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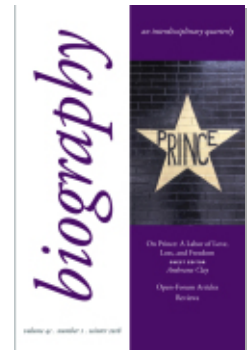
## Introduction: On Prince: A Labor of Love, Loss, and Freedom

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## INTRODUCTION

### ON PRINCE: A LABOR OF LOVE, LOSS, AND FREEDOM

ANDREANA CLAY

I've been thinking a lot about pain management lately, or how we, as Black people, manage pain—individually and in community. How we manage centuries of pain, trauma, and loss (joy, as well), and how that affects who we are. How those histories, collective traumas, and experiences translate to our everyday experience and understanding of who we are as a “people.” And how do we organize to manage our pain? Do we come together or stay in the silent, solo spaces many of us hold onto? Perhaps, more importantly, what or who helps us manage pain? Soothes us and our souls? Acts as medicine so that we can carry on to the next day? Acts as medicine so that we can finally be free.

When I think about these questions, my mind, ultimately, lands on April 21, 2016. The day that soothsayer for many, Prince, died. The moment that changed the day-to-day of many of us—including the writers of the essays gathered here—and forced us to examine our own histories and to bear witness to the collective memories, histories, and pain of others: a dialectic dance between the solo, quiet spaces we held him in and the shared spaces we gathered in to dance, sing, and grieve. The day Prince took his final breath was also a day he spent trying to manage pain. A day he tried to fight the pain that consumed his body. That's what he was mentally and physically doing, managing the years of physical pain his body had endured for a number of reasons. And it was pain he accrued while giving so much pleasure, proving the antidote for others, perhaps especially Black folks. Or maybe queers—whether in terms of sexuality or social position. Before and after the release of *For You* in 1978, Prince allowed us to imbibe him to feel better, to make it to the next day in all our shapes and forms.

I was one of those people. One of the ones who took him on and in, completely. At first, as a salve, finally finding someone who made it OK to

be me. And even kind of sexy, kind of hot to be me, a light-skinned, mixed-race Black woman. The kind he was and the kind he liked, apparently. The three other writers in this cluster—Greg Tate, Steven W. Thrasher, and Scott Poulson-Bryant—are also Black people who took him on and took him in. And I think that Blackness is significant. We weren't just "fans" but, rather, Black people who stood in relationship to Prince (and other Black artists) along with his role and position in (Black) popular culture. And his position as a light-skinned, (hetero)sexually ambivalent, and ambitious truth teller was one that challenged us to think about Blackness and life in ways that were not generally prescribed. A transgressive act. In recent years, when he made explicit statements like "Like books and Black Lives, albums still matter" (at the 2015 Grammy Awards), he sounded more "political" in a traditional sense of the word, and in the current context I argue that Prince's "politics" appeared on many of his albums, specifically in the ways he asked us to think about life. Whether "being in charge of this life and the next" ("Sexy M. F."), or that "life can be so nice" ("Life Can Be So Nice"), Prince pushed us to think about what was presented to us, what we accepted, and what we believed about what our lives could be like. For Black people in the moment "post"-Civil Rights, this was liberating, not only as a healing agent, as music often is, but also as a way to remember that there was something different out there for those of us on the outskirts and, sometimes, on the inside.

In the following pages, the four of us describe this dance between pain and pain management through our specific relationships to and understandings of Prince. Each piece was a response to an invitation to discuss Prince months after his death for the Prince Revue panel at the American Studies Association annual meeting, organized by Nicole Fleetwood. Though this was an academic conference, all of us on the panel (which also included Josh Kun and Daphne Brooks) diverted from that frame and spoke to the ways that Prince touched us, intimately as Black (queer) people, in the way that life writing allows us to, creating theories grounded in our personal experiences of music, sexuality, gender, and race. This dance between the individual and collective is critical in our discussion of Prince, as this was how he approached and talked about Blackness. Like other artists before him, Prince enunciated a Black sexuality and sensuality that contradicted, taunted, and shattered the ways that Blackness (and Black sex) had been offered to mainstream audiences as hypersexualized or predatory. His Blackness and sexuality were sometimes presented as his and his alone, yet because his audience was so much larger than previous artists', it also became a representation of and a possibility for all of us. His stardom grew at a time (the 1980s) when Black representation and leadership had shifted, almost entirely, to popular culture. Artists

like Michael Jackson, Prince, and, later, rappers like KRS-One were stand-ins for the “absence” of, or sometimes alongside, Black leadership and Black leaders like Jesse Jackson. The pieces in this cluster speak to this positionality.

Writer Greg Tate starts us off by mapping a biography of Black music and culture from the “Sorrow Songs” of enslavement and early twentieth-century “freedoms” to the jazz and R&B of the mid-century. A perfect setting for the birth of our own otherworldly “Starman,” Prince. An artist deeply influenced, as many of us were, by the Black political movements of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, which informed his music and outlook. But Tate also draws out the importance of the role of otherness as a path to leadership by invoking the queer science fiction writer Samuel R. Delany to explore the position that Prince inhabits in Black music, Black culture, and Black life.

*Guardian* writer Steven W. Thrasher experienced the monolith of Prince firsthand when he was asked by his editors to reflect on the life and death of Prince in a 2016 essay shortly after Prince’s passing. As someone who writes on race, culture, and “politics,” Thrasher didn’t think that Prince or music was his particular strength—until he drew on his own personal collection of albums and remembered his young, queer self in relationship to Prince. Letter after letter to Thrasher after his essay appeared identified similar fans who were touched deeply, privately by Prince’s reach. Perhaps more than any other of our essays, Thrasher’s account of the collective response to his individual writing demonstrates how meaning—what Prince meant to people—emerged in a dialectic, a dialogue.

The last two essays, by Scott Poulson-Bryant and myself, focus extensively on our personal experiences to bring out the queer, gendered, and intergenerational aspects of Prince’s music and Black sexuality. Prince left doors open for his fans, playing on the ways his blurring of gender lines—performing on NBC’s *Midnight Special* in bikini briefs, thigh-high boots, and long, straight hair—he dared us to question what his preference might be at the same time that he invited us in to play. Poulson-Bryant explores this moment through letters to his younger colleagues/friends as a graduate student at Harvard, marking the embodied importance of Prince for him as a young, queer, Black man listening to his early discography of *Dirty Mind* and *Controversy* (through *Lovesexy*). Like the other authors who move beyond Prince and his music, Poulson-Bryant demonstrates the significance of an artist in opening up the possibility of queered sex—as he states, “And he doesn’t care if she brings her other guy into their bed? That dude is now ‘sleeping in between the two’ of them?—Did they just SHARE homeboy, locate themselves in the ‘every which way’ potentialities of a threesome?” (19)—for a young Black queer boy who had few role models for how to be. At the same

time, Poulson-Bryant's piece also locates the difference in queer experience and the necessity for queered Black role models: his friends barely recognize who Prince is, personally, while at the same time, his enduring presence, or perhaps legacy, resonates because their parents, Scott's contemporaries, held him so close. Just how close we held Prince, or hold Prince, reverberated in my bones the moment I found out that Prince had died, taking me back to another place that I hold dear but haven't been able to hold as close. I was flooded with memories of "my girls," the ones I loved, who loved me back through and within our love for Prince. Queer in the back and forth between who we were *supposed* to be as young, Black, mixed girls and what we enjoyed, who we chose to be with, and how Prince guided us. Held us through it all.

In the following pages, the four of us explore the life, death, and love of—and the love that is—Prince Rogers Nelson. And maybe that is the strongest salve for Black people: love. Or, as Prince might phrase it, "Lovesexy." And that's what he was giving us in his challenge for another life. For endless possibilities. Because, as Fred Moten argues, the "deep-down love, the bone-deep love, convergence of death and love, memory and narrative (that's what recognition is), that accompanies the miscegenative origin of black/American identity is exceeded by another love: that of/for freedom" (71). Prince encouraged us to be free in all the ways we wanted to be, and we met/meet that challenge in myriad ways, knowing or holding onto, as he told us, "Love is the only way till my dying day" ("I No").

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