

Frank Ocean and His Contribution to a Changing Hip-Hop Scene

by Angelo Massagli

Frank Ocean is a wildly successful Grammy winning hip-hop/R&B newcomer. Frank Ocean is also a member of the eclectic Odd Future clique alongside shock rapper Tyler, The Creator. Frank Ocean's *Channel ORANGE*, without much publicity or radio hits, debuted at number two on the Billboard 200 chart. Frank Ocean is also bisexual.

The relationship between homosexuality and hip-hop has been a strenuous one. "Anti-gay epithets and sentiments" (Fekadu) have been the norm in hip-hop soon after its entry into the gangsta rap era. It seemed to be that the hip-hop mission statement for emcees had become a vow to tote the biggest guns, get the most women, and make the most money. In this dangerous and hyper-masculine society, any hint of femininity or homosexuality is deemed a sign of weakness and would prove to outcast any emcee that puts their sexuality into question. In a music genre where homophobia reigns supreme, how did Frank Ocean find acceptance?

Hip-hop is undergoing a monumental shift in ideals as the eye of commercial hip-hop is shifting away from the hyper-masculine gangsta rap aesthetic. As emcees are becoming more concerned with high fashion, foreign cars, and designer drugs, popular hip-hop culture is entering an era of "luxury rap" which is exposing rappers to a world infinitely more diverse than that of the tightly exclusive world of gangsta rap. This shift from exclusivity to inclusivity is redefining what it means to be accepted in hip-hop culture, opening the doors to artists that are willing to expand the boundaries as to how far this new push for acceptance is willing to be taken. To understand this change it is important to acknowledge where the gangsta rap aesthetic came from and why it has proliferated for the past twenty years.

A Man's World

Hip-hop found its voice through discrimination. It was a cultural reaction to the "devastation of deindustrialization, a racist criminal justice system, and years of social neglect" (Shimeless). This voice was characterized by its rough, unapologetic and aggressive subject matter. While hip-hop's roots can be traced back to the late 1970s with acts such as The Sugarhill Gang, hip-hop had never seen anything quite like the meteoric rise of gangsta rap in the early 90s.

Gangsta rap changed the landscape of hip-hop overnight. Rap content went from "Rapper's Delight" to "Fuck the Police" in the blink of an eye. MC's were spitting vicious rhymes that championed violence, misogyny, and homophobia which reflected the importance of maintaining a rigid front of masculinity to survive in the volatile gang ridden streets that they called home. With N.W.A's 1991 release of their album "Straight Out of Compton," rapper Eazy E opens by warning the listeners that they "are now about to witness the strength of street knowledge" (N.W.A.). Singles like "Straight Outta Compton" and "Fuck the Police" were dense with lyrics that emphasized the hyper masculinity that came with the gangsta rap life style. For instance, the constant use of words like "bitch" and "pussy" in reference to men was meant to emasculate men they perceived as weak by naming them slang terms for things associated with females. Based on

fan reactions to such aggressive content, music industry execs were paying close attention to what was soon becoming an entertainment cash cow.

In his article “I Love My Niggas No Homo: Homophobia and the Capitalist Subversion of Violent Masculinity in Hip-Hop,” Nebeu Shimeless spins a remarkably strong argument that puts the blame on big business for proliferating and solidifying the hyper masculine aesthetic that has been deeply rooted in the Hip-Hop scene since the early 90s. Shimeless creates a correlation between the popularity of gangsta rap and the “multi-billion dollar global industry” (Shimeless) hip-hop has grown into today. Hip-hop artists at the time were in an aggressive pursuit of wealth and when the music industry extended their hand to them, it was not long before the commercialization of hip-hop had begun.

Shimeless cites S. Craig Watkins, a hip-hop historian who credits *Billboard* with the commercialization of hip-hop culture. After switching to using Soundscan, a digital record sales monitor, *Billboard* was able to more precisely check the pulse of the music buying public. By using Soundscan, *Billboard* calculated that N.W.A.’s 1991 album *Efil4zaggin* (Niggaz4Life backwards) propelled N.W.A. to the position of top-selling artist in the country, rivaling the King of Pop, Michael Jackson. While there were countless other hip-hop acts out there, for example, the politically charged Public Enemy or the wittily intelligent A Tribe Called Quest, the numbers reflected that the gangsta rap aesthetic was far more popular and ultimately, more profitable.

With the success of gangsta rap, Shimeless argues that while “corporations were pleased with their relatively large returns on small investments in music” the 90s brought about a new strategy of placing “bigger bets on fewer projects in hopes of bigger payoffs(Shimeless). By constricting the amount of hip-hop acts in the mainstream, the music industry was deliberately limiting the playing field and oversaturating it with the gangsta rap narrative. In order to find success, rappers were compelled to satisfy this demand for gangsta rap, thus forcing them into the roll of the hyper masculine gangsta and proliferating inner city stereotypes such as a pension for “violence, drug addiction and lawlessness” (Shimeless).

Switch the Style Up

Shimeless creates an interesting connection between capitalism and hip-hop culture and the post-colonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha’s theory of mimicry as a natural result to the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. Putting it simply, Bhabha argues that the “colonized” begin to emulate the traits pushed on them by the “colonizer” in order to achieve acceptance. In this case, rappers (the colonized) were adjusting their styles in order to satisfy the demands of the music industry (the colonizers). For example, rapper Busta Rhymes fell victim to demand for conformity. While his original content and style reflected both his Islamic faith and an affinity for 70s party funk similar to that of George Clinton, he quickly ditched his originality in exchange for a more gangsta persona after signing with former N.W.A. member Dr. Dre. Busta shaved his dreadlocks off, buffed up, and began to overemphasize his masculinity through multiple homophobic tirades as a result of personal encounters with homosexuals and homosexual behavior. It comes to no surprise that once this change was solidified, his next album sold more than any album he had released in the past. “Success” stories like that of Busta

Rhymes continued to strengthen the gangsta rap aesthetic and influence upcoming rappers to follow the same path to find popularity in the ever expanding hip-hop genre.

Changing From the Inside Out

As a result of music industry execs pushing the hard-edged gangsta rap style, many Hip-Hop artists have been outspoken in their disdain for homosexuality. D.M.C. from Run D.M.C reflects on homophobia in hip-hop and admits that rappers would “diss the gay people because it’s cool” (Fekadu). Busta Rhymes was quoted as saying, “I can’t even partake in that conversation homie. That homo shit? Is that what you talkin’ about?... What I represent culturally doesn’t condone it whatsoever. Word is bond” (Shimeless). Rappers frequently use phrases like “no homo” or “pause” after statements that could be misconstrued as homosexual or weak in order to exonerate them from such a dire misconception. This constant fear of being seen as homosexual and in extension weak or less of a man has permeated hip-hop for the past twenty years. With that being said, what has changed within the culture that makes an artist like Frank Ocean strive in a world dominated by an unflinching adherence to some masculine code?

While Shimeless begins to probe this question, it is important to realize that his essay was written in 2010, two years before Frank Ocean’s unusual ascension into hip-hop and R&B history. He only begins to scratch the surface as to how homosexuality is beginning to become increasingly accepted in the hip-hop community. He uses Lil Wayne as his example, specifically the scandalous photo of Wayne kissing his mentor Birdman on the lips. Shimeless argues that Wayne was “not apologetic and unabashedly affirmed that he kissed Birdman” (Shimeless). He then goes on to highlight how Wayne justified this act by referring to Birdman as his “daddy” and the kiss was merely a sign of affection between himself and someone he considered family. With actions like this, Shimeless defines Lil Wayne as “a harbinger of a more complex masculine politique being developed within hip-hop culture that is able to undermine hip-hop masculinity from within” (Shimeless). While his point is true, it is unfortunate that it is impossible for his essay to take into account recent developments in hip-hop culture that strongly support the complications of the “masculine politique” he has defined. Between the publication of his essay in 2010 and present day, there have been events in Hip-Hop culture that serve to extend and strengthen Shimeless’s argument.

A watershed moment for hip-hop culture and its relationship with homosexuality occurred in May of 2012 when Barack Obama expressed his support for gay and lesbian marriage. Following his address, handfuls of hip-hop moguls with a history of supporting Obama stood behind him. Jay-Z compared anti-gay rights as another form of “discrimination,” no different than discrimination against blacks, which ironically was the impetus for the gangsta rap aesthetic (Martens). Other artists such as Kanye West and A\$AP Rocky have voiced their acceptance of the gay and lesbian community in candid interviews. All of these figures together are actively recreating the prevailing popular rap aesthetic. Hip-hop artists breaking down barriers from within the culture is creating a new aesthetic, one of decadence, success, and most importantly, a wide encompassing form of acceptance.

Luxury Rap: A Style of Acceptance

In May 2012 President Barack Obama released a statement in support of gay marriage. Long time supporter and friend, Jay-Z, was quick to follow up with a statement saying that anti-gay sentiment is nothing but another form of discrimination. In a genre that was created as a response to discrimination, what happens when one of your most iconic artists makes an example of you for discriminating?

This stance against anti-gay sentiments in the country and in hip-hop came at a time where hip-hop was already in a state of flux. It was a multi-billion dollar industry and arguably the most popular genre of music in America. As a result of its increasing mass appeal, hip-hop had begun to spill into a wider, more diverse range of cultures. The art form that was born as a defense against discrimination was finally starting to feel a sense of acceptance. As a result, the music began to reflect this notion.

Luxury rap is a celebration of finally making it to the top. While the discriminatory aspects of gangsta rap had begun to become secondary, the flashy desire for a lavish lifestyle had been heightened. Kanye West, who had always been known for his passion for fashion, declared in his song "Otis" with Jay-Z that his rhymes were "luxury rap, the Hermes of verses" (West). A\$AP Rocky reflects on his track "Hell" that "we used to wear rugged boots now its all tailored suits" (Rocky). As the lines of luxury rap and the fashion world had begun to blur, rappers were being forced to interact with social circles completely outside their comfort zone. Much like Lil Wayne making it acceptable to kiss Birdman, rappers were making it acceptable to associate with heterosexual and homosexual people alike, thus further poking holes in the homophobia in hip-hop from the inside out. With these shifting pieces settling into place, all hip-hop culture needed was for someone to come out that would put their new push for acceptance to the test. Could they walk the walk and talk the talk? Enter Frank Ocean.

Frank Ocean's New Religion

Prominent slam poet and self-proclaimed "hip-hop head" Saul Williams once said, "The most popular emcees of our age are often those that claim to be heartless or show no feelings or signs of emotion. The poet, on the other hand, is the one who realizes that their vulnerability is their power" (Williams). Frank Ocean is nothing if he is not vulnerable. His music and his lyrics ooze emotion on topics such as love, lost love, and lust, and by exposing himself he reaches into the hearts of an infinitely diverse audience. However, what is it exactly that Ocean does to achieve acceptance with songs such as "Bad Religion," where he is clearly talking about a male love object?

The key to Ocean's success in this changing culture is his accessibility. When asked if he believed a homosexual hip-hop artist could make it in the mainstream, veteran hip-hop journalist Shaheem Reid said if "the music is great enough and the topics are great enough, there's a slight chance... I don't think that talking about them being gay or lesbian could be the only substance of their music" (Fekadu). Frank Ocean brilliantly dances around that critique by lacing his songs with both male and female love objects while also refraining from explicitly singing about his homosexuality. Keep in mind, this argument is not attempting to state that Ocean is suppressing

his sexual orientation to conform to cultural norms, however, it does attempt to prove that Ocean makes conscious artistic choices that allow his lyrics to transcend sexuality and soar into the universality of raw emotion.

The first single off *Channel ORANGE* is “Thinkin Bout You” in which we find Frank Ocean candidly giving us a glimpse inside his struggle over a past love leaving him. Ocean repeatedly sings, “I’ve been thinkin’ ‘bout you” and asks, “Do you think about me still?” (Ocean). This begs the question, whom has he been thinking about? Whom exactly is he speaking to? Over the length of this song, Ocean only once uses a term that could refer to the gender of his lover, however, even when he does so the lost love remains to be ambiguous. At the end of the first verse Ocean sings, “My eyes don’t shed tears, but, boy, they bawl when I’m thinkin’ ‘bout you.” (Ocean) Throughout that song, Ocean always refers to his past lover as “you” except for this one moment where he uses “boy,” however, this can be seen as a play on words. He could be talking to this “boy” directly, telling him that when he thinks about him he cries. It could also be read in the exclamatory sense, where we could imagine him saying when he cries his eyes do not just shed tears but oh boy do they bawl! It is in this moment that Ocean exerts his sexuality while at the same time subverting it as to not alienate heterosexual listeners from identifying with his heartbreak.

In the same vein as “Thinkin Bout You,” Ocean’s “Bad Religion” tells his story of loving another who does not love him back while creating a metaphor comparing love with religion. In “Bad Religion” he also reveals a male love object, but this time he is far more raw and honest with his delivery. The whole song takes place over a taxicab confession between Ocean and strange cab driver. He opens by asking the cab driver to “be his shrink for the hour” and it is after this moment that Ocean allows us into his dark corners. When the taxi driver suggests that Ocean “needs prayer,” Ocean retorts that “if it brings me to my knees, it’s a bad religion” which is the first example of Ocean creating a metaphor between being devout to a religion and falling in love with someone (Ocean). In heart wrenching falsetto Ocean confesses “this unrequited love” is “nothing but a one-man cult and cyanide in [his] Styrofoam cup” (Ocean). It is after this refrain that Ocean characteristically reveals his sexuality when he sings, “I could never make him love me” (Ocean).

In “Bad Religion” the explicit use of the word “him” avoids any confusion as to the gender of his love object in this song. However, once again, if one listens to the song in its entirety it *is not* a song about being homosexual. It is about the feeling we can all relate to of loving someone who does not love us back. Readdressing the name of the song Ocean ends by saying, “Only bad religion could have me feel the way I do” (Ocean). By defining what this bad religion is we can decipher what this song is particularly about. As clarified earlier, the bad religion is describing his “unrequited love” or a love that is not returned. He compares that feeling to following an unsympathetic, unresponsive religion. By once again transcending gender and sexuality to reach higher meaning in “Bad Religion” he creates a song that allows listeners to look past the idiosyncrasies and into the heart of what the song is about; a call for true love going unanswered.

Ocean View

In the wake of Frank Ocean's recent achievement, we can conclude that there are progressive shifts changing the landscape of the hip-hop community. Emcees are beginning to break away from the extremely exclusive and discriminatory attitude forced upon them by the commercialization of gangsta rap and the gangsta rap aesthetic. The 50 Cents and DMX's of the late 90s and early 2000s are taking a backseat to the new guard spearheaded by more open minded emcees such as the timeless Jay-Z, the fashionable luxury rapper Kanye West, and the Givenchy adorned self proclaimed "fashion killa" A\$AP Rocky. Along with this change in attitude comes a change in image and a taste for the finer things and high-end fashion. By overflowing into these new social circles, emcees are forcing themselves to become more acceptant of race, gender, and sexuality.

It is not to be misconstrued that these changes are the sole reason for Frank Ocean's success. It is the combination of these shifts along with Frank Ocean's musical ability and poetic talent that paved the way for *Channel ORANGE* to be as groundbreaking as it was. Even Ocean acknowledges the hurdles he would have to overcome despite the progressive developments in black music. In an interview with GQ he speaks about his doubts surrounding his decision to come out so publically in front of the world stage. He said, "I had those fears. In black music, we've got so many leaps and bounds to make with acceptance and tolerance in regard to that issue... So I knew that if I was going to say what I said, it had to be in concert with one of the most brilliant pieces of art that has come out in my generation. And that is what I did" (Wallace). Ocean parallels the aforementioned sentiment where Shaheem Reid believed that "if the music is great enough and the topics are great enough" there is a chance for a homosexual artist to find mainstream success. Ocean understood he was walking on thin ice and knew the slightest misstep would derail his career and in extension gain false proof to the anti-homosexual stereotypes ingrained in the hip-hop community.

With *Channel ORANGE* he musically and even more importantly, lyrically, flipped the script with how we now understand the reach of hip-hop and R&B music. By understating the sexuality and overemphasizing the raw emotion between two people who love each other, Ocean allows himself to dive into the hearts of a diverse sea of listeners. It is the key to his success. Ocean once said, "I believe that marriage isn't between a man and a woman but between love and love." By lacing the essence of this belief through his music, that love transcends all personal differences, he is able to break down walls.

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