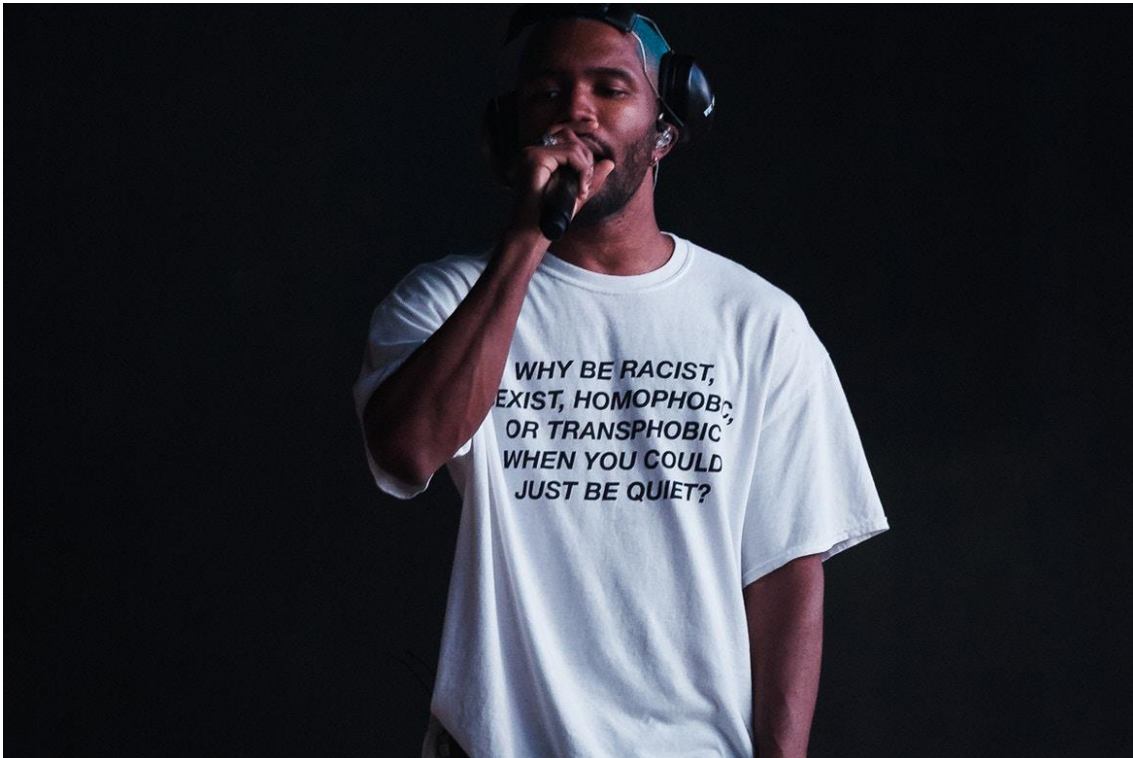


Poets and Thugs

by Silvia Bombardini



Frank Ocean at Panorama Music Festival on July 28, 2017

“This dark diction has become America’s addiction / Those who ain’t even black use it”. This is how a spoken word poem read by Malik Yusef puts it, at the end of Kanye West’s song *Crack Music*. But it’s not just America’s, it’s the whole world’s. From its humble beginnings in the post-industrial South Bronx of 1973, hip-hop culture and its *dark diction*, rap music, have spread to all continents and reach further still. *“Just about every country on the planet seems to have developed its own local rap scene”* wrote National Geographic back in 2002. In the New York of the 70s rap was the voice of side-lined communities, of the city’s Black and Latino youth. Literally so: some say that hip hop’s distinctive vernacular began as a wilful rejection of the racial hierarchy of language, which held the English spoken by whites as a superior form of cultured speech. But minorities and disaffected youth in need of a voice are found throughout the world, and ever more of them find one in rap to speak out against racism or vocalise their dreams. That hip hop was always supple enough to welcome foreign stimuli and adapt to localised conditions is arguably what made its fortune as a global

movement, spawning a multitude of regional subgenres. It is also what allowed rap music to survive and thrive in the age of the web and peer-to-peer file sharing.

It is no secret that in the new millennium the music industry as a whole has suffered greatly from the advent of digital distribution and streaming services, both legal and non. But as physical music sales continue to drop and the importance of ticketed concerts to rise, young rappers from far away neighbourhoods don't have to seek out the approval of record companies to share their music with the widest public, and can make a name for themselves online. The blogosphere has birthed new microgenres, too. Cloud rap for example, that Highsnobiety defines by *"its reliance on ethereal, New Age-like atmospheric and sedated beats over decipherable lyrics and speedy rapping styles"*, tracing its lineage to the 'chopped and screwed' remixing technique that emerged in Houston in the 90s. Yung Lean, a then 17-year-old cloud rapper from Sweden, rose to fame via YouTube in 2013, and went on to tour around Europe and North America with his Sad Boys crew. As their alias suggests, sadness is a prominent emotion in Lean's songs, which is another new development in hip-hop – the *sad rap* tag has popped up on music databases and social networks. *"It's more acceptable than ever for boys and men to show their sadness. Call it a condition of the internet age or simply evolution"* notes FACT Magazine, *"even in the traditionally more macho milieu of hip-hop, where showing the chinks in your armour was once a sign of weakness"*. A few years earlier it had been Odd Future, a former hip-hop collective led by a teenage Tyler, the Creator, who used to release all of their mixtapes for free on Tumblr. Soon their fan base grew to the point that Odd Future were able to start their own label, Odd Future Records, in partnership with Sony's RED Distribution. Tyler's own lyrics, if one can get past the extravagantly violent fantasies and offensive slur that rightfully got him in trouble at the beginning, and that he has since gradually outgrown, were usually angsty tales of suburban adolescence in a broken home, rife with rage and loneliness and ennui. *"I created O.F. cause I feel we're more talented / Than 40 year old rappers talking about Gucci / When they have kids they haven't seen in years"* he famously boasts in *Bastard*. Tumblr was also the means by which Frank Ocean, himself a one-time Odd Future member, penned in 2012 an open letter addressing his sexuality, and one of the few remaining taboos in the hip-hop community. It heralded, with exceptions, a new age of acceptance. Rap had long been considered one of the least LGBT-friendly genres in music, with widespread homophobia often condoned in the lyrics of mainstream performers, such as Eminem. Ocean, now an established R&B artist, performed on stage at the Panorama Music Festival in New York last month wearing a t-shirt that spelled out in caps 'WHY BE RACIST, SEXIST, HOMOPHOBIC OR TRANSPHOBIC WHEN YOU COULD JUST BE QUIET?'. Designed by 18-year-old Kayla Robinson, who identifies as Afro-Latina and bisexual, the tee wants to address all forms of hate speech – but hip hop's loudest lyricists may well have been on Ocean's mind. Now ever more frequently rappers are found making amends for things they've said in the past, and his coming out has emboldened others'. Most recently, possibly, Tyler's own, who in July released *I Ain't Got Time!* in which he raps: *"Next line will have 'em like 'Woah' / I've been kissing white boys since 2004"*.

It's not just the music that's changing though. The macho masculinities of yore are making way in contemporary hip hop to new and unforeseen forms of gender performativity, regardless of an artist's sexual orientation.

Rappers in dresses – be it Young Thug or Jaden Smith – no longer make headlines. Against all odds, a gender-fluid style has become acceptable in this still typically male-dominated industry. For predilection or shock value, a new generation of rappers wear what they want. Outside the hip-hop bubble though, this doesn't strike as particularly progressive. Rather, it's a throwback to different genres and times long gone: Kurt Cobain wore a floral tea dress on the cover of *The Face*, and it was 1993. Few of them had been born then, but that reference may not be lost on these rappers either. Another trademark of Cobain's looks, his plastic oval shades, have recently enjoyed a comeback as *clout googles*, a catchphrase coined by Denzel Curry in a YouTube clip. Urban Dictionary now describes clout googles as “a pair of white sunglasses that mumble rappers wear”, mumble rap being, in turn, a term used to describe the propensity for unintelligible lyrics among a selected group of contemporary rappers, like Denzel Curry or Playboi Carti. At the risk of stating the obvious however, Kurt Cobain was white. The relative safety when wearing feminine clothes, the opportunity to sing introspective songs or express a measure of vulnerability, still count as major achievements in the context of rap, and speak volumes about the evolution of hip-hop culture in recent decades. It wasn't so long ago that Twitter beefs were real street fights. In 1991, while Nirvana were recording *Nevermind*, New York witnessed the highest number of homicides in the city's recorded history to date. In 1992, the West Coast saw six days of riots commonly known as the Los Angeles uprising, in protest of police brutality and institutional discrimination against racial minorities. It was the height of the crack epidemic across the United States, and simultaneously, the rise of gangsta rap to international fame.



Playboi Carti

As Mark Greif points out in his essay *Learning to Rap*, with the genre's commercial success came an alternative way to escape poverty than dealing drugs, for the country's jobless African-American youth. Their lyrics reflected

both: the dangers of daily life, and their aspirations of wealth. It was no longer the hip hop of the 70s, focused on the community and empowerment. Gangsta rap was music to be sold, and to be sold worldwide it needed to appeal to white audiences too. “A hip-hop that seemed to evince a conspicuous will to capitalism – with an extremity that no black American music [...] had quite shown before” writes Greif, “what stood out most to non-fans was the naming of white-owned luxury products, consumer logos and brands”. Worn in piles, these were the markers and talismans of a rapper’s breakthrough. Greif singles out *Crack Music* as the song that best sums up this moment of transition, from drugs to rap, though he concedes that Kanye West “belongs to a postcrack generation”. Indeed, it was released in 2005. But it seems that even when the crisis was back under control, the materialism it inspired lived on in hip hop. West certainly fits Tyler’s profile of a rapper in his 40s talking about Gucci. In *Niggas in Paris*, 2011, he shares a verse with JAY-Z that goes: “What’s Gucci, my nigga? What’s Louis, my killa? / What’s drugs, my dealer? What’s that jacket, Margiela?”. Albeit in all fairness, they’re both reportedly very good dads.

It was still in New York in the early 90s, as legend has it, that Tommy Hilfiger ran into Grand Puba and the Brand Nubian at the baggage claim of Kennedy Airport. Up until then, hip hop had never much impressed the fashion world, though not for lack of trying. With the notable exception of Adidas, who signed a million-dollar endorsement deal with Run-D.M.C. in the wake of the success of their 1986 single *My Adidas*. But sportswear and high-end were still very separate realms at the time: the Lo-Lifes, a Brooklyn gang from the late 80s named after, and in worship of, Polo Ralph Lauren, never got such recognition – although admittedly, theirs was a worship that often entailed shoplifting. But in the 90s, with gangsta rap in the mainstream, rappers were growing rich, and there’s more than a good chance that Puba and his crew had paid for the XXL Tommy Hilfiger gear they were sporting head to toe at JFK. We are to believe that the meeting was something of a revelation for Hilfiger. Soon he started gifting clothes for rappers to wear on their albums’ covers, and they would shout out their thanks to him in lyrics. On March 19, 1994, Snoop Dogg, then known as Snoop Doggy Dogg, performed on *Saturday Night Live* wearing an oversize Hilfiger rugby. The shirt allegedly sold out the next day, and more fashion labels caught on – rappers were not just *nouveaux riches*, they had become tastemakers. This new insight on fashion’s part led to many memorable highlights before the end of the decade. One for the history books came in 1996, when hip-hop legend Tupac Shakur, who would be killed a few months later, walked the runway for Gianni Versace, who would be killed the following year, in a shiny golden crushed-velvet suit.

In the twenty years since hip hop has only been gaining momentum, with fashion at its heels. Multitasking, as they’re wont to do, rappers have stepped into designers’ shoes, and every hip-hop artist worth their salt today has a clothing label to their name to match. Even Tyler, the Creator, even Yung Lean. Truth to be told, rappers’ earliest collections – the Wu-Tang Clan’s Wu Wear, JAY-Z’s Rocawear from the late 90s – look almost wilfully uninspired in comparison. As if the artists had wanted it to be clear that they weren’t giving this much thought, and where their priorities lay. The creative gap was bridged by Pharrell Williams in 2004, when he worked on a collection of sunglasses for Louis Vuitton together with Nigo, the founder of A Bathing Ape. It was called *Millionaire*. The next year, Williams and Nigo would be setting up Billionaire Boys Club, and in 2008 he was back

at Louis Vuitton to design this time a jewellery line. The gauntlet had been thrown down, then. Rappers, who have always had a soft spot for competition, began to take their fashion more seriously. Nowadays hip-hop artists are whom heritage brands count on to dust off the cobwebs and engage younger demographics. A case in point: in January this year an American lifestyle company founded in 1983, Nautica, named Lil Yatchy, a 20-year-old mumble rapper from Atlanta, as creative designer for 2017. All they would seem to have in common is the seafaring theme, and Lil Yatchy doesn't even sail himself, just calls his crew the Sailing Team. The thing is, this unlikely partnership will likely work, if not for Yatchy's sartorial skills then for his 3.7 million Instagram followers.



Run-D.M.C. in Adidas, late 80s

Between one collection and the next, rappers still have the music to show off their fashion literacy. The mentions of brands in hip-hop songs have multiplied, as proved by tracks like *Niggas in Paris* or *Fahion Killa*, where A\$AP Rocky lists 27 different ones. They've become more refined, too. By name-dropping Margiela or Ann Demeulemeester, respectively, West and Rocky go one step further than the bling-bling aesthetic hip hop has traditionally favoured, to position themselves as fashion insiders with discerning taste. Their influence extends not just to their fans, but to other rappers as well. Genius.com, the lyrics website, observes that labels mentioned by either artist from 2010 onwards have subsequently come up more often in hip-hop songs in general: they call these "*The Kanye Bump*" and "*The Rocky Effect*". More or less since then, style-conscious rappers have turned into a regular presence at fashion shows, and can also be counted among the industry's favourite models. Like Shakur before him, Desiigner, who despite his stage name does not yet have a clothing line of his own, took to the catwalk this season for Philipp Plein's fall 2017 show. The show was kicked off with a live performance of *If I Ruled the World* by Nas, while Fat Joe sat front row. And Pharrell, who meanwhile has

become, among other things, G-Star RAW's co-owner and *Head of Imagination*, and stars in the brand's fall 2017 campaign, had earlier this year been the first man to ever appear in a handbag campaign for Chanel.

Let's consider this last one for a minute. A related article was published in WWD upon its release, and it questions Karl Lagerfeld about it, bringing up in particular Pharrell's habitual wearing of non-genuine Chanel necklaces. One could call them fakes, except, says Lagerfeld, "*he has them copied in real gemstones*", then proceeds to pronounce himself "*flattered*". This is interesting for a number of reasons, not least that a counterfeit can pass for flattery, in the eyes of Chanel's creative director, if such counterfeit is expensive enough. But perhaps more curious still is that Pharrell Williams would choose to wear a copy instead of the real thing while also making it clear that he could easily afford either. To understand his motivations we should perhaps revisit a legendary character in the history of hip-hop fashion, from a time before the fortuitous meet-up of Hilfiger and Puma, before hip hop and fashion's fruitful alliance. From 1982 to 1992, Daniel *Dapper Dan* Day run a fabled boutique on New York's 125th Street. Open 24 hours a day, it sold flamboyant made-to-order bootlegs peppered with logos of European luxury brands: Louis Vuitton, Gucci, and yes, Chanel. Prices weren't cheap, and at the height of his fame Dapper Dan is said to have made several thousand dollars a day, dressing up loyal customers who at the time were getting richer and richer – be they athletes, drug dealers, or rappers. This wasn't a clientele fashion labels were actively courting, to put it mildly, regardless of their newfound spending power. So that newly wealthy hip-hop artists would sometimes still prefer paying a visit to Dan rather than feeling unwelcome in uptown high-end flagship stores. This was, in itself, an act of defiance: to disregard *white-owned luxury products* in favour of sumptuous Harlem-based fakes. Clearly, rappers have gotten more comfortable wearing those over the years, but I personally would like to believe that when Pharrell opts for the knockoff it's in a similar spirit, with perhaps a side of nostalgia. That for all of his success, business ventures and ads, he hasn't forgotten what hip hop once stood for, and where it comes from. Eventually, the lawsuits that forced Dapper Dan to shut shop came from those same luxury brands, after pictures of Mike Tyson in a Fendi jacket no one had ever seen before got to the press. By the way, Karl Lagerfeld was already the creative director of Fendi at the time. Perhaps he hadn't known how much that jacket was worth.

How things have changed. Today fashion preens instead of pressing charges, and the industry's respect for hip-hop culture borders on adulation. The moment when this becomes cultural appropriation is, as always, a matter of perspective. Marc Jacobs, who has faced such accusations in the past, penned in advance what amounts to a love letter to hip hop, the inspiration of his fall 2017 collection. "*This collection is my representation of the well-studied dressing up of casual sportswear*" reads a statement he published on Instagram, "*it is an acknowledgement and gesture of my respect for the polish and consideration applied to fashion from a generation that will forever be the foundation of youth culture street style*". Across the spectrum of the menswear collections, callbacks to hip-hop style are present this season from Astrid Andersen to Landlord, the latter going as far as screen-printing album covers on hoodies and shirts. Interestingly, Dapper Dan was cited as one of the references of Louis Vuitton's fall 2017 mens show, which also features an extensive collaboration with Supreme – that Louis Vuitton had issued a cease-and-desist order against, back in 2000, for their misuse of

the house's monogram on skateboard decks. What really caught the public's attention though, was when Gucci rather faithfully reproduced one of Dan's bootleg Louis Vuitton's jacket. After its debut in the label's resort 2018 collection, the puff-sleeved bomber caused something of an outcry on social media, until Gucci later confirmed that it had, in fact, been "*an homage*". The upside of this is that with a delay of about a quarter of a century, this distinguished tailor's talent is being recognised at last. Nowadays, Dapper Dan himself can be found coaching future fashion stars. Indeed, he was appointed as a mentor for the upcoming spring 2018 VFiles show.