

A Flâneur in the Erotic City: Prince and the Urban Imaginary

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Abstract In September of 1986, megastar Prince journeyed across the Atlantic to France to begin filming his second motion picture *Under the Cherry Moon*. Having captured the US imagination in the commercially successful *Purple Rain* (1984), “The Kid” (Prince’s *Purple Rain* alias) was eager to begin shooting his idea for a wry comedy in black and white in “homage to the B films of the 1940’s” (Goodman, 1986). Prince’s artistic, transcontinental trek was already on display with his 1985 *Around the World in a Day*, an album that at once pushed him forward musically by looking backward to 1960s psychedelic, Beatles-esque pop. An avant-garde experimentalist, Prince was seemingly constructing a new musical paradigm that linked past and present in kaleidoscopic fashion. The title song might have Prince playing the melodious wanderer: “Open your heart, open your mind, A train is leaving all day, A wonderful trip through our time, And laughter is all U pay.” *Parade: Music from The Motion Picture “Under the Cherry Moon”* continued the sauntering theme as the diminutive Prince declares in the title track, “The little 1 will escort U, 2 places within your mind.” In this manner, the wanderings of Prince’s character Christopher Tracy took him “more often to the strange corners of Paris than to its historic centre, to the strongholds of multiculturalism rather than to the classic headquarters of the Gallic tradition” (White, 2001). The purpose of the article is to present Prince as a postmodern flâneur. Beyond notions of his dandyism, most directly observed in his use of signifiers that convey gender ambiguity/bending, Prince’s urban representations, traveling imagery, solitary character, social commentary, contradictory relationships with women, and transformative creativity mark a new take on the flâneur.

Keywords Flâneur · Urban imaginary

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Introduction: The Artist (In)Formally Known as a Flâneur

As we have seen, most of these eighteenth-century flâneurs were hardly princely. They were semi-comic or even tragi-comic figures (Conlin 2014).

Few musical figures are as associated with a city as much as Prince is with Minneapolis. Millions around the world have been introduced to Prince's Minneapolis through his music and film. The artist's impeccable taste, adventurous sound, and career-spanning restlessness fermented in the city he never left (Hicks 2016). Interestingly, from the beginning of the twentieth century, the assumptions which underpin the figure of the flâneur were to be taken up by several writers as a means to confront and understand the city in order to get at its essence, and thereby to translate it into artistic terms (Turcot 2014). Prince translated the essence of his hometown, helping to create a brand new something called the Minneapolis sound.

The purpose of the article is to offer Prince as a postmodern flâneur by exploring key concepts of this literary figure in relationship to Prince's music. Popularized in the writing of Charles Baudelaire, the flâneur has historically been tied to the urban spaces of nineteenth-century Paris as a cultural figure intended to make sense of the conditions of modernity and postmodernity. Baudelaire's essay, "The Painter of Modern Life" (1863), reveals key characteristics of the flâneur—artistic; male; private, but driven to public life in search of meaning; and an urban figure. These characteristics certainly resonate with "His Royal Badness."

In linking the urban essence of the flâneur and Prince, one might immediately summon an image of Prince on the streets of his hometown, whether as The Kid in *Purple Rain*, at the corner of First Avenue and 7th Street in downtown Minneapolis and the First Avenue nightclub, or perhaps more figuratively in MTV video fashion, strolling and dancing on *Alphabet Street*. Like the flâneur, Prince's peregrinations across the city built up a body of political and social commentary in songs like *Controversy*, *1999*, *Sign O' The Times*, and *America*, to name just a few. Grasping what it meant to be socially and politically active as a pop star, Prince skillfully crafted his songs with a transgressive intent that knew no bounds (Hawkins 2017). Similar to the flâneur, whose activity requires both the city and its crowds while remaining aloof from both, Prince's penchant for privacy was legendary. Prince's personal isolation was guaranteed by the hiring of the bearded Chick Huntzberry who at 6' 8" and nearly 400 lb, towered over the artist (Morton 2007). In an age where many celebrities do not want to do anything away from the public eye, Prince avoided the spotlight. Instead, he wanted it to shine on his art (France 2016). And comparable to the flâneur, scholarly writing has linked Prince with the dandy (Garelick 1999; Hawkins and Niblock 2011), a gender-bending figure with means and leisure who pays meticulous attention to his appearance and attire.

Prone by its very nature to wandering, the flâneur is difficult to pin down. There is no set definition for who, or even indeed what, the flâneur is. In fact, there is no singular flâneur, but rather nuanced variants: the artist-flâneur; the poet-flâneur; the novelist-flâneur; the urban-flâneur; the prophet-flâneur; and the flâneur/dandy. Similarly, Prince is often thought of as an enigma. To be sure, Prince was perplexing, as he reminded us in "I Would Die 4 U":

I'm not a woman
 I'm not a man
 I am something that you'll never understand

Prince goes on to proclaim he was neither your lover nor your friend, “I am something that you’ll never comprehend.” This paper is an attempt to view Prince’s genius through the lens of another slippery figure in the flâneur.

Significance of Research

There has been an abundance of special issue magazines, journals, and conferences since Prince’s death; yet, despite the fascinating critical insights the artist’s life and works provide on, for example, race, gender, and sexuality, he was a figure rarely discussed in scholarly terms (Niblock 2005; Hawkins and Niblock 2011). But it is exactly the complicated and multifaceted nature of Prince’s life and career that require methods that illuminate new approaches in understanding Prince’s subjectivity. Similarly, until recently, conceptualizations of the flâneur have been limited, with little attention to the widespread adaptation of the figure outside Paris/Europe. By moving beyond the typical geography of the flâneur, we can review the potential for an expanded, more global, and versatile combination of the flâneur’s essential features and how they might take on different forms and purposes depending on context (Wrigley 2014).

This work repositions the flâneur in an uncommon Midwestern, urban space—Minneapolis—while offering a new scholarly interpretation of Prince. It will focus mainly on Prince’s artistic production from 1980 to 1999, a 20-year span during which Prince charted more hot 100 singles (44) than any other artist.¹

A Purple Urban Imaginary

The Twin Cities bequeathed Prince an unusual perspective on American popular music (Morton 2007).

If the Midwest is unusual terrain in considering the flâneur, popular music is similarly a less commonly encountered location for discussions of the flâneur and urban representation. (Milburn 2014). To accomplish this task, this essay engages the concept of the “urban imaginary.” Derived from the field of psychogeography, the urban imaginary provides an access point into the world of urban dreams and highlights the varieties of city life which are constructed by an imaginative response to an urban environment (Mills 2012). Beyond the physical mechanism of the city, Prince brought listeners and viewers into a purple urban imaginary that was his Minneapolis. His

¹ I will also reference Prince’s films.

creative approach to technology and recording practices pioneered the “Minneapolis Sound”—a mixture of new wave, synthpop, rock, funk, and pop—while simultaneously creating a countercultural urban character who established two “types” of cities: a real or named location, which exists on a map, and a coded, phantasmal utopian or dystopian place.²

Uptown Minneapolis

Prince’s January 26, 1980 between-song interview with Dick Clark on *American Bandstand* is memorable. Following a performance of “I Wanna Be Your Lover,” Clark in disbelief asks, “Man, how’d you learn to do this in Minneapolis?” Clark continues, “This is not the kind of music that comes from Minneapolis, Minnesota.” In that moment, Clark and viewers would learn that this genius was indeed an anomaly, geographically and universally, and Prince’s music was deeply rooted in his hometown, with all its obstacles and opportunities (Hicks 2016).

And while *Purple Rain* (1984) catapulted Prince and his beloved city into musical prominence, it was his earlier *Dirty Mind* (1980) that provides a song—“Uptown”—that initially conveyed Prince’s urban insights and creative imagination. Uptown Minneapolis is located just 15 blocks from the downtown core. Viewed as a parallel to Chicago’s Uptown District, this district of Minneapolis centered on the newly renamed Uptown Theatre. “Uptown” is Prince’s first foray into the political, a song about multiculturalism and diversity, his manifesto on racial freedom as bandmate Dez Dickerson described it (Touré 2013). He was walking down the streets of a place he calls “your fine city,” but as Dickerson confirmed, it was meant to be Minneapolis, which many residents feel is something of a multiracial oasis that is extremely liberal and accepting of difference, “the miscegenation capital of the world” (Touré 2013).

“Uptown” nearly captures all at once the characteristics of the urban-flâneur:

She saw me walking down the streets of your fine city

It kinda turned me on when she looked at me and said, “come here”

Now I don’t usually talk to strangers but she looked so pretty

Strolling the cityscape, observation of the female, and indications of Prince’s preference for isolation (though giving way to the “pretty”) conjure the flânerie of 1900s Paris. Let us first consider notions of gendered boundaries in relationship to the flâneur and urban streets. Traditionally, the flâneur has been assumed to be male, in part because the flâneur’s natural domain, the public spaces of the city have been historically viewed as unchallengingly masculine. Whether in a late nineteenth-century Paris context or more contemporary urban configuration, the city is a masculine space and one of the few groups of women who had access to the streets included prostitutes (Wolff 1985). So, who is this woman with whom

² Here, I borrow Vassilena Parashkevova’s (2012) ruminations on the portrayals of the urban in Salman Rushdie novels.

Prince is interacting? According to Prince, “She’s just a crazy, crazy, crazy little mixed up dame. She’s just a victim of society and all its games”. Prince continues,

She even made love to me
 Ooh, best night I ever had, ah yeah
 I never talk to strangers but this time it’s all right
 See, she got me hot, ah, I couldn’t stop, ah
 Good times were rolling all night, all night, yeah

Prince the urban character is playing a game with the female protagonist, perhaps a prostitute or flâneuse (the female version of a flâneur), who asks him “Are you gay?” Along gender lines, then, transgression is limited; however, there is a provocatively urban space as Prince views *Uptown* as a place to challenge social norms:

Now where I come from
 We don’t let society tell us how it’s supposed to be
 Our clothes, our hair, we don’t care
 It’s all about being there
 Everybody’s going uptown
 That’s where I want to be
 Uptown
 Set your mind free
 Uptown
 Got my body hot
 Get down
 I don’t want to stop, no

Prince as flâneur constructs an imaginative city, reporting on the urban in terms of the discourses in which it is conceptualized, particularly the social—gender, attire, sexuality, and race. Prince references the social divisions of city life—“White, Black, Puerto Rican”—but maps out a different urban existence, with “everybody just a-freakin’.” Here, Prince offers his observations in a manner that does not fit the typical conception—as a multicultural flâneur.

But the Uptown district’s evolution from Prince’s version, one revealing transgressive activity, to a gentrified neighborhood that in present time caters to a younger, professional crowd no longer perpetuating marginal communities, is indicative of the flâneur’s witness to capitalist America. As Minneapolis artist/writer Andy Sturdevant (2012) pens, “It’d be insane, though, to suggest that the sort of bohemian pansexual cool that Prince suggested when he wrote ‘Uptown’ about the neighborhood in 1980 still reigns. There is nothing bohemian or pansexually cool about The North Face... caught between a low-rent, artsy McPunk past and an absurdly gentrified present.” McPunks were the mostly teenage “punks” with Mohawk haircuts and piercings who used the Uptown McDonald’s as their primary hangout. The 1980s was the last decade in which Uptown had any claim to “weirdness,” the last hoorah before national chains moved in during the 1990s and rents and housing prices began to escalate at even faster rates. The McPunks were a symbol that Uptown was an eccentric place and somehow different from other city (or suburban) neighborhoods (*Uptown Urbanist* 2009).

It is interesting to consider the transformation of Uptown in relationship to Prince's growing success and marketability. We recall that the flâneur is a figure rooted in the emergence of modern capitalism, the "dandy" clinging to the remnants of an aristocratic aura, but now forced to go on the market. He is the genius who observes daily, urban capitalist life and writes up his observations in prose (Mazlish 1994). "Uptown" conjures a particular musical heritage of Minneapolis, but also reminds us of good business. Early lessons taught Prince about music industry segregation, and he wanted to reach for the large mainstream audience, not the small audience that came along with being identified as being a Black star (Touré 2013). Is Prince "feeding" off the multiculturalism of Minneapolis by advertising and selling an alternate lifestyle in a soon-to-be gentrified Uptown Minneapolis? Here, we can begin to gather the flâneur's historical relationship with capitalism and consider Prince's positioning as a self-interested individual, eventually becoming quite wealthy through his musical urban quest. The setting in which the artist-flâneur operates is the city. And it is this capitalist society that serves as the spectacle for his glance.

This is Not Music, This Is A Trip

A second key characteristic for the flâneur is mobility. Flânerie, that activity of strolling and looking carried out by the flâneur, is a recurring motif in the literature, sociology and art of urban, and most especially of the metropolitan, existence (Tester 1994). Reviewed in this section are notions of mobility/travel in Prince's music, to reveal an evolving, faster, imaginative form of mobility that marks a postmodern flâneur.

In earlier recordings, Prince's urban wanderings are closer to the strolling of the traditional flâneur. For example, in "Head" (*Dirty Mind*, 1980), Prince is presumably walking when he meets the virgin on her way to be wed ("I loved the way you walked"). "Uptown" of course represents the very walkable Uptown Minneapolis area, with Prince focused on a young woman "dancing in the streets." Four years later in *Purple Rain*, Prince takes us on a tour of Minneapolis by introducing us to such sites as First Avenue, the Orpheum Theatre, Lake Minnetonka (all shooting locations for *Purple Rain*), though it seems he may have traded in walking shoes for a purple motorcycle to get around the city. Intellectually, 1990's *Graffiti Bridge* reminds us that transportation is the symbol of modern cities, and bridges serve as an important medium of conveyance.³

But just as the urban imaginary helps us see the real and imagined in Prince's urban landscape, travel, for Prince, takes on a different, dreamlike tempo and narrative than the stroll of the modernist Parisian flâneur. "International Lover," "Alphabet Street," "Graffiti Bridge," "Around the World in a Day," "Christopher Tracy's Parade," and "Under the Cherry Moon" are songs that reference mobility or travel in ways that long for a utopian existence. Travel is a modern concept, signifying both commercial and leisure movement

³ In "Architectural Exclusion: Discrimination and Segregation Through Physical Design of the Built Environment" (April 2015), Sarah Schindler reminds us that bridges were designed to reinforce segregation, often times built so low that buses could not pass under them in order to prevent people of color from accessing a public beach. *Graffiti Bridge*, while a box office bomb, lends insight into a gritty urban environment, portraying an "internecine struggle within the Minnesota musical mafia—Prince (and Paisley Park sidekicks Tevin Campbell, George Clinton, and Mavis Staples) vs. Morris Day and the Time," according to one Washington Post review.

in an era of expanding Western capitalism. As such, travel is marked by a historical taintedness accompanied by associations with gendered/racial bodies, class privilege, frontiers, borders, and the discursive. In the context of *Graffiti Bridge*, Sarah Schindler's "Architectural Exclusion: Discrimination and Segregation Through Physical Design of the Built Environment" (2015) reminds us that bridges were designed to reinforce segregation, often times built so low that buses could not pass under them in order to prevent people of color from accessing a public beach. *Graffiti Bridge*, while a box office bomb, lends insight into a gritty, racialized urban environment, portraying an "internecine struggle within the Minnesota musical mafia – Prince (and Paisley Park sidekicks Tevin Campbell, George Clinton and Mavis Staples) vs. Morris Day and the Time," according to one Washington Post review (Harrington 1990).

A postmodern flâneur, Prince's movements perform the contest between modernity's standard beat and the "sudden rise" of possibilities lost in a cycle of urban utopias and dystopias. In this rotation, Prince's utopian vision is that "Everybody wants to find Graffiti Bridge, Something to believe in, a reason to believe that there's a heaven above." Or from "Still Would Stand All Time" of the same soundtrack:

It's not a thousand years away, it's not that far my brother
 When men will fight injustice instead of one another
 Its not that far if we all say yes and only try
 Then Heaven on Earth we will find

Also from *Graffiti Bridge*, Prince's "Thieves In The Temple" conjures a more dystopian existence:

They don't care where they kick
 Just as long as they hurt you
 There are thieves in the temple tonight

Love if you're there come save me
 From all this cold despair
 I can hang when you're around
 But I'll surely die
 If you're not there

Two albums earlier in *LoveSexy* (1988), "Alphabet Street" cycles the dystopian and utopian as Prince travels in his "daddy's Thunderbird...a white rad ride," with a goal "To make this cruel, cruel world hear what we've got to say/Put the right letters together and make a better day." These post-*Purple Rain* projects reached beyond the set boundaries of commercialism, blurring temporal boundaries and redefining Prince as an artist. Here, we consider the urban imaginary, integrating psychogeography and the concept of the flâneur, to reveal Prince's purposeful wandering through the city-space as if on an imaginary voyage. In the urban imaginary, citizens interact with the urban environment in such a way that they map the urban world according to their desire, disgust, pleasure, pain, loathing, and love (Mills 2012). No longer simply an artist-flâneur, dandy-flâneur, or urban-flâneur, Prince is transformed into a prophet-flâneur. In this role, the prophet weds human movement with the celestial or spiritual.

Around The Black Atlantic In A Day

In a single week in 1984, Prince (and the Revolution) had the number one film (*Purple Rain*), pop single (“Purple Rain”), and album (*Purple Rain*), a feat that placed the artist in elite company with only Elvis Presley and the Beatles (Hawkins and Niblock 2011). Prince had indeed become one of the biggest cultural icons of the 1980s. In the wake of the megahit *Purple Rain*, Prince and the Revolution turned back the clock to the second half of the 1960s for the psychedelic *Around the World in a Day* (1985). By September of 1986, Prince found himself flying over the Atlantic Ocean to Nice, France, to begin filming *Under the Cherry Moon*, his idea for a wry comedy in black and white in “homage to the B films of the 1940’s” (Goodman 1986). Inspired by pre-World War II era black-and-white comedies and containing only two musical sequences, *Under The Cherry Moon* was not intended to be a Parisian *Purple Rain*. Interestingly, the monochrome release of the film did much to highlight the movie’s racial subtext. In shaping his character, Prince seems to have returned to the mixed-blood glamour he projected in rarer form on *Dirty Mind* (Morton 2007), not the sort of follow-up to *Purple Rain* the masses, or music industry executives, were necessarily seeking.

In this section, I place *Under the Cherry Moon* and Prince’s travel across the Atlantic with its racial intimations in dialogue with Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* (1993), a text that remains significant for its pioneering use of race as an investigative category in presenting the “Atlantic” as a distinct geopolitical entity in the modern capitalist world. Prince’s foray into Paris for *Under the Cherry Moon*, in the character of Christopher Tracy, is interesting given the flâneur’s origins as an index of the dramatic changes that occurred as Paris was transformed into a modern metropolis (Grøtta 2015). Gilroy’s “black Atlantic” delineates a distinctively modern, cultural-political space that is not specifically African, American, Caribbean, or British, but is, rather, a hybrid mix of all of these at once; this is evidenced via a series of compelling readings of a cohort of key modern black intellectuals and artists such as Martin Delaney, Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. DuBois, Toni Morrison, and Richard Wright (Kaisary 2014).

Prince’s choice of black-and-white technique and his use of anachronism, misplacing a 1980s pop icon in 1930s Paris, require that Christopher Tracy cross any number of borders—geographic, psychic, social, and temporal. The nostalgic overtones of *Under the Cherry Moon* both disguise and point to the avant-gardism of the music—itsself a temporally/stylishly diverse arrangement of 1950s jazz, 1960s soul, 1970s funk, and 1980s pop. A *conga* line during the scene 4 (“Birthday suit”) birthday party for the character—Mary Sharon—played by actor Kristen Scott Thomas, further underscores the temporal conflict and fluidity through the use of anachronism. The term *conga* was popularized in the 1950s during a period when Latin music swept the USA. Cuban rhythm and New York jazz fused together to create what was then termed mambo, but later became known as salsa. The 1950s television star Desi Arnaz also played a role in the popularization of conga drums. Prince’s steel drum-laden track “New Position” from the movie soundtrack plays during the *conga* line scene. In *Under the Cherry Moon*, Prince is nearly dropped off in 1930s Paris in the form of Desi Arnaz. The result is a cinematic intersection of real and imagined spatialities and temporalities and a Prince character who is crossing international, class, temporal, and musical borders.

Later in scene 4, Mary seeks to liven up her party donned only in a sheer white cloth, presenting herself to the invitation-only crowd asking, “How do you like my birthday

suit? I designed it myself.” Mary proceeds to the band pavilion, declares “All right, let’s get this party rockin’,” pushes the drummer out of his seat and breaks into a funky drummer version of the 1982 canonical rap single “Planet Rock.” Here, Gilroy’s work provides useful insights as he addresses conceptual problems common to English and American versions of cultural studies which, he contends, share a nationalistic focus “that is antithetical to the rhizomorphic, fractal structure of the transcultural, international formation I call the black Atlantic.” Gilroy reminds us that contemporary debates over modernity have largely ignored music, something he considers odd given that “the modern differentiation of the true, the good, and the beautiful was conveyed directly in the transformation of public use of culture in general and the increased public importance of all kinds of music.” Gilroy discusses a range of British and American black hip hop musicians to underscore the place of music in the black Atlantic, his metaphor for a representation of the Atlantic “as one single, complex unit of analysis” of the modern world and production of an intercultural perspective.

“Planet Rock” is a black Atlantic representation that refers “us back to the middle passage, to the half-remembered micro-politics of the slave trade and its relationship to both industrialization and modernization.” A song review reminds us of the cultural significance of “Planet Rock”:

With the release of just one single, 1982’s “Planet Rock” by Afrika Bambaataa & the Soulsonic Force, rap music leapt ahead from the drumbreak aesthetic of the ‘70s to achieve a man-machine fusion and prove – for what is likely the first time ever – that computers are just as funky as people (correction: just as funky as the people using them). The mood of the early ‘80s was ready to embrace, in the musical world, the same technological futurism that powered cultural phenomena like Pac-Man and Star Wars. Add to those the advent of affordable synthesizers, and it’s a natural that computer funk would hit the streets during those years, and create one of the most influential styles of the past 25 years: electro. (Bush n.d.)

Indebted to the melody of “Trans-Europe Express” by German electronic music band Kraftwerk, thus blending German techno with British Rock and American disco rap, the presence of “Planet Rock” in *Under the Cherry Moon* serves to provide insight into Christopher Tracy’s (and Prince’s) postmodern voyage, double consciousness as an artist and black subject. Illuminated in W.E.B. DuBois’ *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), double consciousness is “used to convey the special difficulties arising from black internalization of an American identity,” a “twoness” one feels as an American and a black person, provoked by the experience of the African slave trade and the plantation system in the Americas.

As the “birthday suit” scene continues, Mary Sharon and Christopher Tracy lock eyes for the first time, helping *Under the Cherry Moon* become a narrative of taboo, love, and terror as Christopher’s black sexuality reveals a displaced poetics of subordination. A conflicting, racialized depiction of sexuality plays out, enhanced by the film’s black-and-white portrayal. The interracial love component of *Under the Cherry Moon*, subsequently enraging Mary’s father (played by Steven Berkoff), who resolves himself to hunting down and killing Christopher. Underscoring the double consciousness of the tragic hero Christopher Tracy, Prince seems to be exploring an older, certainly pre-1960s construction of black identity, projecting himself as a jive-talking outsider who is nonetheless so fascinated by white society that he seems to identify with

it (Morton 2007). The double consciousness of Christopher Tracy, also enhanced by the monochrome filming, therefore serves to blur the temporal and psychic boundaries of premodernity and modernity. As a black flâneur, Prince/Christopher Tracy deviates from a Eurocentric account of the development of capitalist modernity. Modernity, Gilroy argues, is apprehended through its historical counter-discourses as “analyses remain substantially unaffected by the histories of barbarity which appear to be such a prominent feature of the widening gap between modern experience and modern expectation.” The supposed universality of European and American enlightenment was employed to maintain an oppressive racial order inherited from the premodern era.

Christopher Tracy/Prince as a border crosser conveys the importance of travel. The shifting historical underpinnings of *Under the Cherry Moon* that produce a black flâneur in Christopher complicate this however. Christopher navigates an urban setting with both real and imagined spaces while providing commentary on the Paris social order. Moreover, the wanderings of Christopher Tracy take him “more often to the strange corners of Paris than to its historic centre, to the strongholds of multiculturalism rather than to the classic headquarters of the Gallic tradition” (White 2001). I would like to speculate that Christopher Tracy/Prince may be thought of as a traveler or flâneur, marking his observations on the frontiers of multiple urban temporalities and spaces both in music and film. Prince seemingly becomes a “glocal” stroller, a black flâneur who moves freely in all directions of the Paris and US societal grid to woo rich Parisian/American women while offering commentary on the urban class lines.

Alone In A World That’s So Cold

The spectator is a prince who everywhere rejoices in his incognito (Baudelaire 1863).

A third significant characteristic of the flâneur that Prince embodies is that of the solitary figure. The flâneur is a solitary walker who patrols the city with a certain hauteur (Conlin 2014). Here again, the Prince musical catalog is abundant with the theme of loneliness. A non-exhaustive list of songs that conveys a sense of solitude include “Still Waiting” (Prince, 1979); “Another Lonely Christmas” (“I Would Die 4 U” B-Side, 1984); “When The Doves Cry” and “Computer Blue” (*Purple Rain*, 1984); “Condition of the Heart” (*Around the World in a Day*, 1985); “Under the Cherry Moon” (*Parade*, 1986); “Forever in My Life” (*Sign o’ the Times*, 1987); “Still Would Stand All Time” (*Graffiti Bridge*, 1990); “Money Don’t Matter Tonight” (*Diamonds and Pearls*, 1991); “The Sacrifice of Victor” (*Love Symbol Album*, 1992); and “Solo” (*Come*, 1994).

And just as there exists a tense and fluctuating relationship between the flâneur and his participation in public life, Prince created a world of music enjoyed by millions of fans, “but, in the end, could only go it alone” (Levy 2016). The cover of the September 12th, 1985 *Rolling Stone* Issue 456 provides insight into Prince’s private/public tension, proclaiming, “Prince Talks: The Silence Is Broken.” Fast-forwarding to his final party at the estate the weekend before his death, Prince appeared for only 15 min and didn’t play a show, instead slipping back into the solitude he had protected so fiercely through his stardom (Pearce 2016). Prince’s aversion to public life was perhaps mythical, and it

should surprise no one that the 1989 *Batman* film and accompanying soundtrack would appeal to an artist as the project provided the meeting of heroic, solitary souls—Bruce Wayne/Batman and Prince. It is also no surprise that even in character as *Batman*, the comic-book and television icon who had obsessed him since childhood (Morton 2007), that Prince should obsess about a character in an imaginary urban landscape.

Flânerie in Gotham

In a rare exploration of flânerie in popular music representation, Milburn (2014) examined the theme of loneliness in a series of Frank Sinatra albums in the mid-to-late 1950s (“Frank Sinatra and the Nocturnal American City”). The series of concept albums preceded the more popular 1960s version of the Rat Pack, a group of popular actors and performers originating in New York (yes, Gotham), and followed the 1940s highpoint in popularity for *noir* films. These albums—*Songs for Young Lovers* (1954), *In The Wee Small Hours* (1955), *No One Cares* (1959), and *Point of No Return* (1962)—revealed a discernible tension between stasis and restless movement in unnamed urban spaces. The records drew on the angst and heightened sense of observation associated with *noir* and on a mood of post-war social and cultural uncertainty, and, most consistently of all, they dwelt upon the theme of loneliness in the nocturnal urban landscape (Milburn 2014).

Much of the Prince discography reflects similar themes and imagery. In *Controversy* (1981), Prince ponders the ambiguity that the public senses about him—“Am I black or white, am I straight or gay?”⁴ “Do I believe in god, do I believe in me?” In *1999* (1982), judgment day hovers over urban activity. *Around the World in a Day* (1985) introduces listeners to Paisley Park, Prince’s musical fortress on the outskirts of Minneapolis, as well as a psychedelic utopia on its title track “Paisley Park.” And *Parade* accompanies Prince’s own comedic film *noir* in which he plays the Christ-like solitary Christopher Tracy, who dies and goes to heaven in “Sometimes it Snows in April.”

Psychogeography and the urban imaginary draw on the figure of the individual observer of urban affairs who is part of city activity while also standing somewhat apart (Mills 2012). Perhaps no project better fit the solitary, enigmatic Prince than the *Batman* (1989) soundtrack. The Gotham City set awed him. New manager at the time Albert Magnoli remembered Prince’s “instantaneous affinity” for Batman (Ro 2011). And why would not Bruce Wayne, a wealthy, attractive playboy, who under cover of darkness transforms himself into a masked vigilante, be appealing to Prince? The flâneur senses—or perhaps it is better to say that he allows himself the conceit—that without him the world will lack meaning and he is engulfed by the sense of the deluge which might rain without him (Tester 1994). Such vanity haunted Prince and Bruce/Batman. Not unlike the fictional Gotham City, Prince created imaginary urban landscapes and sites (e.g., Erotic City, Graffiti Bridge, Crystal Ball).

Prince’s urban commentary throughout his discography reveals that he was as intrinsically part of his own urban chaos as Bruce/Batman. Like Batman, Prince was an enigmatic figure capable of mistakes and feeling pain. Public spaces can be places of an immense existential fear for the flâneur, as the cityscape is both empowering and

⁴ Though both of Prince’s parents were African-American, many think Prince was multiracial, either because he misleads the media or in the case of the semi-biographical *Purple Rain*, The Kid’s parents in the movie are white (mother) and black (father).

frightening. Bruce/Batman fought the fears of Gotham’s dark, corrupt, crime-ridden streets, motivated by the revenge and injustice of his parents’ murders. Prince fought the corruption and racism of a music industry, and was motivated by the parental abandonment and school-age experience of rejection due to his physical stature and racial identity. For Bruce/Batman and Prince, the cityscape came to be an experiential space, the type of urban labyrinth that offers the flâneur an enigmatic assemblage of indecipherable signs.

I’m Not A Woman. I’m Not A Man. I’m Something That You’ll Never Understand

While much has been written about Prince’s gender performativity, the ambiguous, polymorphic quality of the flâneur and Prince requires exploration in this article. Prince both disrupted and reinforced gender boundaries throughout his career. Tactically, Prince’s plight was that of the dandy, rooted in what Charles Baudelaire described as the “the joy of astonishing others, and the proud satisfaction of never oneself being astonished” (Hawkins 2017). He was capable of presenting women as cloned sex objects, but also operated an impressive gender-fluid democracy, positioning women at all levels of his musical operations.

New Position: “Camping” with Prince Under The Cherry Moon

In his letter *De Profundis* (1897), written during his imprisonment for gross indecency, Oscar Wilde⁵ shared, “I let myself be lured into long spells of senseless and sensual ease. I amused myself with being a flâneur, a dandy, a man of fashion.” The flâneur and dandy are distinct, but overlapping figures. The flâneur is a literary figure frequently described as a dandy and noted for his stylish attire. Hawkins and Niblock (2011) provide a description of how Prince’s masculinity can be critiqued through the discourses surrounding dandyism, debating how Prince’s masculinity is modeled on an aesthetic that converts musical style into dandyism—where the artist becomes constituted through the idiosyncracies of his very own visual and sonic spectacle.

Here, the focus is on Prince as dandy-flâneur by further considering two previously discussed Prince projects in the mid-1980s: *Around the World in a Day* (1985) and *Under the Cherry Moon*. These projects were released between 1983 and 1988, a period in which Prince utilized dandy signifiers most notably in a manner that offered him as a site for identification along both ethnic and gender lines (Hawkins and Niblock 2011). As such, these projects represent sites of transcultural modernity and the dandy-flâneur is a conscious actor who works on the site, bringing about creative transformation in the arts. In an effort to reveal Prince as a cultural translator, I borrow Hsiao-yen’s (2010) concept of transcultural modernity in which the author argues that modernity is possible only on “the transcultural site”—transcultural in the sense not only of

⁵ Born on October 16, 1854 in Dublin, author, playwright, and poet Oscar Wilde was a popular literary figure in late Victorian England, known for his brilliant wit, flamboyant style, and infamous imprisonment for homosexuality.

transnational and translingual, but also of breaking the divide between, among other binaries, *male and female*.

The dandy-flâneur is a literary figure discussed by numerous writers and is noted for his stylish attire; as one who strolls the urban streets (originally in Paris) as a spectator of the city and its faces; and is a character who tests boundaries and thus possesses a subversive, transformative creativity. Prince personified pop dandyism, and according to Niblock (2013),

...from the early '80s onwards, Prince fashioned himself as a baroque dandy, resplendent in those aforementioned ruffles, thighs festooned in lace, face powdered and mascara'd. The tabloid press recoiled at the idea of a diminutive, Black, hyper-feminised young male attracting the attentions of thousands of white women and created a mythology of Prince as a rather animalistic, lascivious creature.

The dandy is often thought of as a trendsetter, but, rather than attempt to follow or set trends (perhaps we can set aside the 1990s bad NPG rapping moments and Prince's gun-shaped microphone against the backdrop of gangster rap), Prince really represented himself in unique ways in terms of fashion. Princian dandification was thus launched:

It has not been possible to purchase replica Prince 'wannabe' outfits...It is useful to consider Prince's singularity of identity in the context of the dandy movement. By examining the origins and legacy of these original peacock males in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it can be seen uncontrovertibly how Prince was launching an assault in the mid 1980s on the mainstream practices of white, middle-class, conservative masculinity (Hawkins and Niblock 2011).

Prince's dandyism served not only as an artistic tool to present a wide array of gender representations but also functioned on a political stage. This is consistent with the historical roots of the dandy-flâneur, a figure that arose in Europe as a protest to eighteenth and nineteenth century monarchical rule over fashion. Situated within a political context, Prince was coding himself campily during the Thatcher/Reagan period, in a way that contrasted with his peers and transgressed patriarchal conventions of the moment (Hawkins and Niblock 2011).

On the cover of his debut album, *For You* (1978), Prince broke with the hyper-masculine conventions of the black soul star. While artists of the era such as Teddy Pendergrass and Marvin Gaye were depicted looking bold, manly and often gazing to the side in meaningful contemplation of the material world, Prince stares directly at the viewer, wide-eyed and full-lipped. Such images were much more common on the album covers for female artists. Prince's second album, *Prince* (1979), similarly almost replicates the image for Donna Summer's 1977 album *Once Upon a Time*. Suffice it to say, as this section will demonstrate and consistent with the image of the flâneur, Prince represented a fluid concept of gender, and he kept everyone guessing as to his sexuality. This

included taking the opposite sex or ambiguous identities—Camille, Jamie Starr, Symbol—as his other self.

Demonstrating that the particularities of stating one's difference can be inscribed by the politics of musical style, Prince claimed a dissident masculinity. His antics became potent markers of resistance, prime referents for an aesthetic that redrew the lines between race, gender, sexuality, nationality, and age (Hawkins 2017). Yet there is no mistaking how differently Prince treated male and female associates (Morton 2007). Paradoxical relationships with women mark another characteristic of the flâneur and provide an interesting parallel to Prince. His male associates—Morris Day, Andre Cymone, Dez Dickerson, Mark Brown—could display similar levels of bravado and hyper-masculinity. The women in Prince's life, so it seemed, generally enjoyed a less stinting patronage and could be presented in conventional, if not demeaning, sexual roles and situations: Prince attempting to convince a lesbian that sex, "it's better with a man" ("Bambi," 1979); a bride-to-be performing fellatio "on her way to be wed" ("Head," 1980); searching "for a dame that would want to be my wife" in "Erotic City" (1984); or Apollonia being tricked into stripping and jumping into a lake that is not Minnetonka in *Purple Rain*.

The solitary nature of Prince and the flâneur plays a significant role. For each, deep female companionship seems out of the question as women, it is claimed, compromise the detachment that distinguishes the true flâneur (lending an air of misogyny to the flâneur). As an unidentified former girlfriend said of Prince to an interviewer, "He has great respect for women. And a blatant disrespect and disregard for women... He's not a good husband. He gets bored easily. He's not monogamous. He's very controlling." (Touré 2013). In *Purple Rain*, it is easy to consider Prince's character, *The Kid*, a misogynist. The Kid's slapping of Apollonia, his father's treatment of his mother, Jerome throwing a woman into a garbage dumpster, the women in the Kid's world are treated with emotional distance or worse. Could it be that through misogyny and neglect, Prince used *Purple Rain* to offer an unabashed subversion of 1980's sexism at its worst, or did Prince wish to channel his own biographical experiences with artistic delicacy (Philpott 2013)?

For the long list of females that Prince dated and paraded, the women in Prince's musical life allowed him to project aspects of his own femininity (Morton 2007). "If I Was Your Girlfriend" (1987) puts Prince's gender confusion on full display. Additionally, the sexualized roles and situations of the women Prince worked with often disrupted conventional public or sexual behavior. It is striking how often Prince casts women in sadomasochistic roles (Morton 2007). He met "Darling Nikki," a "sex fiend," "in a hotel lobby masturbating with a magazine". And Prince generously, and disproportionately, shared brilliant pieces from his musical vault with women: "Manic Monday," The Bangles; "The Glamorous Life," Sheila E.; "Sugar Walls," Sheena Easton; "I Feel For You," Chaka Kahn; "How Come You Don't Call Me," Alicia Keys; "Love Thy Will Be Done," Martika; "Nothing Compares 2 U," The Family/Sinead O'Connor⁶; and, "Nasty

⁶ Prince wrote "Nothing Compares 2 U" originally for girlfriend Susannah Melvoin and the group The Family, released on their album *The Family* in 1985 (Morton 2007). Sinead O'Connor covered the song in 1990, which led to a contentious relationship with Prince as O'Connor's producer ignored much of Prince's original arrangement and emphasized O'Connor's piercing vocal (Ro 2011).

Girl,” Vanity 6. The centrality of women in Prince’s life had the strongest bearing on his work, delineating his political aspirations (Hawkins 2017).

Engagement with the flâneur has informed research on gendered dimensions relating to urban mobility. Whether turn-of-the-twentieth-century Paris or the present-day U.S. cityscape, the world of the flâneur was and is a masculine one. Yet scholars of the flâneur continue to debate whether a social history which understands flânerie as gender based is operating with too “essentialist” a conception of gender, which does not allow the subtle negotiations available to any men or women who actually inhabited the world (Wolff 1985). Recognition of gender ambiguities does not invalidate social-historical accounts of gender boundaries. On the contrary, the possibilities of subversion and transgression by gender-ambiguous practices depend on the existence of such boundaries: the more or less rigid the boundaries, the more or less threatening the transgressive act (Wolff 1985). Prince’s gender performativity was indeed marked by an aesthetic that fused traditional notions of macho and ladylike. He was renowned as a gay icon. Whatever his stances were, there is no question he paved the way for generations to embrace gender ambiguity, and reinforced that black male musicians are dynamic and diverse (Donato 2016).

The (Prophetic) Kid

Prophetic flâneurs...are serious analysts of urban culture...They are capable of holding out a utopian vision of a “better society”...and are aware of hidden forces at work... (Mills 2012)

Prince’s camp effete and gender bending as transgressive interventions provide a good transition to a discussion of Prince’s musical social commentary. “Uptown” was a racial manifesto, and Prince’s body of work continued to provide societal observations. The title track from *1999* (1982), Prince’s first song to capture a giant audience and first monster hit, was a song all about apathy and apocalypse. Released during a period of early 1980s heightened Cold War tensions between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, Prince played with apocalyptic rhetoric, creating “a perfect gen X dance song built on the idea that the world’s about to end so, to hell with it, let’s dance” (Touré 2013). Though a late baby boomer, Prince became something of a voice for Generation X, often defined as cynical and disaffected.

The flâneur is, primarily, a man on the streets whose peregrinations across the city build up a body of commentary. In this section, I consider Prince as prophet-flâneur through a prophetic view represented by a political commentary gathered through his postmodern, urban observations. Songs like “Ronnie, Talk to Russia,” (*Controversy*, 1981); “Purple Rain,” (*Purple Rain*, 1984); “Pop Life” and “America,” (*Around the World in a Day*, 1985); “Sign o’ the Times,” (*Sign o’ The Times*, 1987); and “Batdance,” (*Batman*, 1989) conjure the urban, bleakness, and tensions between the sacred and profane.

What might a political flâneur entail? The focus on an emotional stroll of sorts was accompanied by Prince’s attention to public space and social awareness. In track 2 from *Around the World in a Day*, “Paisley Park,” the artist

speaks of a metaphorical place of peace and love, reflecting a 1960s connection between urban parks and the hippie movement. In track 6, “America,” Prince’s political and social observations emerged:

Little sister making minimum wage
 Living in a 1-room jungle-monkey cage
 Can’t get over, she’s almost dead
 She may not be in the black
 But she’s happy she ain’t in the red

A lifelong “stroller” and observer of Minneapolis, the lyrics of *America* reflect Prince’s commentary on the conditions of modernity and postmodernity in a Midwest urban center. Prince also extends his commentary beyond Minneapolis as the lyrics project a disdain for post-détente/Cold War communism.

And in the 1987 *Sign o’ the Times* album, whose cover is a muted version of *Purple Rain*’s raw cityscape, Prince addresses a number of social issues including, in the title track, AIDS, which had reached the public radar for only a few years at that point:

In France a skinny man
 Died of a big disease with a little name
 By chance his girlfriend came across a needle
 And soon she did the same

Prince also attends to gang violence and the excess of guns on the streets and among young people:

At home there are seventeen-year-old boys
 And their idea of fun
 Is being in a gang called The Disciples
 High on crack, totin’ a machine gun
 Time, time

Prince also tackles the *Challenger* space craft explosion disaster, President Reagan’s “Star Wars” missile defense program, inner city poverty, illegal drug usage, and terrorist attacks. As prophetic flâneur, Prince is an analyst of urban culture who provides a rigorous critique of urban institutions and of city-state behavior (Mills 2012). The 1991 album *Diamonds and Pearls*, produced two songs—“Money Do not Matter 2 Night” and “Live 4 Love”—that tackle money/poverty/greed and the 1990–1991 Gulf War.

The prophet-flâneur is encouraged by the deity, speaking to the urban inhabitants as worshippers, navigating a symbolic journey in an urban context. Here, Prince’s “Thieves in the Temple” comes to mind. With a faintly Middle Eastern harmony, the song and video merge the twin icons of temple and city, conjuring the spiritual and a Prince figure walking the streets of Jerusalem. In the video, Prince spreads his arms and places his legs together, producing a crucified Christ

image in an urban site. Prince as Jesus is preaching love as the city may be viewed “as a human site and as a place subsumed into the sacred site” (Mills 2012):

Love come quick
 Love come in a hurry
 There are thieves in the temple tonight
 I feel like I’m looking for my soul (Soul)
 Like a poor man looking for gold (Gold)
 There are thieves in the temple tonight

A prophetic voice, Prince’s message conveys suffering and urban anxiety while seeking well-being and love. From the same *Graffiti Bridge* album as “Thieves,” “Still Would Stand All Time” seeks the divine on earth:

It’s not a thousand years away, it’s not that far my brother
 When men will fight injustice instead of one another
 Its not that far if we all say yes and only try
 Then Heaven on Earth we will find

As prophet-flâneur Prince’s message is that hope is attainable if you run to “the Light,” or perhaps,
 God, and “All things will be fine, Still would stand all time”.

Conclusion: a Final Stroll in Baltimore

Baudelaire’s poet is a man who is driven out of the private and into the public by his own search for meaning (Tester 1994).

Prince’s posthumously released final studio album, *Hit n Run Phase Two*, contains “Big City” and “Baltimore.” The artist-/prophet-flâneur strolled the streets of Baltimore following the protests over Freddie Gray’s death (while in police custody), announcing that he would hold a “Rally 4 Peace” concert in Baltimore, his first performance there in a decade. As a Baltimore reporter wrote following the artist’s death, “Prince, the popular and virtuosic musician who died Thursday at age 57, was known for maintaining his Minneapolis roots. He also made an impression on Baltimore at a critical moment—as the city dealt with the death of Freddie Gray and the unrest that followed (Case 2016). Once again, and for a final time, Prince casts his reporter’s eye over a city:

Nobody got in nobody’s way
 So I guess you could say it was a good day
 At least a little better than the day in Baltimore
 Does anybody hear us pray
 For Michael Brown or Freddie Gray?
 Peace is more than the absence of war
 Absence of war

The modern flâneur is associated with the experience of shock—which is inflicted upon him by the rapidly changing urban surroundings—an overload of sense impressions created by the crowds and new technology (Grøtta 2015). The crowd was Prince’s sphere, an inspiration for his art, yet, as is with the flâneur, he maintained an autonomy while casting his eye and reporting. In this moment in Baltimore was Prince’s acknowledgment of a broken system and nod to the young class of protesters who had mobilized here, and in cities across the country, as the future of the movement (Summers 2016). “If there ain’t no justice then there ain’t no peace” he sings, just before bringing “you up to date on a developing situation in Los Angeles.” Unfortunately, as he passed away, his urban utopia must have felt like both a nightmare and dream.

Prince never stopped scoping the cityscape, and in connecting the figure of the flâneur to him, we can gather that the flâneur is not a character that must be relegated to a Parisian past. It is important to recall, in the context of the advanced media technology within which Prince thrived, Baudelaire’s nineteenth-century flâneur found himself in the first phase of modern media culture. The visual culture that we experience today—with its moving images, virtual images, and montage images—started to take form already in Baudelaire’s day (Grøtta 2015). Prince’s stroll occurred at hyper-speed, from radio to television and MTV to online radio, digital downloads and mobile devices, record label pressures and global tours. If time and space were felt to be different for Baudelaire’s flâneur, Erotic City compressed our spatial and temporal worlds in dramatic ways as detected by a purple flâneur. That such compression occurs “in order that a new round of capital accumulation can be realized does not mean that places decrease in importance” (Urry 2009). It does mean that the tension between the sacred and profane necessarily increases depending on the economic and political consequences. Perhaps this is what informed Prince’s message of love and peace. As a missionary of a utopia, our Purple flâneur provided a political commentary, focusing on, in this moment in Baltimore, a diverse urban population struggling to reconcile an experience of subordination and fear in a postmodern world.

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