PROJECT MUSE®

Obituarizing Black Maleness, Obituarizing Prince

Steven W. Thrasher

Biography, Volume 41, Number 1, Winter 2018, pp. 9-16 (Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/bio.2018.0004>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/690274>

OBITUARIZING BLACK MALENESS, OBITUARIZING PRINCE

STEVEN W. THRASHER

On April 21, 2016, I was leaving a three-hour graduate seminar on Atlantic slavery when I noticed multiple voicemails, text messages, and emails from my editors at the *Guardian*. I had already spent enough time steeped in Black death for a day, but while I had been in class, the Purple One had passed away.

Prince Nelson Rogers had already given us a scare when his plane made an emergency landing a few days before. But this time the Kid danced offstage for good, leaving our world a little less colorful, a little less soulful—and a lot lonelier. In both my journalism and academic writing lives, I deal with race, Black culture, and sexuality, but the temporalities couldn't be more different. It is possible to work on an academic article for two to three years, but in responsive journalism, I sometimes get two to three hours to turn out an article, if I'm lucky. Writing obituaries isn't just for information in digital journalism; it is expected to play an immediate role in people's ability to mourn emotionally.

Processing that Prince had actually died, with the clock ticking to pump out a reaction piece, was daunting. I tried to get out of it. I told my editors, Alex Needham and Lanre Bakare, that I didn't have anything of value to say. I questioned myself and wondered if Prince had really had enough of an effect on my life to justify my writing anything at all. I thought with intimidation about the most beautiful piece of musical-feature-writing-as-racial-political-eulogy I had ever read: Greg Tate's "The Man in Our Mirror," which was published on the cover of the *Village Voice* just days after Michael Jackson died. Jackson was arguably the closest person to being a musical sibling in genius talent to Prince, and Tate was a maestro of music writing. Music writing is not my forte, but that did not excuse me, my editors gently encouraged me, from taking on the assignment. I had a relationship with readers in writing about race and sexuality, and I needed to see what I could say to them in this profoundly sad moment of American history.

Tate opened his Michael Jackson eulogy by writing,

What Black American culture—musical and otherwise—lacks for now isn't talent or ambition, but the unmistakable presence of some kind of spiritual genius: the sense that something other than or even more than human is speaking through whatever fragile mortal vessel is burdened with repping for the divine, the magical, the supernatural, the ancestral.

Like Michael, Prince *was* such a vessel, and losing him is a stab to Black America when we need such spiritual guidance in the face of daily attacks on *our* bodily vessels as much as ever; indeed, both singers' deaths were memorialized in New York City with multiple dance parties, from Brooklyn to Harlem, with an excuse for Black bodies to dance when we had felt able to march, but not dance, after the deaths of so many other Black men in recent years. If Michael and Prince embodied the spiritual genius of the ancestors in spades, Barack Obama has been in many ways sorely lacking it. It is worth noting that two of Black America's most cherished artists have passed during the administration of the first Black president. Obama has been a champion of Black artists, but he embodies the talent and ambition Tate is writing about far more than he, as the American president or even as a post-president, can or will ever embody a spiritual genius of the divine.

I am glad that my editors pushed me. I went home, saw that I had no fewer than seven Prince LPs in my record collection, realized Prince had indeed touched me greatly, lined up the LPs next to my record player, started playing the first one (*Around the World in a Day* from 1985), tried to channel Patron Saint of Music Writing Tate, and got to work writing about that sexy motherfucker. In a couple of hours, I had written one of my most personal essays ever for the *Guardian*. The article, "Prince Broke All the Rules about What Black American Men Should Be," became for a while the most read story I'd ever published. I appeared on *Democracy Now!* the next morning, was bemused when parts of the story were translated into other languages, and for a day talked about Prince with media outlets around the world.

But the story's popularity had little to do with me, except insofar as I was able to express the ways in which Prince was able to help me to understand myself better in the world—a truth I simply didn't fully understand until I sat down to write it.

And it was a sentiment that millions or billions of people around the world shared.

In the essay, I wrote about one of my first conscious memories of Prince: of forcing my father to take me to buy the *Batdance* album. More than a quarter century later, Tim Burton's 1989 film *Batman* is a forgettable mess. But I

mostly remember it for its accompanying concept album *Batdance*, for which “Prince wrote a song about Batman that you can fuck to. Think about that,” as the writer Jeb Lund noted on that mournful day he died (@Mobute). I was twelve when I got my hands on that *Batdance* album after not being allowed to see *Purple Rain* due to its racy nature. I was confused by the sexual lines on the album’s eponymous track, like a sample of Jack Nicholson saying, “This town needs an enema” (I did not quite know what an enema was, but I knew it was something dirty) and sticking a seven inch in a computer (since my Apple computer only took 3.5 and 5.25 inch disks, I knew this was referring to something else).

Like Prince, I was a light-skinned Black boy doing my best to understand myself racially in the world. Unlike Prince, I was extremely nervous about letting anyone know too much about my sexuality. And even though I had already taken ballet lessons and performed in the world’s worst amateur production of *Cats*, it would take me an additional decade to understand that I was queer. But even before I could form conscious thoughts of my sexuality being something other than what society wanted it to be—to be heterosexual enough to make me afraid of being too close to other Black men, macho enough to appear as a justifiable threat to police, but not so virile as to pose an actual threat to white women—Prince helped me to expand on who I could imagine being in the world in my body without being ashamed of it.

I didn’t think anyone would care about my particular story about connecting to Prince because there are fans who are far more dedicated than I am. I had never seen him live, and I never interviewed him. And yet I got emails from readers around the world. People poured their hearts out to me, writing to me with details of their lives in as intimate a manner as anyone had ever written to me. A Japanese woman wrote to me about how Prince had helped her to understand her sexuality and gender outside the realm of how she felt both were prescribed for her in Tokyo. A white heterosexual man in Australia wrote to me about how Prince allowed him to feel closer to other men, including his own father. Many queer people of color (mostly, but not all, Black Americans) wrote to me about how Prince allowed them to inhabit their lives more fully. All of these letters held a similar quality in how they spoke to me as if they knew me and were approaching me at a wake to talk about our mutual friend who had just died.

But this makes sense. As Stuart Hall wrote, “Meaning is a dialogue—always only partially understood, always an unequal exchange” (4). Though Prince likely didn’t hear most of their side of the conversation, many people were in a years- or decade-long dialogue with Prince about what his music meant, who they understood him to be, and, perhaps most consequentially

for them, who they understood themselves to be. The meaning of his music was created in unequal ways, as Prince had the largest platform to say what it meant with one voice; yet, simultaneously, untold thousands or millions of people were saying what it meant in ways he couldn't control. And when the Purple One died, people around the world wanted to transform their dialogue with him into one with each in order (sometimes via my email inbox) to make meaning of Prince, his music, themselves, and each other. Even as Prince remained unknowable and mysterious, his art was so expansive it allowed us to feel like we knew him because it forced us to know ourselves better. From *Prince and For You* in 1978, to *Controversy* (1981), *Emancipation* (1996), and *Indigo Nights* (2008), Prince's music allowed us to roam around in its mystery in such a way that we could discover more about ourselves and the world.

In "I Would Die 4 U," Prince declares quite aggressively, "I'm not a woman/I'm not a man/I'm something you'll never understand"—a sentiment that rejects being categorized, but that also rejects ever being knowable to the listener. While inviting them to embrace feelings of gender fluidity and unknowability might in itself appeal to listeners, distancing himself as unknowable might be a turnoff. A bit later in the song, he also asserts, "I am not your lover/I am not your friend/I am something you'll never comprehend"—an even more direct way of keeping himself at a distance.

It is curious that Prince was a pop musician, and one of the best the world has ever known, for his music didn't fall into the trap of so much pop music. It was not produced with the kind of hegemonic, oppressive messaging of insipid songs meant to beat the masses into a submissive, limited form of thought with no space for themselves. Indeed, his song "Pop Life" opens with the lines, "What's the matter with your life/Is the Poverty bringing U down/Is the mailman jerking U 'round? Did he put your million dollar check/In someone else's box?" These lyrics sound more like country-western lyrics than anything you'd hear in a contemporary Beyoncé or Pharrell Williams chart-topper that demands the listener embrace "Love on Top" or feeling happy. Prince, on the other hand, seems either ambivalent or antagonistic toward the idea of a "pop life" in which "everybody needs a thrill/Pop life/we all got a space 2 fill." Indeed, given how he died, it is interesting to revisit how critical Prince is of a pop life that made him ask, "what U putting in your nose?/Is that where all your money goes . . . the river of addiction flows/U think it's hot, but there won't be no water/When the fire blows."

Prince's lyrics (and the aesthetic of his gender-bending, gender-queer outfits) gave space for listeners to imagine him, and themselves, as masculine, feminine, gender fluid, Black, American, and human in ways that didn't

dictate putting up sharp barriers and adhering to strict definitions. It also gave space for feeling sad and angry and economically vulnerable—emotions often conjured by the Blues, country, and hip-hop but rarely employed by pop.

“Those who choose to walk on love’s path are well served if they have a guide,” bell hooks wrote in her book *All About Love* (161). For many of us, Prince was a guide who served our ability to know and love ourselves and each other better. And for me, it wasn’t until he had died—and I looked at my record shelf, and I thought back on prancing to *Batdance*, and I smiled about all those moments of dancing to his music and talking about his inscrutable sexuality with queer and straight friends of all races—that I realized Prince had been a more important guide to me than I had consciously known.

I think so many readers reached out to me after my article on Prince was published because we are at an interesting moment in social media and in the evolution of how the United States and other societies discourse about race and gender. Indeed, thanks to the transnational force that is Black Twitter, racial and sexual identities are being deconstructed and formed across borders—much as Paul Gilroy theorized Blackness moved across borders in *The Black Atlantic*. And even though Prince himself is not an internet-born phenomenon and, compared to his global cultural reach, barely has any internet presence (he vehemently kept his work from being pirated or appearing on YouTube), his death was mourned in the public square of the internet. Prince had once found written language to be an inadequate medium for his name, and yet, by the time of his death, a digital public sphere had emerged with a kind of extensive vocabulary to talk about issues of race and identity in a more sophisticated manner than ever before . . . and, ironically, Prince had retreated from it.

Social media allows anyone blessed with literacy and privileged with an internet connection to debate what race, gender, and culture mean in our lives. Prince died about a year after Caitlyn Jenner came out as transgender and Rachel Dolezal claimed to be “transracial.” The nearness of these two incidents in American pop culture triggered pundits, researchers, and everyday tweeters to wrestle with what race, gender, and sexuality meant in our lives with a speed and on a scale never seen before. And when Prince—such an important embodied force for interrogating race and gender—succumbed to that inevitable human experience of death, we wanted to interact with each other to understand it, using a digital realm he’d largely shunned.

Since the initial shock of his transition, I’ve been thinking a lot about how Prince is beloved by people of all races the world over, and of how he is an artist especially of American Blackness and for Black people.

Little known to many people who haven't been there, but a huge part of the annual Burning Man festival in Nevada is that it is a place of mourning. The festival builds up all week to the burning of the giant man on Saturday night—a loud and bacchanalian affair—but it really ends on Sunday night with a burning of the festival's temple, which happens in silence. Every year, a temple is constructed so that people can write the names of dead ones on it and construct shrines to them in and around the enormous wooden structure. Then, the whole thing is torched (Thrasher, "Dust to Dust").

In 2016, the two people with the most shrines at the temple were David Bowie and Prince. Indeed, throughout the week, you could hear "Starman" and "Purple Rain" playing all around the playa, and there were more Prince music dance parties than for any other single musician—a testament to the ways that in even overwhelmingly white spaces (as Burning Man is), Black music can be actively imported and welcomed even as actual Black people living in Black bodies are not.

And Prince's music was often blaring out of the roving art cars that career around the Black Rock Desert where Burning Man happens. But pretty consistently, I noticed that whenever Prince's "Sexy M. F." or "Little Red Corvette" would drift in from a roving set of speakers on wheels, the Black people at Burning Man would lose their minds for it. I noticed this especially when I spent an evening riding around on the Jazz Camp's art car while it played nothing but Prince. When Black people would hear our tunes, they'd stop whatever they were doing, dance, follow the art car, and sometimes jump onto it. It filled us with irrepressible joy.

Meanwhile, the white people who heard Prince would either ignore it or clap for half a second and then go back to whatever they were doing. But Prince got such a visceral reaction out of Black people, they'd follow his voice like they had to jump onto the car playing his tunes to be at one with him. I was reminded of this reaction when I spoke to a Black friend of mine who deejayed a sex party where he played nothing but Prince. I asked him if he actually got to have sex himself while he was working. No, he hadn't, he told me: he was too busy playing Prince for the orgiastic revelers, which allowed him to claim he had "fucked them all!"

Prince's music is Black joy, movement, and sexuality embodied on earth. As sister Teresa of Ávila said to the Christians that "Christ has no body but yours / No hands, no feet on earth but yours," Prince's Black fans at Burning Man seemed to embody that Prince has no body now but *ours*, no feet on earth but *ours*—and so we must dance with them.

We have lost Prince when we may need him most. But fortunately, perhaps unlike at the dawn of the Obama presidency when Tate was writing

about Michael, Black America is *not* lacking obvious spiritual genius outside of an artist like Prince. The Black Lives Matter movement was founded by queer women of color, sustained by those living in abjection, and has been predicated on beautifully using the fragile mortal vessels of Black bodies. And it is every bit as steeped in a spiritual (if not always a *religious*) Black radical tradition as were Fannie Lou Hamer's, Martin Luther King's, and Malcolm X's struggles.

"Albums still matter," Prince said at the 2015 Grammy Awards. "Like books and Black Lives, albums still matter." It was great that he said that. It was great that Prince helped all of us (especially Black people) to think about and interrogate and unlock the intersectional ways that oppression plays out in our lives—and in ways that don't render art and literature irrelevant, but that mean that both are necessary for us to survive and thrive.

But now, more than ever, we have Prince in our hearts, but we also have the contemporary words of Kimberlé Crenshaw (who gave us "intersectionality") and Evelyn Higginbotham (who gave us "respectability politics") in our timelines. We got the historic voices of Fannie Lou Hamer and the radical MLK (the one calling for the end of the Vietnam War at Riverside Church) not just away in a library, but circulating in memes and on Black Twitter. Janelle Monáe is bringing the divine in song, *Hidden Figures*, and *Moonlight* alike, as is Beyoncé in funding graduate fellowships for women in art, literature, and African American studies (Tsioulcas).

Prince was a voice so rooted in Blackness and in gender-fluid sexuality; in this way, he was always rooted in a kind of honesty, which both revealed what he stood for and revealed what is suspect in the world. And in being true to the specifics of himself—in being true to what may have seemed at once obvious and mysterious—he allowed others from so many walks of life to be honest about the specifics about themselves and about the questions we all share.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT: *Biography* would like to thank Hal Leonard for the permission to reprint Prince lyrics in this essay. This essay quotes from "I Would Die 4 U" and "Pop Life." See the Lyric Acknowledgments in this issue for titles, writer credits, and copyright notices.

WORKS CITED

- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color." *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement*, edited by Kimberlé Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, Kendall Thomas, and Cornel West, New Press, 1995, pp. 357–83.
- Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Harvard UP, 1993.
- Hall, Stuart. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. Sage, 1997.

Higginbotham, Evelyn Brooks. *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920*. 1994. Harvard UP, 2006.

hooks, bell. *All About Love: New Visions*. Perennial, 2000.

@Mobute. "Prince wrote a song about Batman that you can fuck to. Think about that." *Twitter*, 21 Apr. 2016, 5:17 p.m., <https://twitter.com/mobute/status/723349869482643456>. Retrieved 13 May 2007.

Prince. "I Would Die 4 U." *Purple Rain*, Warner Bros. Records, 1984.

———. "Pop Life." *Around the World in a Day*, Warner Bros. Records, 1985.

Tate, Greg. "The Man in Our Mirror." *Village Voice*, 1 July 2009, <http://www.villagevoice.com/news/michael-jackson-the-man-in-our-mirror-6394480>. Accessed 13 May 2007.

Thrasher, Steven. "Dust to Dust: Mourning the Dead at Burning Man." *The Guardian*, 5 Sept. 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2016/sep/05/burning-man-temple-project-death-mourning>. Accessed 13 May 2017.

———. "Prince Broke All the Rules about What Black American Men Should Be." *The Guardian*, 21 Apr. 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/apr/21/prince-broke-expectations-black-american-men-musical-genius-performances>. Accessed 13 May 2007.

Tsioulcas, Anastasia. "Beyoncé Funds College Scholarship Award for 'Bold, Creative' Women." *NPR*, 25 Apr. 2017, <http://www.npr.org/sections/therecord/2017/04/25/525551078/beyonc-funds-college-scholarship-award-for-bold-creative-women>. Accessed 13 May 2017.