralist literary theory that feeds the work of other authors, such as Kramer, according to the author; “All these intellectual sources of New Musicology share a heritage in the kinds of postmodern literary and cultural theory that announced major breaks with Marxist theoretical traditions”⁸. In *Music and Capitalism*, Timothy D. Taylor also questions the absence of Marxist perspectives within Musicology, attending to the justification of the “increasing humanities-zation of the softer social sciences that came in with the cultural studies boom beginning in the 1980s.” According to Taylor, it is not the case that modern Cultural Studies writers are not concerned with capitalism as a whole, but rather that they choose to focus on its effects rather than its causes.⁹

It is important to note, that, although it is necessary to proceed with caution when ascribing ideological models to unknowing authors, some of the most influential texts produced in Hip-Hop Studies, although not written from an assumedly Marxist perspective, seem to align themselves with traditionally Marxist perceptions of history and culture. For instance, in Tricia Rose's seminal work, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, the author expands upon the social, economical and historical conjectures that led to the formation of a hip-hop culture amongst disenfranchised African-American youths in 1970s' New York City suburbs.¹⁰ This could potentially lead to an approximation of Rose's writings to the classical Marxist dialectics - which emphasize the importance of the conditions of the real, *material* world, whose contradictions result in new forms of social organization, leading to new cultural formations.¹¹ Similarly, Neal is deeply concerned with what he coins commodified blackness, particularly when it comes to 1970s soul music: “In their efforts to sell “soul to the masses” (...) corporate America's uncompromising exploitation and revisioning of the meanings and icons of blackness introduced (...) surreal constructions of blackness to a mass buying public. (...)”¹². This concern with the dangers of commodification, can also be linked with the Marxist conception of commodification within a capitalist economic system - namely, the transformation of goods, services, ideas, nature, personal information and people into commodities or objects of trades. According to authors such as Neal, music practice is too susceptible to these very processes.

⁷ Krims, Adam. 2002. *The Hip-Hop Sublime as a Form of Commodification* in Qureshi, Regula. *Music and Marx: Ideas, Practice, Politics*. 64. Psychology Press.

⁸ Krims, Adam. 2002. *The Hip-Hop Sublime as a Form of Commodification* in Qureshi, Regula. *Music and Marx: Ideas, Practice, Politics*. 64. Psychology Press.

⁹ Taylor, Timothy D. 2016. *Music and Capitalism: A History of the Present*. The University of Chicago Press: Chicago.

¹⁰ Rose, Tricia. 1994. *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. 30. Wesleyan University Press: Connecticut.

¹¹ Jordan, Z.A. 1967. *The Evolution of Dialectical Materialism*. 167. Macmillan: New York.

¹² Neal, Mark Anthony. 1999. *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture*. 98 - 99. Routledge: New York.

“The Hip-Hop Sublime”

Perhaps the most meaningful neo-marxist theory to be applied to the present case study, as it concerns the specific case of rap music, is Krim’s theory of the “hip-hop sublime”. The author first exposed this theory in *The Hip-Hop Sublime as a Form of Commodification*, an essay included in ethnomusicologist Regula Burckhardt Qureshi’s *Music and Marx: Ideas, Practice, Politics*. In it, the author explores how the depiction of ghetto narratives in rap music, employed through sonic and visual representations, result in transforming black post industrial poverty - itself a product of late capitalism - into a commodifiable good.

Krims starts by quoting Gilroy’s theory on black cultural formations, found in *The Black Atlantic*. In it, the author explores the role of music in constructing identity and authenticity in African-American culture. According to Krims, *realness* has always been a pillar of identity formations within African-American contexts. In hip-hop, this *realness* is closely related to representations of the ghetto, just as authenticity in previous modes of African-American music was connected to black rural life. However, Krims points out an essential difference between blues and rap authenticities; namely, the different ways in which this *authentic poverty* is presented - and the way in which, in hip-hop, this mode is projected as a product of a very peculiar historical conjecture, a product of a “late, or multinational, capitalism”. Krims continues; “the ghetto projected in hip-hop culture is generally the dangerous, decaying place that arose in the wake of deindustrialization and urban gentrification of the 1970s”.¹³

Krims then turns his attention to how rap music chooses to represent its principal mode of authenticity, the ghetto, through the means of marxist terminology. Namely, Krims focuses on what he calls the “refolding of the ghetto as a libidinal object”; or, in other words, how rap music and rap videos succeed in transforming the most abject consequences of world economic disequity into a commodified product readily available for consumption. Krims employs the marxist concept of surplus value¹⁴ in order to explain the process of commodity fetish within a hip-hop context, stating; “the ghetto produces a new use value; it becomes, through the commodification just described, a safe, portable image for pleasurable consumption.”¹⁵

¹³ Krims, Adam. 2002. *The Hip-Hop Sublime as a Form of Commodification* in Qureshi, Regula. *Music and Marx: Ideas, Practice, Politics*. 66. Psychology Press.

¹⁴ Marx, Karl. 1867. *Capital*. Vol.1. 228.

¹⁵ Krims, Adam. 2002. *The Hip-Hop Sublime as a Form of Commodification* in Qureshi, Regula. *Music and Marx: Ideas, Practice, Politics*. 67. Psychology Press.

Through the assumption of the aforementioned process of *refolding* found in rap music and rap videos, Krims browses for examples of this very phenomenon in the aesthetic constituents of hip-hop music, and categorizes such instances as *the hip-hop sublime*.¹⁶

One of the ways in which this process can be observed in hip-hop aesthetics is through the practice of sampling. The aesthetic distortions often applied to the musical layers which constitute a hip-hop instrumental (in which the original sample is at often times cut and reorganized endlessly, through loops, scratches, detuning, layering, and so on) suggest the process of *refolding*; “the detuning of musical layers (...) and its association with (...) descriptions of ghetto life suggests that the failure of representation itself becomes a figure for inner-city life. The music projects the ghetto not merely as an uncomfortable or dynamic place: is it, in fact, projected as radically unrepresentable in itself (...). The hip-hop sublime is itself (...) subsumed by a market economy that values exactly this representation of ghetto life.”¹⁷

In conclusion, Krims’ theory of the hip-hop sublime stems from the notion that hip-hop depictions of *realness* (or authenticity, seen in rap music through depictions of the ghetto) are profoundly contradictory; as the aesthetic constituents of rap music, such as sampling, serve only to distort the original object, transforming it into an example of the irrepresentability of the ghetto. However, this process serves as well to transform ghetto narratives into commodities, through the form of rap songs and rap records. Later on, in the last chapter of this thesis, one shall apply Krim’s theory to Wu-Tang Clan’s *36 Chambers*, in order to assert under which conditions one may relate the record to a neo-marxist critique such as the one offered by the author.

Afro-diasporic musical tradition and Hip-Hop as Postmodernism

Perhaps one of the most compelling arguments regarding the perception of rap music as postmodern was made by American writer Russell A. Potter in his 1995 book, *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism*. Although Potter is focused on the case of hip-hop itself, viewing it as the natural (postmodern) successor to jazz modernism, the author inevitably expands upon the subject of African-American modes of cultural expression as a whole, and this section shall serve to review some of the more meaningful considerations made by him and other authors on the subject - which we will return to in the final chapter of this thesis, juxtaposing them with the case study at hand.

¹⁶ Krims, Adam. 2002. *The Hip-Hop Sublime as a Form of Commodification* in Qureshi, Regula. Music and Marx: Ideas, Practice, Politics. 68. Psychology Press.

¹⁷ Krims, Adam. 2002. *The Hip-Hop Sublime as a Form of Commodification* in Qureshi, Regula. Music and Marx: Ideas, Practice, Politics. 69. Psychology Press.

Potter begins by quoting Theresa L. Ebert's dichotomy between *lucid* and *resistance* postmodernisms. According to Potter's analysis, these two modes of postmodernism are distinguishable according to the following characteristics; lucid postmodernism is understood to be the *postmodernism of play*, whilst resistance postmodernism is one which concerned with social and textual subjectivities. However, Potter undercuts Ebert's binary, which fails to consider the possibility of "a play that is in its ethos and effects a form of resistance". According to the author, it is in this compound of lucidity and resistance in which hip-hop finds its postmodernist nature.¹⁸

The concept of time is central to the understanding of postmodernism. According to Readings and Schaber, "the postmodern marks a gap in the thinking of time that is constitutive of the modernist concept of time as succession or progression".¹⁹ The importance of chronology, and, in particular, historical chronology, in thinking the postmodern is intimately related to hip-hop, as the genre is understood by some theorists, such as Joseph G. Schloss and Jeff Chang, as an "ahistorical phenomenon". According to these two authors, this lack of historicity comes from the difficulty of placing hip-hop within a broader musical history, marking it as a "*sui generis*" genre. As well, rap music's close relationship with music of other eras, through the practice of sampling, further meddles its place in a linear understanding of history.²⁰ In conclusion, one can easily trace the link between hip-hop and the postmodern when considering Potter's classification of such: "(...) and there is what I would identify as a central trait or trope of the postmodern: its refusal of fixed or progressive models of time."²¹

On the topic of afro-diasporic arts as a whole, postmodernity has always been intimately related to the culture's material situation, according to Potter. The history of African-American music and culture is plagued by contradictions, most often related to processes of appropriation and commodification of authentic black arts. These contradictions are often economic; as Potter recalls, "a great deal of value has been placed on black arts, but this value has been largely negotiable only in terms of white dollars".²²

One of the central theories found in African-American Studies is the practice which literary critic Henry Louis Gates Jr. coined *Signifyin(g)* in his 1988 book, *The Signifying Monkey*. According to the author, this practice is a trope of African-American expression which, in itself, encompasses several other tropes, such as metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony,

¹⁸ Potter, Russell A. 1995. *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism*. 1. Suny Series, Postmodern Culture: New York.

¹⁹ Readings, Bill and Bennet, Schaber. 1993. *Postmodernism Across the Ages*. 6. Syracuse University Press, New York.

²⁰ Schloss, Joseph G. and Chang, Jeff. 2000. *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop*. 19. Wesleyan University Press: Connecticut.

²¹ Potter, Russell A. 1995. *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism*. 2. Suny Series, Postmodern Culture: New York.

²² Potter, Russell A. 1995. *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism*. 3. Suny Series, Postmodern Culture: New York.

amongst others, which are all used in the *ritual of signifying*.²³ According to Potter, this practice refers to a possibility of resistance through language by dissimulation. It is “a history of a serious unconsciousness, a power/play, a verbal game in which the stakes continually escalate (...)” Potter, not unlike other authors²⁴, recognizes the existence of Signifyin(g) in hip-hop narratives, in which it represents an undermining of Ebert’s separation of “*lucid*” and “*resistance*” postmodernisms.²⁵ According to Anthony Kwame Harrison and Arthur Craig, the process of Signifyin(g) is visible in rap music through its close relationship with intertextuality - or “the relationship hip-hop texts engenders with previous (hip-hop, black diasporic, or popular) cultural texts”. These acts of “indirect signification”²⁶, in which the hip-hop producer and/or rapper is able to remold, transform and adapt previous texts of black musical expression contribute both to its postmodern nature, as well to its perception within the frames of neo-marxist critique (as, according to Krims, it is in this process the ghetto becomes a capitalist commodity).²⁷

A recent perspective on these subjects comes from the aforementioned Harrison and Craig, who, in 2019, published a paper titled *Hip-Hop Ethos*. They too confirm Potter’s suspicions of African-American arts as being historically contradictory. Hip-hop is, at once, *entrepreneurial* and *communal*; it is implicated in *neoliberal modes of survival*, but, at the same time, it offers itself as a solution to the violence propagated by these very *capitalist inquieties*; it is deeply concerned with *hierarchical identity politics*, as well as *politics of identity*. To the authors, this means that hip-hop represents a distinct expression of black postmodern subjectivity.²⁸ Another contradiction that could be added to hip-hop’s postmodern equation could be what Krims diagnosed as the unrepresentability of its very main mode of authenticity, the ghetto, as observable through the destructive sound aesthetics of sample-based hip-hop.²⁹

Thus, through its divorce from chronological history, as pointed out by authors such as Potter and Schloss and Chang, as well as the difficulties its aesthetic transformations pose to the goal of representing its very subject, one can easily comprehend why there have been links established between rap music and hip-hop and postmodernism in the past and present. This postmodernism, to some, is characterized as “*a deeply historical and resonantly informed*

²³ Gates Jr., Henry Louis. 1988. “*The Signifying Monkey: a Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*”. 52. Oxford University Press: Oxford.

²⁴ Schloss, Joseph G. and Chang, Jeff. 2000. *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop*. 160. Wesleyan University Press: Connecticut. .

²⁵ Potter, Russell A. 1995. *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism*. 11. Suny Series, Postmodern Culture: New York.

²⁶ Harrison, Anthony Kwame and Craig, Arthur. 2019. “*Hip-Hop Ethos*”. 6. Department of Sociology, Virginia Tech: Virginia.

²⁷ Krims, Adam. 2002. *The Hip-Hop Sublime as a Form of Commodification* in Qureshi, Regula. *Music and Marx: Ideas, Practice, Politics*. 68. Psychology Press.

²⁸ Harrison, Anthony Kwame and Craig, Arthur. 2019. “*Hip-Hop Ethos*”. 1. Department of Sociology, Virginia Tech: Virginia.

²⁹ Krims, Adam. 2002. *The Hip-Hop Sublime as a Form of Commodification* in Qureshi, Regula. *Music and Marx: Ideas, Practice, Politics*. 69. Psychology Press.

vernacular articulation of anti-modernism”³⁰ - a modernism whose promises, meant very little for African-Americans who were not included in the so-called “*progressive*” developments of America in the 20th century. This would include, of course, their exclusion from the benefits of post industrial, late capitalism; one shall explain how black communities were shunned from these progresses in the next chapter of this thesis, **Chapter 2: Economic, Social and Historical Context**. This contextual setting, which seeks to explain under which material conditions hip-hop originated, will serve to establish the grounds for a deepened analysis of *36 Chambers* which will seek to review the record in light of the theories mentioned above.

³⁰ Potter, Russell A. 1995. *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism*. 4. Suny Series, Postmodern Culture: New York.

Chapter 2: Economic, Social and Historical Context

In order to delve into the research question - how Wu-Tang Clan's debut record, *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)* relates to theories regarding black postmodernity as well as neo-marxist critique - one must first explore the origins of hip-hop as a cultural phenomenon itself. This chapter serves to expose the material conditions found in late 1970s New York City suburbs, commonly considered hip-hop's breeding ground. It is important to underline the importance of such material conditions by taking into account how these contribute to new cultural formations. It is, as well, important to relate hip-hop to previous forms of black musical expression, thus understanding how it may represent both an extension and a divergence from these.

According to a traditionally dialectic marxist conception of history, the development of human societies is guided more so by *real* conditions rather than ideals (contrarian to a hegelian perspective on dialectic materialism), thus opposing the nineteenth century great man theory. This theory attributes great importance to the actions of a few individuals (understood as *great men*, or *heroes*) in the development of societies.³¹ Among hip-hop historians, this viewpoint appears to feed some assertions on the origins of the musical genre. For instance, one needs to look no further than the great deal of importance which is given to certain revolutionary, almost mythical, figures among the very first generation of hip-hop actors, such as DJ Kool Herc, Afrika Bambaataa and Grandmaster Flash. Perhaps one of the most striking examples of the great man theory's influence in Hip-Hop Studies comes in the form of Becky Blanchard's 2003 essay, *The Social Significance of Rap and Hip-Hop*. In it, Blanchard goes as far as to precise a date for the exact day in which hip-hop was created; a 1973 Halloween dance party thrown by DJ Kool Herc and his sister, in which the Jamaican-born DJ utilized an "innovative turntable technique to stretch a song's drum break by playing the break portion of two identical records consecutively".³²

However, quite a few academic sources showcase a healthy blend of attributing the due importance to the work of these pioneering figures, as well as seeking to relate hip-hop to the material conditions provided by the several social and economic conjectures found in late 1970s New York City suburbs. They also integrate hip-hop within a larger historical scope of black diasporic traditions. This chapter seeks to provide a contextual setting for the appearance of the genre under the guise of these material conditions, as well as its relationship to previous forms of black musical expression.

³¹ Carlyle, Thomas. 1888. *On Heroes, Hero Worship and the Heroic in History*. 2. Stokes & Brother: New York.

³² Blanchard, Becky. 2003. *The Social Significance of Rap and Hip-Hop*. *EDGE [Ethics of Development in a Global Environment: Poverty and Prejudice: Media and Race]*. Recovered March 10, 2020. https://web.stanford.edu/class/e297c/poverty_prejudice/mediarace/socialsignificance.htm

Material Conditions of post industrial New York City

In his 1999 essay *Gangsta Pedagogy and Ghetto-centricity: The Hip-Hop Nation as Counterpublic Sphere*, Peter McLaren summarizes some of the material conditions found in late 1970s New York City. These include, but are not limited to: the proliferation of several black nationalist movements in the 1960s (such as the Black Panthers, Nation of Islam and Young Lords Party, among others) - and their subsequent decrease in popularity in the following decade; post industrial shifts in economic conditions (which largely affected suburban minority communities and led to unemployment, crime, poverty and difficulties in accessing to housing); the relocation of people of color from different parts of New York City to the South Bronx; the system of crews or posses as a means for alternative youth identities; the popularization of disco music, and, especially, the cross-fertilization among new artistic practices such as rapping, breakdancing and graffiti-writing.³³

According to Neal, the Black Public Sphere was “radically altered” in the wake of postindustrial New York. The author states that hip-hop appears as a movement rooted in a much needed counter narrative to the “emergence of a corporate-driven music industry and the mass commodification of black expression”. He states: “relying largely on word of mouth and live performance as a means of promotion, hip-hop may represent the last black popular form to be wholly derived from the experiences and texts of the black urban landscape”.³⁴

Rose also underlines the importance of the material conditions under which hip-hop first appeared. Particularly, the author recalls how the city’s poorest residents were the ones who were most negatively affected by deindustrialization and economic restructuring of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Rose confirms Neal’s suspicions of how the rushed relocation of minorities from different areas of New York to the South Bronx was especially brutal for these families and communities.³⁵ Under the banner of urban renewal, the black working class was excluded from the benefits of the post industrial city. Instead, they were exposed to rampant unemployment and poverty, a process which, says Neal, served to challenge the desire to maintain a community - or a Black Public Sphere, “invaluable to the transmission of communal values, traditions of resistance, and aesthetic sensibilities”.³⁶ This process of social isolation also relates to Goldberg’s conception of the *living space of poverty*, which acknowledges “an urban landscape that privileges the private and the local (...). The very logic of federally subsidized “low-income” housing meant that the poorest blacks would be socially and economically isolated from the mechanisms of the postindustrial city in

³³ McLaren, Peter. 1999. *Gangsta Pedagogy and Ghetto-centricity: The Hip-Hop Nation as Counterpublic Sphere*. in *Counterpoints*, Vol. 96: *Sound Identities: Popular Music and the Cultural Politics of Education*. 25.

³⁴ Neal, Mark Anthony. 1999. *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture*. 125 - 126. Routledge: New York.

³⁵ Rose, Tricia. 1994. *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. 30. Wesleyan University Press: Connecticut.

³⁶ Neal, Mark Anthony. 1999. *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture*. 1. Routledge: New York.

neighborhoods that (...) lacked the necessary public and institutional space to build and maintain communal sensibilities.”³⁷ Separated from the benefits of post industrial late capitalism, young black youths found themselves in a dire situation. The conditions were set for the emergence of a new, youth-infused cultural form which represented a new, radically different form of black musical expression.

Of course, one of the most evident inflictors of African-American crime and poverty in New York City came in the following decade, with the arrival of crack-cocaine to already disenfranchised, socially excluded and economically fragile suburban communities - which would later become a staple reference in rap song lyrics, either it be implicit or explicit. Cornel West provides an interesting link between the rise of crack-cocaine trafficking and addiction in suburban black communities and the consumptionist culture of North America;³⁸ a link echoed by Neal when describing those who fell into the trappings of drug addiction as individuals “who desired transcendence from the everyday misery of postindustrial life.” In more than one aspect, crack-cocaine resembled previous historical examples of religion, recreational sex and dancing as temporal releases from the harsh realities of African-American life in the twentieth century. However, crack-cocaine differed from its previous incarnations in its disastrous effects towards already fragile black communities, as it provided an increase on black-on-black crime and the emergence of illicit, sometimes dangerous sex acts in exchange for drug money or the drugs itself.³⁹ In a somewhat twisted fashion, the destruction of the traditional Black Public Sphere (replaced with a social life geared illicit drug trafficking and criminality) gave way to a formation of a independent African-American youth culture, which, in turn, planted the seeds for the formation of hip-hop as a cultural movement: “hip-hop differed from previous structures influenced by African-American youth in that it was largely predicated and driven by black youth culture itself.”⁴⁰

Although hip-hop’s precise origins are widely disputed among academics, most find its birth place in the post industrial, late capitalist setting brought on by a radically altered South Bronx in the late 1970s. In it, increasingly popular “block parties”, often organized and populated by those of African or Caribbean descent, crossed previous staples of black expression and music with new aesthetic and stylistic components. Such is the case of DJ Kool Herc’s pioneering DJing techniques, as is mentioned by Blanchard. Herc’s development of several techniques related to turntablism (or the manipulation of vinyl records through the use of two turntables) are considered by most to represent an unignorable timestamp on the

³⁷ Neal, Mark Anthony. 1999. *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture*. 131. Routledge: New York.

³⁸ West, Cornel. 1993. *Prophetic Thought in Postmodern Times*. 112. Common Courage Press, Maine.

³⁹ Neal, Mark Anthony. 1999. *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture*. 132 - 133. Routledge: New York.

⁴⁰ Neal, Mark Anthony. 1999. *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture*. 136. Routledge: New York.

birth of rap (combined with the gradual collaboration of DJs with “masters of ceremony” or MCs, which gradually took center stage).⁴¹

Despite much dispute over which is, indeed, the first rap song, there are two records worth mentioning when discussing hip-hop’s early years. The first, Sugarhill Gang’s “Rapper’s Delight”, represents the moment in which hip-hop shifted from a live practice⁴² to a mainstream, profitable and consumable cultural force. The track, released in 1979, is notable for becoming the first rap single to reach the Billboard Hot 100 charts.⁴³

The second record, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five’s “The Message”, released in 1982, represents the moment in which hip-hop cements itself as potentially revolutionary black art form. According to Neal, the record’s critical and commercial appeal lies in its “unmitigated” portrayal of black urban life. Music critic Dan Carins called it, in a retrospective penned for the Sunday Times in 2008, “inarguably innovative” - not only in its lyrical content but in its sonic production, which lifts its sample from a previous track from the group, “Superappin”. This sonic innovation, according to the author, stems precisely from the way the track treats its instrumental (slowing it down and creating spaces in the instrumentation), resulting in a sound which, according to the author, “isn’t so much hip-hop as nightmarish slow-funk, stifling and claustrophobic”. In a certain regard, this repackaging of the original instrumental showcases the haunting lyrical content.⁴⁴ We are thus reminded of Krim’s observations regarding how the hip-hop sublime refolds the ghetto as a libidinal object.

It is for good reason this chapter begins by calling hip-hop’s origins *multifaceted*. The pioneering work of DJs like DJ Kool Herc and early MCs such as Afrika Bambaata⁴⁵ represent the birth of hip-hop as an urban, live phenomenon, or a new form of Black Public Sphere in a radically altered New York City. However, Sugarhill Gang’s 1979 “Rapper’s Delight” represents an equally important piece of the genre’s history - its transformation from a merely performative experience into a mainstream, commodifiable musical recording.

In this regard, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five’s “The Message” represents a fusion of these two histories. Whilst the record certainly reached undisputable mainstream success (cracking the Billboard Hot 100 Charts at #62⁴⁶), it is noticeably different from tracks such as “Rapper’s Delight”, as its lyrical content, penned by MC Melle Mel, strays away from the typical braggadocious rhymes found in hip-hop at the time - instead, it offers a bleak

⁴¹ *Hip-Hop Evolution*. “The Foundation”. Episode 1, Season 1. Directed by Wheeler, Darby. Written by Bascunan, Rodrigo. Netflix. 4 september 2016.

⁴² *Hip-Hop Evolution*. “The Foundation”. Episode 1, Season 1. Directed by Wheeler, Darby. Written by Bascunan, Rodrigo. Netflix. 4 september, 2016.

⁴³ *Billboard Hot 100 Chart History*. song-database.com. Recovered on April 15, 2020.

⁴⁴ Cairns, Dan. 28 september 2008. “1982: Grandmaster Flash: The Message”. 25. Sunday Times.

⁴⁵ *Hip-Hop Evolution*. “The Foundation”. Episode 1, Season 1. Directed by Wheeler, Darby. Written by Bascunan, Rodrigo. Netflix. 4 september, 2016.

⁴⁶ *Billboard Hot 100 Chart History*. song-database.com.

portrayal of the consequences of the previously listed material conditions found in postindustrial New York for African-American youths. It is interesting to observe, in the following chapter of this thesis, how Wu-Tang Clan's debut record may mirror the literalness of the narrative penned by Melle Mel. Or how it may instead employ Signifyin(g) techniques in order to offer a similar critique of the same late capitalist environment found in the city, more than a decade later. According to Kwame Harrison and E. Arthur, it is precisely in the conditioning black youths experienced in these times that hip-hop finds its *ethos* - a series of "maverick sensibilities of those who assert agency from positions of social marginalization and oppression."⁴⁷

Hip-Hop in the context of Black Diasporic Tradition: *rap was always there*

In an interview given in Netflix's documentary series *Hip-Hop Evolution*, hip-hop pioneer Afrika Bambaata says: "rap was always there". The rapper and producer refers to a large historical collection of black expression in North America in the twentieth century. Two defining examples are shown in the documentary series; first, the gospel quartet The Jubalaires' rendition of "Noah", dating from the 1940s, in which the verses are performed in a spoken rather than sung fashion, and, second, Pigmeat Markham's "Here Comes The Judge". The record, released in 1968 by the famed soul and comedy singer, is notable for its rhythmic use of boastful language - a characteristic which would become a staple of hip-hop music. One could also speak of the influence of other African-American vocalists who often meddled the lines between sing and speak, such as Gil Scott-Heron or Barry White.

However, a closer look at the history of African-American musical expression across the twentieth century shows how hip-hop represents a logical evolution from its predecessors. According to Neal, hip-hop music is partially rooted in a phenomenon the author names "*post industrial nostalgia*" - in which socially and economically fragile black communities seek comfort in the recovery and adaptation of previous forms of black cultural and musical expression. According to the author, "the prevalence of nostalgia based narratives in black popular culture would have particular effects on the maintenance of intra diasporic relations, at once providing the aural and visual bridge to reaffirm diverse communal relations".⁴⁸ It is no surprise, then, that Afrika Bambaata can find prior manifestations of tropes commonly associated with hip-hop throughout the history of African-American musical expression; for these elements are not necessarily exclusive to rap music, but were rather updated upon in the wake of the need for a new African-American cultural form in late 1970s New York City suburbs.

⁴⁷ Harrison, Anthony Kwame and Craig, Arthur. 2019. *Hip-Hop Ethos*. 1. Department of Sociology, Virginia Tech: Virginia.

⁴⁸ Neal, Mark Anthony. 1999. *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture*. 137. Routledge: New York.

In *Rhymin' and Stealin': Musical Borrowing in Hip-Hop*, Justin A. Williams states that hip-hop's *fundamental element* is its "overt use of preexisting material to new ends."⁴⁹ Here, one is reminded of Neal's conception of post industrial nostalgia, as well as Schloss and Chang's observations on the importance of music from other eras for hip-hop's aesthetic sensibility.⁵⁰ This music from other eras is spoken upon existence "retroactively" by hip-hop producers, when utilized as the instrumental base for a hip-hop record - often molded into new meanings and contexts. For this, the authors employ the example of the track "They Reminisce Over You (T.R.O.Y)", released by Pete Rock and C.L. Smooth in 1992, which is based on a break from a late sixties jazz artist. According to Schloss and Chang, Pete Rock and other hip-hop producers' goal when mixing tracks such as these is not to change the course of black music history, but rather to encounter pre-existing instances which serve a hip-hop purpose; "record collecting is approached as if potential breaks have been unlooped and hidden randomly throughout the world's music. It is the producer's job to find them."⁵¹

In conclusion, although hip-hop is rooted, according to authors such as Schloss and Chang, in a *sui generis* historical vacuum, it is inseparable both from the material conditions found in late 1970s New York City suburbs and previous forms of black musical expression - whose readaption and reshaping constitutes undoubtedly part of the genre's *ethos*. And whereas postmodern criticism tends to define rap music in modernity⁵², authors such as Potter and Krims may help to see Wu-Tang Clan's debut record as a postmodern object, as well as bracketing it within the frames of neo-marxist critique.

⁴⁹ Williams, Justin A. 2013. *Rhymin' and Stealin': Musical Borrowings in Hip-Hop*. 2. University of Michigan Press, Michigan.

⁵⁰ Schloss, Joseph G. and Chang, Jeff. 2000. *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop*. 34. Wesleyan University Press: Connecticut.

⁵¹ Schloss, Joseph G. and Chang, Jeff. 2000. *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop*. 36 - 37. Wesleyan University Press: Connecticut.

⁵² Keyes, Cheryl L. 1996. At the Crossroads: Rap Music and its African Nexus. in *Ethnomusicology*, vol. 40, no.2. 224. University of Illinois Press: Illinois.

Chapter 3:

Wu-Tang Clan's *Enter The Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)* :

An expression of black postmodernist neo-marxist critique?

Having established both the theoretical framework which seeks to guide the following analysis, as well as the material conditions necessary for the emergence of hip-hop as a form of black musical expression, the final section of this thesis shall devote itself to the case study at hand. It attempts to answer the question of how one may regard Wu-Tang Clan's debut record, *Enter The Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)* as a subject of black postmodernist neo-marxist critique. But, before diving into what is, according to several authors (such as music journalist Ben Yew) one of the most significant rap releases of all time⁵³, it is first important to understand under which conditions rap music existed in early 1990s New York City, the context in which the album was recorded, produced and released by RZA and the remaining constituents of the Clan.

Hip-Hop in the early 1990s: a tale of two cities

As asserted in the previous chapter, the emergence of the postindustrial city radically altered black communal sensibilities in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s. By the early 1990s, African-American New Yorkers had been raised amidst the historical, social and economic conjectures that had come to define the black experience in the city; intense poverty and criminality, economic collapse, and, mainly, the erosion of a viable public space for black expression.

In the early 1990s, hip-hop was rapidly becoming one of the most popular, even if controversial, musical genres in America, trespassing the borders of New York City and being produced and heard all throughout the country, particularly in the West Coast, in which groups such as N.W.A and Cypress Hill gained significant traction in the late 1980s. All this, accompanied by the rise of gangsta rap, which Neal describes as “an often cartoonish portrayal of black masculinity, ghetto realism, and gangster sensibilities”.⁵⁴ The once niche musical expression, mostly produced for and by suburban New Yorker black youths, was now growing in popularity and mass appeal, thanks in part to the promotional boost given by the influence of music video, displayed on television programmes such as MTV's *Yo MTV*

⁵³ Yew, Ben. 2005. Retrospect for Hip-Hop: A Golden Age on Record? Proud Flesh Journal.

⁵⁴ Neal, Mark Anthony. 1999. *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture*. 144. Routledge: New York.

*Raps*⁵⁵. The access to hip-hop narratives by the means of television meant that the genre was now widely consumed by white audiences, particularly white youths, to which the “otherness” found in rap music - particularly those of the gangsta rap persuasion - was very enticing: “music video opened hip-hop to an audience of mid-American youths, who relished in the subversive “otherness” that the music and its purveyors represented. (...) Gangsta rap (...) became one of the most popular genres of hip-hop, and a significant portion of the music was largely supported by young white Americans”.⁵⁶ This mass appeal meant rap music was as commodifiable by white audiences as previous incarnations of black musical expression, such as soul music was in previous decades.

Perhaps one of the most significant hip-hop releases which closely anticipated *36 Chambers* was Dr. Dre’s first solo record following his departure from N.W.A, *The Chronic*, released in the autumn of 1992. Dr. Dre’s ode to the California lifestyle of what Neal calls *postindustrial gangsters*⁵⁷ solidified Los Angeles as the dominant creative and commercial territory in the hip-hop landscape, and made the “G-Funk” sound its main production style; in fact, Jonathan Gold of the Los Angeles Times equated Dr. Dre’s influence on hip-hop’s sound to the one figures such as Brian Wilson or Phil Spector’s had on pop music⁵⁸.

It is clear that, by the turn of the decade, hip-hop’s headquarters had swiftly shifted from one coast to the other. However, New York hip-hop still sustained a solid identity, which *Hip-Hop Evolution*’s director Darby Wheeler summarizes in three words; lyrical, political and afrocentric.⁵⁹ It would be under the guise of these three main pillars that new East Coast voices would rise, returning hip-hop to its motherland. Among others, the Wu-Tang Clan’s debut record, *36 Chambers*, released in november of 1993 through Loud Records, would become immortalized thanks to its raw and gritty lyrical and sonic portrayal of the North-Eastern American post industrial landscape. According to Adam Heimlich of the New York Press, the release was so meaningful to the city’s hip-hop culture that it “(...) all but invented 90s New York rap”.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Chang, Jeff. 12 october, 2009. It’s A Hip-Hop World. foreignpolicy.com. Recovered on 29 april, 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/10/12/its-a-hip-hop-world/>

⁵⁶ Neal, Mark Anthony. 1999. *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture*. 144. Routledge: New York.

⁵⁷ Neal, Mark Anthony. 1999. *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture*. 145. Routledge: New York.

⁵⁸ Gold, Jonathan. 27 december, 1992. The Rap’s Flat, But Ya Can’t Beat The Beat. Los Angeles Times. Recovered on 29 april, 2020. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1992-12-27-ca-4829-story.html>

⁵⁹ *Hip-Hop Evolution*. “New York State of Mind”. Episode 4, Season 2. Directed by Wheeler, Darby. Written by Bascunan, Rodrigo. Netflix. 19 october 2018.

⁶⁰ Heimlich, Adam. 2002. *2002: Hip-Hop’s Year One: Nas, Mobb Deep and Wu Face 9/11*. Vol. 15, Issue 4. New York Press: New York.

I grew up on the crime side, The New York Times side: the birth of the Wu

Although the 1980s were a time of restrained optimism for the city of New York, instigated by an economic boom which facilitated a drop in unemployment numbers, the city was still plagued with crime, disorder and increasing racial tensions.⁶¹ These tensions spiked by the end of the decade, much thanks to the infamous Central Park jogger case - in which four African-American and two Hispanic-American teenagers were taken into custody by the New York police for the alleged assault, rape and attempted murder of Trisha Meili, a white woman (in 2002, the state court withdrew all charges against the then men).⁶²

However, perhaps one of the most significant social and economic conjectures brought on to the city of New York was the crack epidemic. In the previous chapter of this thesis, Cornel West's associations between the illegal drug trade and the desire of African-American youths to partake in the "american dream" ideal of consumption and wealth was already explored. For now, it is more significant to underline how objectively destructive crack-cocaine was to the city throughout the mid 1980s and early 1990s. According to the DEA History Book, in 1985, cocaine-related hospital emergencies rose by 12 per cent, from 23,500 to 26,300. Between 1984 and 1987, they increased to 94,000. The crack epidemic disproportionately affected the poor, disenfranchised, African-American community. According to a 2006 study conducted by Roland G. Fryer, Paul S. Heaton, Steve D. Levitt and Kevin M. Murphy, between 1984 and 1989, the homicide rate for black males aged from 14 to 17 doubled. During this period, the black community also experienced a 20-100% increase in fetal death rates, low birth-weight babies, weapon arrests, and the number of children placed in foster care.⁶³

After recalling the data above, it is apparent that young suburban black men, such as the nine MCs from the borough of Staten Island that would come to form the Wu-Tang Clan, were living amongst a scenario as nightmarish for minorities as the one found two decades earlier, or worse. In a testimony provided by Wu-Tang Clan member Clifford Smith, or Method Man, for *Hip-Hop Evolution*, he describes the difficulties faced in the years that preceded the recording of *36 Chambers*: "I was at my wits end... No place to go, selling drugs... That shit was getting to the point that where motherfuckers was dying every fucking week."⁶⁴

⁶¹ Soffer, Jonathan. 2012. *Ed Koch and the Rebuilding of New York City*. 256 - 260. Columbia University Press: New York.

⁶² Harris, Aisha. 30 of may 2019. The Central Park Five: We Were Just Baby Boys. New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/30/arts/television/when-they-see-us.html>

⁶³ G. Fryer, Roland, Heaton, Paul S., Levitt, Steve D., and Murphy, Kevin M. 2006. *Measuring Crack-Cocaine and Its Impact*. 66. Harvard University Society of Fellows: Cambridge, MA.

⁶⁴ *Hip-Hop Evolution*. "New York State of Mind". Episode 4, Season 2. Directed by Wheeler, Darby. Written by Bascunan, Rodrigo. Netflix. 19 october 2018.

It was amidst this climate of poverty and criminality in the “forgotten borough”⁶⁵ of Staten Island that 32 year old Robert Diggs (better known for his rap alias RZA) decided to gather family and friends and form a hip-hop collective that would come to take the rap world by storm. RZA’s take on rap business would later come to represent a significant portion of the Wu-Tang Clan’s extra-musical influence on the industry. Stephen Thomas Erlewine, senior editor of Allmusic, explains why RZA’s “street entrepreneurialism” was of such importance to the history of the genre. The author states: “turning the standard concept of a hip-hop crew inside out, the Wu-Tang Clan were assembled as a loose congregation of MCs, almost as a support group. Instead of releasing one album after another, the Clan were designed to overtake the record industry (...) with their debut album and then spin off into as many side projects as possible.”⁶⁶

RZA began by calling his cousins Gary Grice and Russell Jones for a first version of the group; they would later adopt the aliases GZA (or Genius) and Ol’ Dirty Bastard. However, despite fluke releases from GZA and RZA on Cold Chillin’ Records and Tommy Boy Records (from which they were both quickly dropped), the Wu-Tang Clan came to reassemble in its final and definitive incarnation in the early nineties, with the addition of Dennis Cole (or Ghostface Killah), Jason Richard Hunter (or Inspectah Deck), Lamont Jody Hawkins (or U-God), Corey Woods (or Raekwon), Clifford Smith Jr. (or Method Man) and Jamel Irief (or Masta Killa). The Wu-Tang Clan was then complete and ready to record *36 Chambers*, under the guise of a group ethos described as a “blend of Eastern philosophy picked up from kung fu movies, Five PerCent Nation teachings picked up on the New York streets, and comic books.”⁶⁷

This chapter shall now analyze the record, in an attempt to understand its relationship to ideas relating to expressions of black postmodernism and neo-marxist critique. It shall be broken down into three distinct sections; the first will establish the material conditions under which “*36 Chambers*” was conceived, recorded and produced; the second will analyze its lyrical content, and the third will explore its sonic constituents (mainly, its use of sampling).

⁶⁵ *Hip-Hop Evolution*. “New York State of Mind”. Episode 4, Season 2. Directed by Wheeler, Darby. Written by Bascunan, Rodrigo. Netflix. 19 october 2018.

⁶⁶ Erlewine, Stephen Thomas. 2007. Wu-Tang Clan: Biography. AllMusic. Recovered on 30 april, 2020. <https://www.allmusic.com/artist/wu-tang-clan-mn0000959876>

⁶⁷ Pfeifle, Sam. 17 of october, 2005. *Days of the Wu: RZA looks inside the Clan*. The Boston Phoenix. <https://web.archive.org/web/20151017180411/http://www.bostonphoenix.com/boston/arts/books/documents/04646062.asp>

36 Chambers: Conception, Recording and Production

Before diving into the lyrical and sonic constituents of *36 Chambers*, this section seeks to comprehend how the album's conception and production can lead to its first perceptions as a "distinct and contradictory expression of black postmodern subjectivity".⁶⁸ First and foremost, one has to consider RZA's revolutionary take on hip-hop entrepreneurship - in which the Wu-Tang Clan leader assured all the nine MCs had free agency to embark on solo endeavours through different record labels (despite being signed as a group to Loud Records at the time of the release of *36 Chambers*).⁶⁹ According to Harrison and Arthur, hip-hop, as many forms of postmodern expression, is built on contradiction, and, regarding RZA's business model, the relationship between its critique of hardships provided by neoliberal capitalism whilst, at the same time, acting under its driving principles, is the most significant one. As the authors state, "[Hip-hop] is implicated in neoliberal modes of survival, but offers itself as a social and psychological balm to the violence perpetuated through capitalist inquieties".⁷⁰ The same can be applied to *36 Chambers*; an album which, as this thesis will review, is deeply critical of the negative impact post industrial capitalism had on the black communities of New York City suburbs, whilst being conceptualized under a deeply consumerist (and capitalistic) desire to monopolize the record industry "in as profitable fashion as possible".⁷¹ One is reminded of what Rose defined to be one of the principal tenets of hip-hop music: its partnership with consumerism, and consequential tendency to inspire alternative forms of entrepreneurialism, be it individual or communal.⁷² Although there is a deep contradiction between hip-hop's underlying critique of neo-liberal capitalist effects on the black working class and its following of capitalist ideals in its entrepreneurial schemes, Harrison and Arthur claim these strategies may very well be an appropriation of consumerism as a means of emancipation for this same working class. According to the authors, "(...) in recognizing the entrepreneurial spirit that underlines hip-hop's attitude and approach to the world, we must recognize how (...) it can propagate social uplift".⁷³ In conclusion, when rap artists employ capitalistic strategies in order to benefit their disenfranchised circles destroyed by the very same economic model, it may seem like a destructive contradiction; however, it may very well be, according to authors such as Adrienne Brown, a form of "*admirable anti-capitalist ethos*"⁷⁴.

⁶⁸ Harrison, Anthony Kwame and Craig, Arthur. 2019. Hip-Hop Ethos. 1. Department of Sociology, Virginia Tech: Virginia.

⁶⁹ Erlewine, Stephen Thomas. 2007. Wu-Tang Clan: Biography. AllMusic. Recovered on 30 april, 2020. <https://www.allmusic.com/artist/wu-tang-clan-mn0000959876>

⁷⁰ Harrison, Anthony Kwame and Craig, Arthur. 2019. Hip-Hop Ethos. 1. Department of Sociology, Virginia Tech: Virginia.

⁷¹ Erlewine, Stephen Thomas. 2007. Wu-Tang Clan: Biography. AllMusic. Recovered on 30 april, 2020. <https://www.allmusic.com/artist/wu-tang-clan-mn0000959876>

⁷² Rose, Tricia. 1994. *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. 22. Wesleyan University Press: Connecticut.

⁷³ Harrison, Anthony Kwame and Craig, Arthur. 2019. Hip-Hop Ethos. 1. Department of Sociology, Virginia Tech: Virginia.

⁷⁴ Brown, Adrienne. 2012. Drive Slow: Rehearing Hip-Hop Automotivity. 268. *Journal of Popular Music Studies*. Vol. 24, Issue 3.

Another important aspect to notice concerning the production work behind Wu-Tang Clan's debut record is the material conditions under which it was produced, namely, when it comes to how the group's lack of financial means came to result in the album's distinct gritty and raw sound (in interviews given in the context of the series *Hip-Hop Evolution*, several members of the collective recall, anecdotally, how RZA asked each MC to contribute with 100\$ for studio time if they wanted to be on the record). Wu-Tang Clan were forced to record *36 Chambers* in a small, inexpensive studio, with up to eight members of the collective in the booth at once. The group would frequently decide who would appear in each song through rap battles.⁷⁵

The importance of rap battles has been widely documented among hip-hop historians, as it recalls a time in which MCs rose to prominence thanks to the display of their talents in a live setting, gaining status much thanks to word-of-mouth rather than marketing tactics later employed by agents of the music industry.⁷⁶ According to Paul Gilroy, the relationship between early forms of hip-hop and the importance of live performance makes the genre a quintessential example of recovery of "commodified black texts", as has been mentioned previously in this thesis. Other theorists, such as Amiri Baraka, consider performance to be one of the main pillars of black diasporic tradition; as cited in Harrison and Arthur's article, the author considers this "blurring of distinction between performers and audiences" a priority in all forms of black musical expression⁷⁷. One of the tracks of *36 Chambers* in which the collective most evidently reproduces "performance", as considered by Gilroy and Baraka to be one of the pillars of black musical expression, is "Method Man". The track begins with a skit in which Method Man himself and Raekwon take turns in a sort of game, in which members take turn describing how they would torture each other in the most painful and ridiculous way conceivable. The skit is recorded acapella, and, in the background, laughs can be heard from other members of the Clan listening in. Although there is no foreseeable way to verify whether this skit was improvised or scripted, the hesitations found in Raekwon's voice - "I'll fuckin'... I'll fuckin'... I'll fuckin'... Hang you by your fucking dick off a fuckin' 12-sto-story building out this motherfucker (...)"⁷⁸ - would lead the listener to believe that the rappers' intent was to make one believe that they were listening to a genuine moment of improvisation that just happened to be recorded, thus underlying the importance of performative tactics for hip-hop as integrated in a larger history of black musical expression.

⁷⁵ *Hip-Hop Evolution*. "New York State of Mind". Episode 4, Season 2. Directed by Wheeler, Darby. Written by Bascunan, Rodrigo. Netflix. 19 october 2018.

⁷⁶ Neal, Mark Anthony. 1999. *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture*. 137. Routledge: New York.

⁷⁷ Harrison, Anthony Kwame and Craig, Arthur. 2019. *Hip-Hop Ethos*. 9. Department of Sociology, Virginia Tech: Virginia.

⁷⁸ Wu-Tang Clan. 1993. *36 Chambers*. RCA / Loud Records. LP.

By the end of this section, one can conclude there are already rich observations to be drawn even from the emergence of the Wu-Tang Clan as a group, as well as the context in which *36 Chambers* was produced and recorded. These observations are mainly concerned with RZA's capitalistic (or, according to authors such as Brown, *anti-capitalistic*) entrepreneurial strategy, as well as how the material conditions in which it was recorded led to consequences in its sound which can be related to past of black musical expression. The next section of this thesis shall devote itself to an analysis of the record's lyrical and thematic content, followed by a similar review of the album's sonic landscape - under the guise of its relation to expressions of black postmodernism and neo-marxist critiques of late capitalism.

Lyrics and Thematic: *Survival got me buggin', but I'm alive on arrival*

36 Chambers (Enter The Wu-Tang), Wu-Tang Clan's debut record, was released through Loud Records in november of 1993. The album's lyrical content is characterized by its explicit, humorous and free-associative rhymes⁷⁹. According to Rolling Stone's contributor Touré, the album's aesthetic is characterized by being "low on hype and production values and indigence is a central part of blackness". One is reminded of Michael Eric Dyson's claim that hip-hop's mission lies in "remythologizing New York's status as the spiritual center of black America".⁸⁰

Indeed, in *36 Chambers*, the Staten Island borough where the members of the Clan hail from assumes a particularly mythological nature. This mythological framing stems from the noted influence of the imaginary lifted from Eastern philosophy and culture, and, in particular, kung-fu films⁸¹. It is for good reason that the album's very own title is inspired by the 1978 film *The 36th Chamber of Shaolin*⁸²; as well, dialogue from the Gordon Liu picture is often sampled throughout the record, and Staten Island is frequently reframed as Shaolin.⁸³ In fact, the significance of the kung-fu imaginary in Wu-Tang Clan's aesthetic is even patent on the aliases chosen by the MCs (RZA, GZA, Ol' Dirty Bastard, Ghostface Killah, Inspectah Deck, U-God, Raekwon, Method Man and Masta Killa), which are all inspired by films of the genre.⁸⁴

⁷⁹ Heimlich, Adam. 2002. 2002: Hip-Hop's Year One: Nas, Mobb Deep and Wu Face 9/11. Vol. 15, Issue 4. New York Press: New York.

⁸⁰ McLaren, Peter. 1997. *Revolutionary Multiculturalism: Pedagogies of Dissent for the New Millennium*. 158. Westview Press: Boulder.

⁸¹ Pemberton, Polie. november 17, 2003. Pitchfork Feature: Top 100 Albums of the 1990s. Pitchfork. Recovered on 1 may, 2020.
<https://pitchfork.com/features/lists-and-guides/5923-top-100-albums-of-the-1990s/>

⁸² Diggs, Robert. 3 september, 2019 . Wu-Tang's RZA Breaks Down 10 Kung Fu Films He's Sampled. Vanity Fair. YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RZ67KyHX-cY>

⁸³ Wu-Tang Clan. 1993. *36 Chambers*. RCA / Loud Records. LP.

⁸⁴ Diggs, Robert. 3 september, 2019 . Wu-Tang's RZA Breaks Down 10 Kung Fu Films He's Sampled. Vanity Fair. YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RZ67KyHX-cY>

This section shall focus on what came to be one of the collective's most recognizable tracks, "C.R.E.A.M". Originally released as the eighth track of *36 Chambers*, it was later re-released as the group's third single in January of 1994 under the title "C.R.E.A.M (Cash Rules Everything Around Me)". Although the entire group is credited on the liner notes, the track only features three of the nine Wu-Tang members: Raekwon, who provides the first verse, Inspectah Deck, who provides the second verse, and Method Man, who delivers the song's hook : *cash rules everything around me, C.R.E.A.M / get the money; dolla dolla bill y'all*. The track is, as are all the other tracks on *36 Chambers*, produced by RZA, and its instrumental is sampled from the 1967 Charmel's song "As Long As I've Got You". The final section of Method Man's hook is an interpolation of Jimmy Spicer's 1983 old-school rap track "Money (Dollar Bill, Y'all)". The next paragraphs are mainly focused on the lyrical content, penned by Raekwon, Inspectah Deck and Method Man.⁸⁵ These verses shall be analyzed within the theoretical framework of the practice of Gates Jr.'s Signifyin(g) and its relationship to black postmodern subjectivity. The track's potential as a neo-marxist critique of late capitalism shall not be overlooked either.

Even before "C.R.E.A.M"'s first verse, the viewer is introduced to the setting of destruction, disorder and criminality in which the Clan situates the song's narrative through a spoken introduction. It depicts a conversation between Raekwon and Method Man, in which the two men discuss a crack-cocaine sale ("word up, two for fives over here baby / word up, two for fives (...)") and express concern for police surveillance amidst the negotiation ("(...) word up, look out for the cops though (...)")⁸⁶. This seemingly natural conversation immediately underlines two significant thematics found across *36 Chambers*; the crack-cocaine epidemic, and the distrust of the police in a time of heightened racial tension.

Raekwon delivers the first verse of "C.R.E.A.M", starting by stating the now famous first lines: "I grew up on the crime side / the New York Times side / Stayin' alive was no jive". Raekwon utilizes two descriptors to describe the late capitalist, post industrial setting he grew up in; by, *the crime side* and *the New York Times side*, he links his upbringing in the violent borough of Staten Island to media depiction of African-American life. As producer RZA explains on *The Wu-Tang Manual*, "he means the side of black life you always see reported in the newspaper - crime, death, murder. The side Rae and all of us grew up on."⁸⁷ The mention of media narratives, and its correlation to the empiric knowledge obtained by Raekwon, is undoubtedly interesting in the way it relates to another hip-hop perspective on the relationship between ghetto narratives and traditional media narratives. Public Enemy's Chuck D famously declared that hip-hop is black America's CNN; according to Neal, "(...) it is an acknowledgement of the changing dynamics of black urban life and the centrality of the

⁸⁵ Wu-Tang Clan. 1993. *36 Chambers*. RCA / Loud Records. LP.

⁸⁶ Wu-Tang Clan. 1993. *36 Chambers*. RCA / Loud Records. LP.

⁸⁷ Diggs, Robert and Norris, Chris. 2004. *The Wu-Tang Manual*. 80. Riverhead Books: New York.

black popular recording tradition and mass culture within these dynamics”.⁸⁸ In a way, Raekwon’s mention of traditional media narratives regarding the lives of black young men in the suburbs can be read with a trace of irony - since, by the early nineties, according to Chuck D and authors such as Neal, rap narratives such as the one found in “C.R.E.A.M” were more meaningful in exposing ghetto realities than those found on CNN or the New York Times.

Raekwon’s verse describes his difficult upbringing in the crime and drug-struck borough of Staten Island - a vivid account which entails recollections regarding poverty and (possibly) prostitution (“(...) had secondhands / mom’s bounced on old man (...)”), drug trafficking as a means of economic and social emancipation (“(...) only way I begin the G off was drug loot”), and criminality, even at a young age (“ (...) pullin’ out gats for fun / but it was just a dream for the teen who was a fiend (...)”). Raekwon finishes his verse by reminiscing on how his young self - a poverty-struck, crack-dealing, drug-taking black teenager, like many in late 1980s New York City suburbs - ended up finding in hip-hop, and, more precisely, in the Wu-Tang Clan, an escape from the *wrong route*, before the listener is introduced to Method Man’s full hook for the first time.⁸⁹

Inspectah Deck follows suit with a verse which explores similar themes, painting a picture of his upbringing and evolution from “hustler” to MC - a journey described by Wilson McBee of Pop Matters as “from teen to juvenile offender to would-be mentor”.⁹⁰ His account is, much like his predecessor’s, one of both struggle (“It’s been twenty-two long hard years, I’m still strugglin’ / survival got me buggin’ (...)”) and resilience (“(...) but I’m alive on arrival”). In his rhymes, Inspectah Deck does not hide his dismay for the promises of the American Dream ideal; he bluntly exposes how the system does not benefit African-Americans, if not only with the descriptor: “(...) a man with a dream and plans to make cream / which failed; I went to jail at the age of fifteen (...) / tryin’ to get a clutch of what I could not touch (...)”. The MC finishes his verse with a *double entendre*: referring to the drug-induced state of most young black men who use marijuana as an escape from their gritty, crime-filled reality, Inspectah Deck states they are: *neglected for now*. However, this sentence can also be misheard as: *neglect it for now*. Depending on how the listener perceives his closing lines, one could, on the one hand, assume Inspectah Deck predicts his testimony and mentorship as a black man who has successfully escaped the trappings of inner-city drug trade, criminality and poverty, will fall on deaf ears. Or else, one might consider the first option - that these children and teens, born to working-class black families who benefit close to nothing from the advancements allegedly brought on by the city’s post industrial context, are and will continue to be, neglected by a system that does not care for their well-being. Upon hearing

⁸⁸ Neal, Mark Anthony. 1999. *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture*. 137. Routledge: New York.

⁸⁹ Wu-Tang Clan. 1993. *36 Chambers*. RCA / Loud Records. LP.

⁹⁰ McBee, Wilson. 20 January 2014. Inspectah Deck: Wu-Tang’s Unsung Hero. Popmatters. Recovered on 1 May 2020.

<https://www.popmatters.com/176783-inspectah-deck-wu-tangs-unsung-hero-and-the-mvp-of-enter-the-wu-tang-2495705513.html>

these two accounts, one is reminded of Marx's seminal critique of capitalism's relationship (or lack thereof) with social welfare: "There must be something rotten in the very core of a social system which increases its wealth without diminishing its misery, and increases in crimes even more rapidly than in numbers."⁹¹

Having explored how both Raekwon and Inspectah Deck's verses offer a gritty ghetto narrative which both compliments and replaces the *New York Times* side, one must lastly attend to Method Man's hook. Money is certainly central in "C.R.E.A.M"'s narrative, albeit never as explicitly as in the track's hook. However, it would be a mistake to believe that the importance attributed to capital signifies an exaltation of capitalism itself; quite the contrary - in Raekwon and Inspectah Deck's verses, one can most certainly locate a critique of the economic structure which led to their hardened upbringings. Speaking on what Rolling Stone calls *street capitalism*, one is most likely to associate the narrative found in the Wu-Tang track to Brown's considerations on hip-hop's *anti-capitalist ethos*. Thus, it is through this association that one can read "C.R.E.A.M"'s lyrical content as an explicit critique of neo-liberal, post industrial capitalist structures, and the association of its message with Marx's formulations, drawn more than a decade prior, leads one to conclude that the track itself contains as well a neo-marxist *ethos*.

For the final part of this section, one shall now look more attentively at Inspectah Deck's use of *double entendre* towards the end of his verse (*neglected for now / neglect it for now*) - a strategy commonly employed in rap verses throughout *36 Chambers* and other hip-hop records - and how it may be understood within the frame of Signifyin(g).

As has been explained in this thesis' first chapter, Signifyin(g) is a term coined by literary critic Henry Louis Gates Jr. in his 1988 book, *The Signifying Monkey*. The practice, as described by the author, refers to a trope of African-American expression which, in itself, encompasses several other tropes (including *double entendre*), which all contribute to "the ritual of signifyin(g)".⁹² This practice can be linked to others pointed out by theorists throughout the twentieth century, regarding the complex nature of black modes of expression, particularly through artistic and literary means, such as James C. Scott's *hidden transcripts*. According to Neal, "these transcripts have historically accented an underground resistance in which "signifying" and double entendre played major roles".⁹³ Thus, when Inspectah Deck himself too employs *double entendre* in order to expose either the fragility of a neo-liberal, late capitalist system, or young black youth's lack of receptivity of successful black narratives, he is following in the footsteps of prior black diasporic literary traditions - traditions those which, according to Porter, are aggressively postmodern. As a matter of fact,

⁹¹ Marx, Karl. 1971. *Marx and Engels on Ireland*. Progress Publishers: Moscow.

⁹² Gates Jr., Henry Louis. 1988. *The Signifying Monkey: a Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. 52. Oxford University Press: Oxford.

⁹³ Neal, Mark Anthony. 1999. *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture*. 3. Routledge: New York.

the author considers hip-hop to be a form of resistance postmodernism; a form of which that “proposes (...) that the material and social forms resistance takes in a specific cultural context exceed and may well be indifferent (...) to some of the academic formulations of postmodernism.” This indifference lies precisely in a vernacular tradition of anti-modernism, for which the practice of Signifyin(g) is fulcral.⁹⁴

Having established that hip-hop can be understood as a form of resistance postmodernism, how does the practice of Signifyin(g) contribute to such? Porter states that the importance of the practice lies not so much in itself, but how it is then received by unknowing white audiences, and benefiting disenfranchised black communities. The author states: “Aware that their cultural capital bore an inverse relation to their material wealth, Black Americans have frequently deployed the art of Signifyin(g), giving white audiences what they thought they wanted, while at the same time giving themselves what they needed: a mode of communication which could signal solidarity.”⁹⁵ As hip-hop narratives began employing modes of Signifyin(g) into their lyrical content, black rage became ever more upfront and consumable; in its redefinition of black resistance, tracks such as “C.R.E.A.M”, founded on the verbal play of signification, further blurred the lines between *play* and *serious*. Porter concludes: “the postmodernism of hip-hop pushes the boundaries of the political, in the process redefining the very structures of resistance. As George Yancy has observed, hip-hop is fundamentally a form of praxis.”⁹⁶

To conclude this section, one can, first and foremost, assert that the centrality of the theme of capital in Wu-Tang Clan’s “C.R.E.A.M” does not necessarily reflect a compliment for capitalism; quite the contrary - it reflects an anti-capitalist *ethos* prevalent in hip-hop narratives, in which communal entrepreneurship serves not to follow the guise of neo-liberal capitalist tendencies but precisely to contradict those same tendencies - constantly work against young black working class men, bringing upon their lives unemployment, lack of housing, poverty and criminality, seesentially shunning them from the traditional American dream. In this contradiction, young working class black men find in hip-hop an escape from the shackles of post industrial misery. Also, one can locate in Raekwon and particularly Inspectah Deck’s verses the employment of the practice of Signifyin(g), in which linguistic tropes such as *double entendre* serve to constitute a mode of communication unique to black diasporic tradition. In hip-hop, the practice of Signifyin(g) represents, according to Porter, an act of solidarity amongst African-Americans, and an opportunity for this very struggle to be recognized by an outside audience. Thus, on a lyrical level, and considering the example of its eighth track, “C.R.E.A.M”, one can already locate in which ways Wu-Tang Clan’s debut

⁹⁴ Potter, Russell A. 1995. *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism*. 4. Suny Series, Postmodern Culture: New York.

⁹⁵ Potter, Russell A. 1995. *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism*. 6. Suny Series, Postmodern Culture: New York.

⁹⁶ Potter, Russell A. 1995. *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism*. 11. Suny Series, Postmodern Culture: New York.

record could be interpreted in relation to black postmodern traditions, as well as a neo-marxist critique of late capitalism. The final section of this chapter shall now turn its attention to the sound of *36 Chambers*, as seen through RZA's distinct gritty production on the track "Can It All Be So Simple". By dissecting its instrumentals, the final section of this chapter shall attempt to answer the same questions by focusing on the sonic elements of the record.

Sonic landscapes and sampling: *everybody's talking about the good old days*

RZA's raw production style, frequently adorned with *soul* samples and esoteric sound clips, came to be a staple not only of the Wu-Tang sound, but also influenced future propellers of the East Coast Renaissance, such as Jay-Z, Mobb Depp and Notorious B.I.G. According to Erlewine, RZA complemented the rappers' performances with "lean, menacing beats that evoked their gritty, urban surroundings more effectively than their words"⁹⁷. Yew is also quick to assess the importance of the unique sound of the record and the way in which it relates to its dark themes; he underlines the production's dirty quality, characterized by bass-filled drums, "eerie" sample use, and gritty vocals, which perfectly depict the post industrial suburban setting the album's narratives take place in.⁹⁸ Thus, one can consider that, due to the material conditions under which RZA found himself in, he was able to produce an album which reflected perfectly these same historical, economic and social conjectures. One could go as far as to state the producer was socially conditioned to produce *36 Chambers* in the way in which he did. Here, it is important to recover the Marxist notion of dialectic materialism, which underlines the importance of *real* material conditions, which result in new forms of social organization and eventually lead to new cultural formations.

Similarly to the prior, this section shall focus on one of the tracks that make up *36 Chambers*. The track in question, "Can It Be All So Simple", serves as the record's fourth and final single. It features verses from Ghostface Killah and Raekwon, as well as production from RZA.⁹⁹ However, unlike the previous one, this section shall focus solely on its instrumental component, and, mainly, on RZA's choices regarding sampling. Mainly, Krims' theory of the hip-hop sublime shall serve as the main conductor of the analysis.

"The Way We Were" is a ballad penned by Alan Bergman, Marilyn Bergman and Marvin Hamlisch, originally performed by American vocalist Barbara Streisand in 1974.¹⁰⁰ It was later famously covered by American R&B band Gladys Knight & The Pips, as a blend with another cover - of the 1960 track "Try To Remember", originally performed in the musical *The Fantasticks*. And, in 1993, Knight's version was sampled by RZA for the track "Can It

⁹⁷ Erlewine, Stephen Thomas. 2007. Wu-Tang Clan: Biography. AllMusic. Recovered on 30 april, 2020. <https://www.allmusic.com/artist/wu-tang-clan-mn0000959876>

⁹⁸ Yew (2005). Retrospect for Hip-Hop: A Golden Age on Record? ProudFleshJournal.com.

⁹⁹ Yew, Ben. 2005. Retrospect for Hip-Hop: A Golden Age on Record? Proud Flesh Journal.

¹⁰⁰ William, Ruhlmann. 2017. *Barbara Streisand - The Way We Were*. AllMusic. Recovered on 1 may, 2020. <https://www.allmusic.com/album/the-way-we-were-mw0000650840>

Be All So Simple”, off *36 Chambers*, Wu-Tang Clan’s debut record. The RZA-produced track interpolates Gladys Knight’s cover version, by laying a replay of her sampled voice singing the opening line of the second verse: “can it be that it was all so simple then”.¹⁰¹

Similarly to “C.R.E.A.M”, “Can It All Be So Simple” also begins not with music itself, but with an aural introduction, in which again the listener is treated to a seemingly natural conversation - this time, the participants are RZA himself, Ghostface Killah and Method Man. In it, the three men reminisce about the “good old days”, when everything was, according to RZA’s account “smooth and calm”. Once again, the conversation is depicted with harrowing realism, as the three MCs talk over and interrupt each other, and the sound of traffic and the city bustle grounds the listener in the suburban setting from which their accounts come from. Then, the track presents a second introduction, this time, borrowed from Gladys Knight’s speech which anticipates her version of “The Way We Were”; in it, the singer expresses a similar sentiment, stating: “hey, you know everybody’s talking about the good old days, right? Everybody! The good old days... Well, let’s talk about the good old days!” Only then the sung hook is heard, and looped over and over again across the song’s four minute length, as Raekwon and Ghostface Killah discuss once again the hardships of growing up in Staten Island, whilst dreaming of a wealthy, successful and secure life alongside the rest of the Clan.¹⁰²

If “C.R.E.A.M”’s driving theme is capital, “Can It All Be So Simple”’s is the so-called “good old days”; this fixation on the past can even be traced to the sample choice, as both the original Barbara Streisand song as well as the Gladys Knight version focus on nostalgia. One is, first and foremost, reminded of Neal’s previously mentioned *post industrial nostalgia*. This phenomenon would serve to both provide the aural and visual bridge necessary in order to reaffirm black communal relations (now lost, thanks to the erosion of the Black Communal Space), as well as to underscore “the general refusal to adequately engage the realities of the Black Public Sphere in the postindustrial era.”¹⁰³ Considering Wu-Tang Clan’s *36 Chambers* was produced in the disorderly context of the early nineties, one can certainly link RZA’s fixation on the concept of nostalgia found in both the track’s introduction provided by the Clan itself, as well as both sections sampled off Knight’s version of “The Way We Were”, to Neal’s diagnosis of black art fixation on past incarnations of a long-gone Black Public Space.

Next, Krims theory of the hip-hop sublime shall be applied to the sonic textures found in RZA’s production in the track. One of hip-hop’s founding characteristics is the expression of authenticity; previously coded in, for instance, blues music, as signifiers of black rural life. However, in the most recent form of black musical expression, hip-hop, authenticity is

¹⁰¹ Gladys Knight & the Pips. 1975. *The Way We Were/Try to Remember*. Buddah Records. Single.

¹⁰² Wu-Tang Clan. 1993. *36 Chambers*. RCA / Loud Records. LP.

¹⁰³ Neal, Mark Anthony. 1999. *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture*. 125 - 126. Routledge: New York.

interlinked with a new concept - *realness* - expressed through aural and visual representations of the ghetto, itself distinguishable from previous modes of rural poverty as it represents a distinct product of “late, or multinational, capitalism”.¹⁰⁴

According to Krims, hip-hop does not simply represent the ghetto as it is, but, through the practice of hip-hop’s characteristic affinity for reappropriating, reshaping and retransforming pre existing musical materials of black diasporic tradition, reappropriates, reshapes and retransforms the ghetto itself. Krims names this transformation as “refolding of the ghetto as a libidinal object”; the author means that, through song, lyrics and imagery (namely, music videos), hip-hop turns the most abject consequences of world economic disequity into a commodified product readily available for consumption. Krims employs the marxist concept of surplus value in order to explain the process of commodity fetish within a hip-hop context, stating; “the ghetto produces a new use value; it becomes, through the commodification just described, a safe, portable image for pleasurable consumption.”¹⁰⁵

One of the ways in which this process can be observed in rap music aesthetics is through the practice of sampling. According to the author, the aesthetic distortions often applied to the musical layers which constitute a hip-hop instrumental (in which the original sample is at often times cut and reorganized endlessly, through loops, scratches, detuning, layering, and so on) suggest the shortcomings of the *refolding* of the ghetto as a libidinal object; “the detuning of musical layers (...) and its association with (...) descriptions of ghetto life suggests that the failure of representation itself becomes a figure for inner-city life. The music projects the ghetto not merely as an uncomfortable or dynamic place: is it, in fact, projected as radically unrepresentable in itself (...). The hip-hop sublime is itself (...) subsumed by a market economy that values exactly this representation of ghetto life.”¹⁰⁶

In order to prove his theory, Krims himself mentions the track analyzed in this section. According to the author, RZA’s handling of the sample exemplifies the hip-hop sublime; he fixates, particularly, on how the original song is recontextualized harmonically and semantically, regarding how the lyric’s original nostalgia for a past love affair is now reframed in the context of a *post industrial nostalgia*. The author also speaks on the peculiarities of the sound of the record’s production itself, in order to locate in RZA’s treatment of the sample the hip-hop sublime itself: “(...) it [Can It Be All So Simple] is imbricated in a dense combination of musical layers (...). In the domain of pitch they comprise a sharply dissonant combination (...). In fact, the layers are not even in tune (...). The result is that no pitch combination may form conventionally representable relationships with the others; musical layers pile up, defying aural representability for musically socialized

¹⁰⁴ Krims, Adam. 2002. *The Hip-Hop Sublime as a Form of Commodification* in Qureshi, Regula. *Music and Marx: Ideas, Practice, Politics*. Psychology Press. 67.

¹⁰⁵ Krims, Adam. 2002. *The Hip-Hop Sublime as a Form of Commodification* in Qureshi, Regula. *Music and Marx: Ideas, Practice, Politics*. Psychology Press. 67.

¹⁰⁶ Krims, Adam. 2002. *The Hip-Hop Sublime as a Form of Commodification* in Qureshi, Regula. *Music and Marx: Ideas, Practice, Politics*. Psychology Press. 69.

Western listeners.”¹⁰⁷ According to Krims, it is precisely this unrepresentability which, paradoxically, best describes the ghetto reality; as something incomprehensible, just as RZA’s distortion of Gladys Knight’s voice and instrumentals. In its inability to represent the ghetto, hip-hop refolds it as a libidinal, commodifiable project.

In conclusion, Krims’ theory of the hip-hop sublime exposes the contradictions which plague not only *36 Chambers*, but, according to authors such as Harrison and Craig, the entire hip-hop *ethos*. Through RZA’s refolding of the ghetto as a libidinal object - which, according to Krims, occurs in the way in which the producer deals with the Gladys Knight sample - he represents the ghetto in all its unrepresentability. Through this paradox, the ghetto is now reinvented as a commodity. One can relate this to the practice of Signifyin(g) - in which linguistic tropes characteristic of black diasporic tradition, such as the *double entendre* (employed by Inspectah Deck on the track “C.R.E.A.M.”), serve to both signal solidarity and expose black rage in a digestible fashion to white audiences. In this regard, the hip-hop song serves as both a commodity as it does as a particularly resistant form of postmodernism. It is a contradiction as deep as the one RZA’s entrepreneurial schemes pose to the understanding of the Wu-Tang Clan’s actions as neo-marxist. However, it is on these contradictions that hip-hop subjects, such as *36 Chambers* are built - and it is precisely in these contradictions that we can locate its postmodern, neo-marxist components.

¹⁰⁷ Krims, Adam. 2002. *The Hip-Hop Sublime as a Form of Commodification* in Qureshi, Regula. *Music and Marx: Ideas, Practice, Politics*. Psychology Press. 68.

Conclusion

This thesis' intent was to decipher the relationship between Wu-Tang Clan's seminal debut record, *Enter the 36 Chambers* (Wu-Tang), and a larger history of black postmodernism among afro-diasporic traditions, as well as its possibility of serving as neo-marxist critique, regarding the post industrial, late capitalist context under which it was conceptualized, recorded and released.

As was previously asserted in this thesis' introduction, the end goal of this project was not to reach the definitive conclusion that *36 Chambers* is undoubtedly a clear expression of postmodernist neo-marxist critique. It was, instead, to regard the classic record in a differentiated light (taking into account, namely, its various contradictions, particularly where it pertains to its relationship to the capitalist setting and ideals that dominated the economic, social and historical setting under which it was produced). This differentiated perspective intended to offer new regardings of Wu-Tang Clan's work - particularly, in how it may relate to the aforementioned theoretical categories and traditions of thought.

In conclusion, one cannot, as was expected prior to the analysis conducted throughout this thesis, regard *36 Chambers* as decidedly postmodern or neo-marxist; one can, however, understand how, in the several contradictions found in its deepened analysis, it relates to black postmodernist traditions, as well as to a neo-marxist critique of post industrial, late capitalist New York in the early 1990s. These contradictions are abundant among hip-hop narratives, according to Harrison and Kwame, and it is precisely in these contradictions that hip-hop finds its ethos as a "distinct and contradictory expression of black postmodern subjectivity". For instance, the struggle between RZA's entrepreneurial schemes, which adhere to neoliberal modes of survival, and the record's critique of the consequences of the same capitalist structures; however, from this contradiction results what Brown deems to be an admirable form of anti-capitalist ethos.

36 Chambers is full of similar contradictions, whose resolution is, in fact, its very nature as a postmodern object; namely, the refolding of the ghetto as a libidinal object, as appointed by Krims, which simultaneously transforms the spaces depicted by Wu-Tang Clan into profitable commodities and into unrepresentable realities - particularly, through RZA's remodeling and reshaping of the Gladys Knight sample employed for "Can It All Be So Simple". However, one is still faced with the lingering link between Wu-Tang Clan's debut record and neo-marxist critique. For that, one needs to look no further than the track "C.R.E.A.M", which we have analyzed extensively throughout this thesis, particularly where

it pertains to its lyrical content. As Raekwon and Inspectah Deck depict the harsh conditions brought on by New York City's urban transformation in the late 1970s and early 1980s - brought on by post industrial, late capitalist policies and conjectures -, Method Man seems to contradict himself their critique by claiming "C.R.E.A.M get the money, dolla dolla bill y'all" on the song's hook. Capital is precisely the central theme of the track; however, when stating "cash rules everything around me", Wu-Tang Clan is not applauding neo-liberal modes of survival; instead, it is providing an angered critique of how young working class black men are shunned from modern economic progress, and appropriating a narrative which was never intended for them; we once again return to Brown's assertions regarding how much of hip-hop's relationship with signifiers of wealth, consumerism and capital represent, in fact, a communal, profoundly anti-capitalistic attitude.

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