Intersectionality in Afrofuturism

Frank Ocean came as a breath of fresh air to the hip hop community. His individuality was seen as both artistic and personably different from the rest. He settled into the hip hop and rap community with a sound unique to the rest, ethereal, and with a sense of new age hope and as a disillusioned response to the modern society in 2011. Ocean appeared to have nestled into his place in the hip hop community quite nicely as a new and refreshing artist, when in 2012 Ocean yet again rose above the normality of his surrounding peers. Frank Ocean released a letter, in true 2012 fashion, on tumblr, outing himself and admitting that his first love, and most influential love was with a man. The world may have appeared, comparatively to some, more accepting of the LGBTQ+ community in 2012, however, the hypersexualized hip hop community’s storylines revolved around heteronormativity and an immunity to existence outside of any gender norms. Around the same time, Janelle Monáe was already established and on her second album, tux and all, existing as a black woman outside of the norms of society. Around 2012, she somewhat admitted to her queerness explaining, in her typical afro-futuristic explanation that she only dates ‘androids’. More currently, she has defined herself as both pansexual and bisexual, but at the time hesitated to bluntly explain her sexuality, differing from Ocean in this fashion. In both of these artists’ instances they have gone against, not only society’s grain, but also what is widely accepted in their community. They’ve not only gone against the norm but also the concept of what ‘should be’. Both have experienced reactions of distaste, and have given responses of enlightenment, pride, and the triumphant tone of an afro-futuristic feeling of celebration for their individuality rather than shame. Frank Ocean and Janelle Monáe showcase the afro-futuristic ideals that blackness transcends past a singular identity. They exemplify this overcoming of binaries by defining their intersectional identities of queerness and blackness as qualities that are not purely a burden, but rather fluid identifiers that gives their lives a larger essence than one that functions within harsh restrictions, as exemplified in the songs of these artists.

Both Monáe and Ocean epitomize Afrofuturism as they recognize the negative portrayals of African Americans. They develop a perspective instead, that recognizes and does not attempt to belittle the black experience, but rather rises past it with perseverance and a prideful tone. Frank Ocean exemplifies the often, negative, portrayal of black men in society, in parallel to his own existence as one, in his song “Chanel”. He questions the antagonist, in this case, “12”, who is treating him, a grown person, as if he is “12”, and then questions how they can be “looking up to me and talking down”. Firstly, Ocean recognizes that he is being viewed as naturally inferior to the antagonist. He explains, with his pun in the use of “12”, that he is being looked down upon for merely his existence as a black man, and thus being assumed to be inferior. This aspect to “Chanel” aligns with the realistic tone Afrofuturism takes towards the black experience. Ocean, in line with afro-futuristic beliefs, is not shirking aside the negative perceptions placed upon black people, but instead recognizing them. He then follows up this recognition with the exclamatory question “Can't you see I am the big man? (Big man) God level I am the I am.” This question followed by an exclamation, exemplifies Ocean’s afro-futuristic perspective, that his, and universally all, African American identities are much grander than the belittled tropes put forth by discriminatory people such as, in this case, “12”. Ocean showcases with this statement following his recognition of belittlement, that instead he will rise above the discrimination. He puts forth the afro-futuristic idea that despite society’s lack of recognition, he can fully recognize himself, with confidence, as a person of much grander dignity such as a “God”, and not someone with the dignity of a 12 year old. This acknowledgment of the overly critical judgements of African Americans in conjunction with refusal to believe it to be so, showcases that Frank Ocean’s place is inherently afro-futuristic.

Janelle Monáe completes the same pattern of recognition followed by a response of triumph in her song “Crazy, Classic, Life”. She questions “Remember when they told you I was too black for ya?”, a prompt that aligns with Ocean’s, and the afro-futuristic ideals that one should realistically distinguish society’s negative tropes of blackness. She fully recognizes the negative perceptions, even with a blunt and assured tone, questioning whether the antagonist remembers when her race’s existence was wrongly seen and is still wrongly seen as a definitive fault. Monáe then follows up this question with the observation “And now my black poppin' like a bra-strap on ya”. This observation showcases the turn-around described in Afrofuturistic works, amongst Ocean, Monáe and many others. Monáe, in this case, is even using typically feminine imagery to explain that her identity as a black woman is something that now empowers her, rather than in the past when it belittled her. This change in acceptance of racial identity parallels many women’s change from seeing bras as something taboo to something empowering, as present in Monáe simile. This proclamation puts forth an ideal that recognizes that the black existence is and can be an existence much grander than an undesirable identity, and instead one that functions with a sense of pride that is not belittled by negative perceptions.

Frank Ocean and Janelle Monáe then again exemplify Afro-futuristic ideals as they exist away from the typical binaries of sexuality and gender, and then portrays this fluidity not as a toxic eccentricity but rather as a uniqueness that harbors something much grander. This grandness comes as they are existing not in line with the trope that blackness must overpower any other form of identity, but rather as an intersectional ideal that should not necessitate disapproval from oneself. Ocean describes his fluidity of sexuality in “Chanel”, as he explains the dynamics in the life of someone who does not esteem identities as something that holds precedence over the entirety of one’s character. He describes sexuality not as a binary, but rather as something more fluid, which like other elements described in “Chanel”, (and the literal visual of the Chanel logo) is multifaceted and does not need to be bound to only one identity. Ocean explains “my guy pretty like a girl, and he got fight stories to tell. I see both sides like Chanel…” which indicates that firstly, he participates in a queer relation with another man, and therefore that his black existence does not precede that he must fall into any trope of black masculinity, which is especially present in the hip hop community. As Ocean points out, an individual has many aspects to them, not just one identity such as being “pretty” in line with feminine norms or aggressive as in line with typical male depictions. Ocean, instead, brings forth the idea that individuals are transcendent of just one identity, as such is present with Afrofuturism. This ideal of sexuality and gender norms transcending expectations falls in line with the Afro-futuristic concept that the black existence is much more than an undeviating persona that is stuck in the binaries that an unjust society places upon them, but rather is a multidimensional life that should not be hindered by the expectations of a singular identity.

Monáe creates a similar empowering portrayal of identity transcending the limitations place by society in her song “Make Me Feel”, and in differentiation to Ocean sheds light on the intersectionality of disenfranchisement in race, sexual orientation, *and* gender inequality. She states that she’s “powerful, with a little bit of tender, an emotional, sexual bender…” In parallel to Ocean’s explanation of how an individual is more than the stereotypes place upon their partial identity, Monáe also expresses her own existence as multifaceted. She describes herself as being both “powerful” and “tender”, traits of differing ends of the spectrum of what each gender should adhere to. With this opposition, Monáe is expressing the empowering ideal, comparably to Afrofuturism ideals, that an individual can and has every right to be much more than the stereotypes or expectations of them. More significantly, as a queer African American woman, binaries are placed upon Monáe much more harshly. Her expectation is that in which she should inherently fall into line with societal norms of femininity, but in true Afro-futuristic fashion, Monáe’s empowerment comes in recognizing that humans are much more than a singular portrayal. She also mentions a “sexual bender”, yet again exemplifying her own need to not adhere to the normality of women, in this case the precedent that women’s sexuality cannot nor should not be open, vocalized, and non-restrictive. For these reasons, Monáe exemplifies the Afro-futuristic tactic of empowerment that puts forth the idea that an individual, specifically a black individual is much more than the strict and limited binaries placed on them, but is instead a multifaceted individual whose life is much grander and limitless than the stereotypes of African Americans.

Frank Ocean and Janelle Monáe both embody how Afrofuturism is used as a means of empowerment. Both showcase in their music how black existence is one that is *not* a singular identity that cannot respectfully intersect with others outside of its harsh restrictions. Monáe and Ocean instead showcase through their portrayal of pride in their African American identity and its struggles that they are much more than the stereotypes placed upon them. They do not shirk the realism of the struggles of racism, but instead recognize them, and rise above the difficulties with a tone of resilience and triumph instead. The two may differ, in certain portrayals of their identities, as their genders differ, however, their portrayal of being queer as black artists parallel each other. This parallel comes across especially so as the two utilize the Afro-futuristic framework to enrich the ideal that an individual’s identity can transcend past expectations and binaries. Frank Ocean and Janelle Monáe, undoubtedly, are icons in popular culture that showcase how Afrofuturism can empower one to realize the beauty in their identities, and develop a sense of pride, despite the discrimination faced.

Frank Ocean. “Chanel.”

Janelle Monáe. “Crazy, Classic, Life.”

Janelle Monáe. “Make Me Feel.”