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Mama Said Come on Out

Henry Flournory

Ella V. Schwing Award Winner

On July 4th 2012, the day the United States celebrated its 236th year of independence, up and coming R&B singer, songwriter, producer, and member of hip-hop collective Odd Future, Frank Ocean, liberated himself from the music industry closet, posting a poetic anecdote on the social media site Tumblr about the summer he fell in love with a man. Pop-culture-responsive Twitter users immediately took to the site to air their reactions to this groundbreaking act of self-exposure. The reaction from celebrities, specifically those within hip-hop, was overwhelmingly positive, with various artists tweeting their support. Def-Jam Records' co-founder, Russell Simons, widely considered a "Godfather" of hip-hop, penned an open letter praising Ocean's bravery, saying he "changed the game" (Global Grind). Ocean was the subject of widespread reverence, bigotry, and analysis on industry blogs and social media for days. Ocean's album debuted at #2 on the *Billboard* chart less than a week later. No black male artist in the arena of urban music had ever publicly opened up about same-sex desire right on the brink of mainstream popularity. The fact that Ocean did so without shooting his career dead in its tracks speaks to the huge strides hip-hop has made towards tolerance. But just how far has it come in accepting those who identify as LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, & transgender), and what does it mean for a genre of music and its accompanying culture that, by tradition, rigidly enforces gender and sexual roles?

Hip-hop is best understood as a musical form, with rap music being the fundamental genre that hip-hop as we know it is based on. Starting in the late 1970s in New York City, hip-hop was a collaboration between rappers and DJs that formed a genre that took R&B and replaced traditional vocals with a fast-paced spoken word emphasizing storytelling. Hip-hop culture eventually became galvanized by the fact that this musical experimentation served as a form of expression for young black men in the inner city to cope with poverty and oppression. Q-Boy, an openly gay UK rapper, explains hip-hop's birth from a social perspective. "When hip-hop started in the Seventies, it was political and creative, it served as a platform for black men in New York who weren't given a voice" (Shehadi). Hip-hop's influence is ever-growing, and today, it is a cultural symbol of the young, black, and hip. The pervasiveness of hip-hop's influence led

sociology professors Siobhan Brooks and Thomas Conroy to characterize its commercialization thusly: “Hip-hop has also permeated the commercial language of marketing, being used rather pervasively to confer hipness and street cred on a variety of consumer products” (6).

The significance of hip-hop to the black community, and its ubiquity within pop culture, makes it a vital and legitimate form of expression for those who are too often ignored. However, the inherent maleness of hip-hop limits its inclusiveness and has complicated efforts to diversify. From lyrical content to visual accompaniment (music videos, hip-hop magazines), Rap is obsessed with an inflexible, hyper-sexualized, heteronormative masculinity. Hip-hop’s historical exclusion of the LGBT community is best explained by this fundamental preoccupation with masculinity.

Music critic and University of Iowa, Professor Kembrew McLeod, in his article on authenticity in hip-hop, hypothesizes that those within hip-hop culture enforce strict gender-sexual binaries as a way to protect hip-hop’s identity as it becomes more commercialized (136). McLeod states that hip-hop recognizes “hard” (or masculine) attributes as authentic to hip-hop, with “soft” and feminine being the fraudulent approach and not included in “real” hip-hop:

Within hip-hop, being a real man doesn’t merely entail having the proper sex organ; it means acting in a masculine manner...To claim one is a real man, one is defining himself not just in terms of gender, but also sexuality, that is, not being a ‘pussy’ or a ‘faggot.’ For instance, Tupac (1994) raps in ‘Hertz of Men,’ ‘Now me and Quik gonna show you niggas what it’s like on this side/The real side/Now, on this ride there’s gonna be some real motherfuckers/and there’s gonna be some pussies’ (142).

Rapper Eminem, one of hip-hop’s most provocative figures, received criticism, particularly from media monitoring group GLAAD (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation), for his use of the word “faggot” and what they interpreted as violent and hateful lyrics against gays. Eminem responded to his critics, “Faggot is like taking away your manhood – you’re a sissy you’re a coward...It doesn’t necessarily mean you’re being a gay person” (Stephens 25-26). Eminem doesn’t recognize, or doesn’t address, that his choice of word, a familiar gay slur, betrays the common conflation of homosexuality and lack of masculinity.

Since homosexuality, specifically male same-sex desire, unequivocally doesn’t fit in with mainstream hip-hop’s definition of masculinity, it is no wonder it took so long for a Frank Ocean to appear. Legendary rapper Snoop Dogg (who now goes by the name Snoop Lion) spoke on his uncertainty of the future of hip-hop’s acceptance of gays in an interview with music magazine *NME*. When asked about Ocean and what it means for hip-hop, he bluntly replied, “Frank Ocean ain’t no rapper, he’s a singer. It’s acceptable in the singing world, but in the rap world, I

don't know if it will ever be acceptable because rap is so masculine" (NME). Even gay artists and those who support gays in the industry feel the need to make the distinction between masculinity and homosexuality. "People think it's gonna be this flamboyant, whiny guy getting on the microphone or some drag queen," says Tori Fixx, an artist and producer, in an article describing LGBT hip-hop festival, Peace Out East (Thomas).

In this male-dominated genre, the plight of the female rapper is of particular interest. Certainly less invisible than gay rappers, females have nonetheless had to contend with a hip-hop "glass ceiling". A female has yet to be awarded a Grammy in any of the major rap categories, and only eight solo rap singles performed by a woman have reached the top ten on the *Billboard* Hot 100 chart in its 53-year history (Caulfield). To be taken seriously by hip-hop peers, female rappers tend to incorporate masculine traits into their sound and image. Fascinatingly, female rappers have fashioned a commercially successful image that overlaps the feminine and masculine in a way that may even be subversive to the inflexible sexual roles enforced by hip-hop. Successful female rapper, Eve, in her song "What Ya Want," refers to herself as a "pit bull in a skirt" (*Let There Be*), contrasting yet reconciling the connotations of aggressiveness and viciousness attributed to the breed of dog with the traditional femininity and "lady-likeness" of wearing a skirt. When listening to Lil' Kim and Foxy Brown, artists who, along with Eve, are considered to be icons of the "Golden Age" of female rap (late 1980s to early 2000s), they rap in a low-pitched growl. When one YouTube an interview with them, especially Lil' Kim, the difference in their natural, conversational speaking voice is striking. Lil' Kim speaks in a very high-pitched, traditionally feminine voice, much higher and lighter than her "rap voice."

Even more fascinating are the ways in which women manipulate their sexual image in regard to sexual preference. Sexual fluidity, or bisexuality, is a familiar theme in female rap. Nicki Minaj is the most visible and successful female rapper today and is credited with bringing female rap back into mainstream music. Her 2010 debut solo single was the first #1 rap song by an unaccompanied female in nearly a decade. Minaj rose through the hip-hop underground supported by songs with lyrical content that spoke of her sexual attraction to women, but when she was interviewed by major music publications, she did not claim to engage in any same-sex sexual activity. "I think girls are sexy, but I'm not going to lie and say that I date girls," she confessed in an interview with *Rolling Stone*, further stating she just claimed to be bisexual for attention (Greene). It would seem that a woman adopting the sexuality that is customarily male would strengthen her perceived authenticity, whereas a male would be perceived as weak, lesser, and un-hip-hop if he were seen as possessing a sexual preference attributed to the female.

Regarding Frank Ocean, Snoop Dogg makes a pertinent observation. Although Ocean's hip-hop credentials are strong, he does not rap in any of his mainstream songs, which are mostly slow to mid-tempo R&B ballads, a genre that is generally more pop-friendly. Even more recently, revered hip-hop DJ, Mister Cee, was violently outted publically when audio clips of him soliciting sex from a transgendered prostitute were released—a stark contrast to Ocean's artistic and eloquent coming out letter. Mister Cee received unreserved support from his radio station, Hot 97, and his peers. However, Mister Cee is a DJ, an instrumental part of hip-hop but not as representative of the culture as rappers. To add even further complication, Mister Cee is still hesitant to claim a gay or bisexual identity (“DJ Mister C...”). In a political climate where gay marriage is a genuine legislative priority, probably for the first time, and gay rights are universal discussion points, there is a paradigm shift in American culture as a whole towards acceptance of LGBT people. Arts and culture will naturally reflect this shift. However, before we have representatives within hip-hop candidly speaking of their experiences as gay men, hip-hop as a culture must reshape its narrow definitions of sexuality, especially masculinity.

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