J Afr Am St (2017) 21:296–319
DOI 10.1007/s12111-017-9370-8

ARTICLES

Black Muse 4 U: Liminality, Self-Determination, and Racial Uplift in the Music of Prince

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Published online: 26 September 2017

Abstract Prince's unparalleled, innovative musical style remains widely revered by his worldwide audience in the wake of his death less than two years ago. Since the late twentieth century, many scholars have used European critical theory to examine Prince's musical multidimensionality. These important analyses help us understand Prince's music and performativity in new ways but repeatedly ignore the cultural roots of his music. Indeed, many critical discussions focus on his performance of ambiguous sexualities and sartorial strategies without addressing how Prince's understanding of his Blackness played a crucial role in his creative practice and theatricality. I contend that exploring Prince's dynamic oeuvre through interpretive lenses of radical black theory is a productive space for understanding his performance of lyrical and musical liminality, his self-determination in the music business, and his commitment to using his music for racial uplift. Prince's creative practices were linked to his covert, but avid, support of social justice initiatives that support black humanity. Framing my analysis through Prince's composition "Black Muse" from his final studio album, I explain how "Black Muse" provides lyrical and musical evidence of Prince's political thought and deployment of counter narratives. I put "Black Muse" in conversation with "Baltimore," "Resolution," and "Planet Earth," unapologetically activist songs written by Prince that discuss police brutality, warmongering, and climate change. I discuss how Prince's strategic use of musical liminality in "Lady Cabdriver" obscures his political diatribes through a layer of sonic salacity. Combining close musical analysis with Black theoretical thought that explores Prince's definitions of Black Muse, I explore Prince's performances of blues hybridity, his tireless effort in repositioning his relationship with the music industry, and his mission to uplift his people. While Prince had muses, who were both Black and white, Prince's ultimate creative muse was the Black community and the black experience itself. Prince scholars can benefit from exploring and utilizing

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various black performance theories to better understand and explain his contribution to global music culture.

Keywords Black Muse · HitnRun Phase Two · Prince & social justice · Prince & Black lives matter · Black performance theory · Prince & Black positionality · Prince & self determination

> "*Getting over on The Crossover been a Negro specialty since a cork-greased Bert Williams stuffed himself into a bootylicious rooster suit.*"Greg Tate (from PRINCE: A EULOGY)

When I informed members of my inner circle that I was writing a critical essay on Prince, the bewildered expressions on their faces reminded me how some people remain entangled in a discursive web of misrepresentations and misunderstandings surrounding this musical giant. An artist both celebrated and maligned throughout his nearly 40-year career, Prince was the most multifaceted musician of his generation.[1] Though a year and a half has passed since Prince's death on April 21, 2016, news stories, music videos, and music continue to trickle in. Books have been written quickly by people who knew him personally and with the opening of Paisley Park to the public, "fans have the unprecedented opportunity to experience first-hand what it was like for Prince to create, produce and perform inside this private sanctuary and remarkable production complex."[2] Much of what has come out does not bring Prince devotees or newcomers to his music closer to understanding the national treasure that is Prince Rogers Nelson.[3]

This essay focuses on gaining insight into Prince's most recent years as a musician. In addition to analyzing several songs in his catalog in order to understand how liminality, self-determination, and racial uplift figured prominently in his work, this article delves into and analyzes "Black Muse" from *HitnRun Phase Two* (2015). *HitnRun Phase Two* is Prince's last studio album. I don't view Prince's last album as a final statement since that would be a teleological projection on a career that only showed signs of unpredictable creative development. Prince was a parallactic subject who tirelessly created music that challenged his audience to constantly adapt to his artistic visions. I was drawn to Phase Two for several reasons. Compared to *HitnRun Phase One* (Nelson 2015) which is more experimental, dance oriented, and autobiographical, *Phase Two* gives the audience an opportunity to hear the blues, funk, jazz, gospel, and soul music aesthetic which is the musical foundation of Prince's sound. *Phase Two* is an ensemble album with extensive horn arrangements, multiple singers, and improvisation. With the inclusion of "Baltimore" and "Black Muse," *Phase Two* is

[1] Prince's "Darling Nikki" was highlighted in 1985 by Tipper Gore and Susan Baker of the Parents Music Resource Center as one example of an artist out of the "Filthy 15" who created music deemed harmful to American children.

[2] https://officialpaisleypark.com/pages/paisley-park-tours, Retrieved on May 11, 2017

[3] While Paisley Park website states that Prince eventually would have opened Paisley Park to the world, I have often told my music colleagues that key parts of Paisley Park should be preserved as a national archive for music researchers and serious musicians instead of a wholesale tourist attraction.

the more overtly political album, an historical critique of issues that continue to trouble Black people.

As will be seen in my analysis, the first section of "Black Muse" illuminates Prince's political stance on Black self-determination and racial uplift that reflected his support of various social justice causes and the careers of other musical artists. "Black Muse" shows evidence that Prince was politically conscious and understood what was politically at stake for Black people. For music critics accustomed to archetypical Black musical acts who appeared apolitical or—on the other end of the spectrum—very political as shown in the lyrics and music of Funk music pioneers George Clinton and Sly Stone, Prince's refusal to adhere to either of those templates from those preceding zeitgeists was often construed as a betrayal of his Blackness and the Black community

> What has always separated Clinton – and, for that matter, Sly Stone –from Prince was their attitude towards the politics of being black in America. Stone's Family was a prototype for the Revolution but no way did Stone ever seek to dissociate himself from the black world that made him. On the contrary, his entire act was a celebration of it and its right to equal, unadulterated recognition by the powers that be. It is a failure to appreciate this which makes many comparisons between Stone and Prince so shallow and glib" (Hill 1989, 207).

We should remember Prince's strategy employed very early in his career. He was a strategist that embraced representational slippage, a type of aesthetic liminality that would ultimately inoculate him from radio market ghettoization while allowing him to reach the ears, hearts and minds of people everywhere. By the time *Dirty Mind* (1980) is released, Prince is positioned as a racially ambiguous prophet whose music signals a growing "biracial orientation" in the future of American popular music.[4] Prince's biracialism was thought to enable him in synthesizing Black and white popular music codes, leading to an intervention into the ghettoizing of American popular music. Indeed, Prince explored various musical styles but the roots of his music was darker than blue. While he commanded people's attention with his virtuosic flair, Prince challenged his audiences with lyrical and sonic diatribes on social inequality, racism, and fanaticism.[5] Prince wrote many songs that dealt with a host of social and complex issues, "trying to understand the world so he could change it" (Grow 2016). Prince developed a critical consciousness and political acuity from a young age. Prince read the late comedian and civil rights activist Dick Gregory's book *Nigger* (1969) and other literature about the continual Black struggle for equality and freedom (C. Smith, personal communication, May 26, 2017). Prince's remarkable comments about the connection between Black people, Black music, and value are referenced in the cogent

[4] http://www.nytimes.com/1981/12/02/arts/the-pop-life-is-prince-leading-music-to-a-true-biracism.html. Retrieved on April 28, 2017

[5] I attended Prince's Rally 4 Peace concert in Baltimore on Mother's Day at the Royal Farms Arena in 2015 and witnessed how Prince brought attention to the militarization of Black communities while highlighting the link between poverty and police brutality. The death of 25-year-old Freddie Gray while in police custody was the catalyst but Prince was critiquing the socio-political circumstances that created the conditions for Gray's death.

statement he made before presenting the 2015 Grammy for Album of the Year: "Albums still matter. Like books and black lives, albums still matter. Tonight, and always."[6] The connection Prince makes between literacy, Black music and the value of Black life may have appeared anomalous to those unfamiliar with his political convictions. His political convictions often existed in his lyrics on a different register below the humorous and colorful theatricality born in the narrative of corporeal temptations. Yet Prince was becoming more outspoken about Black humanity in the unexpected twilight of his life and he understood his legacy was about preparing a way for the next generation, not only through what has become the postmortem discovery of financial support for social justice organizations, but by setting an example through the legacy of world renown musicianship and creativity. Prince's "legacy is going to be about researching"[7] and knew he "had to make moves setting it up for the future…" (C. Smith, personal communication, May 26, 2017).

This work's primary contribution to the growing body of literature on Prince will be an analysis of his music and activism through the hermeneutic of the Black radical aesthetic steeped in Afro-diasporic thought and philosophy. I approach my analysis of Prince, not as a music critic, but as a creative musician and theorist because "sometimes the issues are not about who is better than whom, but what is a particular artist trying to do and what does it teach us about the music and the world we inhabit (Kelley quoted in Welburn 2009)."[8] Prince's music teaches us what he was trying to do as a musician and citizen in an increasingly globalized and complex world. I understand Prince's oeuvre within the context of what Ishmael Reed calls "Neo HooDoo esthetic" (1972) and what Robert Farris Thompson defines as the "lessons from the crossroads" (1983) in an effort to resist situating Prince within a discursive formation (Foucault 1972) of theses on Prince's purported ambiguous racial and sexual identity.[9] Ishmael Reed defines Neo-HooDoo as an unmistakably Black aesthetic that does not require legitimization or validation from European art values. Neo HooDoo challenges power structures by disrupting social inequality. Neo Hoodoo has its own sensuality, is not sexist and does not treat women as sexual objects for pleasure. New HooDoo is superior to Christianity and Islam because it has allowed a space for women theorists and philosophers. Prince mentored and promoted the careers of many women. The Neo-HooDoo esthetic has an immense impact on American culture but does not get credit for influencing American culture (Reed 1972). Reed argues the critical establishment would rather credit European artistic culture for the hipness in America. The crossroads is that unfixed space where the infinite potentiality of the Black radical imagination reigns. The crossroads tell us that a community's identity and strength can be maintained through improvisation in the face of crushing despair brought on by systems historically designed to marginalize and destroy Black life. In the following pages, I will engage Prince, framing my analysis of his compositional and lyrical

[6] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LdE5bAGIyC4, Retrieved on June 2, 2017,

[7] http://www.cnn.com/videos/entertainment/2016/04/26/prince-muse-remembers-legend-lemon-intv-cnt.cnn/video/playlists/celebs-pay-tribute-to-prince/. Retrieved on June 2nd, 2017

[8] http://www.openskyjazz.com/2009/09/aint-but-a-few-of-us-Black-jazz-writers-tell-their-story-9/. Retrieved on May 9th, 2017

[9] A discursive formation is a collection of statements about a subject that share the same institutional strategies and political patterns as it constructs a meaning within a discourse. For more information on discursive formations, see Foucault's *Archeology of Knowledge* (1969)

processes from the lens of Eshu at the crossroads. We might then discover through Black performance theory how Prince's music embodies liminality, self-determination and racial uplift. Nadine George-Graves concept of diasporic spidering might also be useful here.

At the root of George-Graves definition of diasporic spidering is the notion of Black identity as a continually changing process that is performative in nature. Spidering is antithetical to biological essentialism, fixed notions of the African diaspora and "embraces the multifarious and slippery performances of Black identity" (George-Graves 2014, 44). Prince's performance of liminality could be understood as a type of musical spidering that plays in the pool of representations while rooted in his love and economic empowerment of the Black community. Prince was, himself, a Black muse in several ways for perhaps countless people across the political and racial identity spectrum. His creativity and work ethic influenced other artists. The music he wrote for other artists helped launch, rejuvenate and, in some cases, resurrect careers. His complex and nuanced representations of humanity were inclusive of audiences irrespective of gender and sexuality identity. More importantly, Prince was a muse through his humanitarian acts. It is important to understand the lyrical and musical content of Prince's music within the broader mission and philosophical tradition behind his actions. It is important to ask how racial uplift, self-determination, and liminality manifest as philosophical threads in Prince's music. To explore the deeper significance of Prince's musical goals, it is first important to examine how scholars have positioned Prince in a universalizing discourse to explain his musical strategies. I follow with an examination of Prince's music within the context of an alternative discourse rooted in Black esthetic philosophy. This crossroads philosophy is then connected to Prince's belief in self-determination which is placed within the genealogy of musicians who have practiced self-determination. I then analyze the sonic impact of several of his songs on the levels of lyrical and compositional form. I conclude the piece arguing that Prince's music could be understood in vibrant new ways within the burgeoning field of Black performance theory.

Prince and Positionality

One's reading of Prince is anchored in how one understands his or her own positionality in the world. Whether you read Prince as a racially and sexually ambiguous locus where he becomes an inspiration for freeing oneself from various social constraints on sexual identity, or whether you are on a mission to reclaim Prince as a Black musician anchoring his persona and cultural production in the African diaspora, the culture that informs his work has been downplayed in an attempt to make Prince, and his musical ideas, universally appealing. Scholars like Hawkins and Niblock have rightly championed Prince's fluidity of representations. They argue that "his representations of ethnicity, gender and sexuality are proof of his constantly shifting image and circumstance…Rather than conforming to stereotypes, Prince explores representations that challenge the power relations of the very binaries, Black-white, straight-homo and girl-boy. His authenticity is thus established by a politics of representation that is continuously double-coded" (Hawkins and Niblock 2011, 33). What I find most compelling is examining how Prince's complexity is rooted in Black culture and

cosmology. While I agree with Hawkins and Niblock's argument regarding Prince's double-coded behavior, it is more crucial that scholars address Prince's doubleness through W.E. Dubois's theory of double-consciousness. Dubois's theory of double consciousness speaks to Prince's defying of stereotypes, power relations, and simplistic binaries. If Prince is not always looking "at himself through the eyes of others that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Du Bois et al. 2004), he is orchestrating his lived two-ness through his musical, cinematic and sartorial strategies that challenge monochromatic notions of Blackness. Du Bois's theory, which connects to the lessons of the crossroads, accounts for Prince's repertoire of survival shapeshifting. To suggest Prince's artistic strategies are unique to him as a stand-alone signifyin' figure suspended in a universal space of colorblindness separates him from the tradition of the Black blues men and women who sang boldly and truthfully about their lives rather than creating a false soundtrack to white, idealized notions of mainstream heterosexual love. Ma Rainey, for example, showed us through "Countin' the Blues" how she understood that composing gave her creative control while "countering the Christian monopolization of Black spirituality" (Davis 1998, 129). There is much talk about how Prince empowered women but we must remember that Black blues men and blues women laid the groundwork for Prince's innovation generations before June 7, 1958. America was founded upon the extermination of Native Americans and the enslavement of Black people wholesale and—so for that reason—this study of Prince's music and activism does not have the patina of racial discourse; this study of Prince is saturated in racial discourse. Though he sought to be racially ambiguous early in his career (Nilsen 1999) issues of race and Black pride were important to Prince, notwithstanding his proclivity for deemphasizing racial difference in the interest of musically imagining a racial utopia in songs like "Baltimore." Perhaps Prince did not have an ambivalent relationship with race but an ambivalent relationship with being defined solely by race**.** Transcending categories however is not synonymous with abandoning ones' roots**.** My claim invites crucial questions about his work. What does his lyrics reveal? Who does Prince musically reference or sample? What sonic signifiers or musical codes does he prioritize? I contend that Prince was less ambivalent, less mercurial, less liberal, less ambiguous about race than he has been depicted in the discursive formulations about his work. The African folklore concerning the orisha Eshu Elegba who guards the crossroads is a fruitful way to address the work of an artist who consistently defied musical and corporate expectations.

The Lessons from the Crossroads

Eshu Elegba, the prominent African orisha, has been defined as a royal child, a prince, "the ultimate master of potentiality" (Thompson 1984, 14). Eshu is "the mediator of the crossroads between the spirit world and the land of the living" (Fennell 2007, 91). From the Yoruba Nigerian perspective, crossroads are "the point where doors open or close, where people have to make decisions that may forever after affect their lives" (Thompson 1984, 19). In African art, the Trickster God is represented with bulging eyes which for the Yoruba people represent the power of potentiality—a gift that comes from God. (Thompson 1984) Elsewhere Eshu is represented with the cowrie shells of sacrifice, which represent resilience.

It communicates the story that even though the Yoruba people may be reduced to fragments due to the difficulties of life, the people still retain their individuality and identity. Eshu is guardian or Master of the crossroads who interprets the messages of the spirit world and is often portrayed as having a fiddle that allows the trickster God access to the spirit world. Prince's musical strategies exemplify the lessons of the crossroads because of the playful and provocative double meanings in his lyrical forms, the expression of opaque religiosity that is the middle ground between good and evil, the blending of musical genres, and the masquerading of political speech via intense eroticism. We also find the lesson of the crossroads in Prince's very meticulous arrangements, his use of very sophisticated musical nuance and subtle irregularity in musical patterns. Being a trickster is about occupying liminal spaces, it's about being comfortable in an unfixed state while improvising the topography of your life and music as you go along. For the Trickster, the secular and sacred are not polar opposites but exist together in harmony. In the music of Prince, the sacred and the secular exist together on the levels of his inventive iconography as well as his musical architecture.

In the history of the Mande textiles in Senegambia, the Mande avoided symmetry in their craft since symmetrically straight lines were associated with evil (Thompson 1984). The Mande symbolized their avoidance of straight lines through creating textile patterns that interrupted each other. These asymmetrical permutations symbolize the philosophical antithesis to the hierarchical, Western technocratic way. Similarly, Prince avoids the straight lines of conventional music making. The crossroads as a form of alternative theoretical knowledge outside the ivory tower has been a productive, methodological space for understanding marginalized sexualities beyond the mainstream heterosexual or mainstream gay and lesbian spheres. While the discourse of tricksterism has been focused on the heroic Black male, the Trickster can be explored as a space for understanding pansexuality and the most marginalized sexualities (Horton-Stallings 2007). While Prince has been celebrated as a universal ambivalent space where both men and women can challenge gender and sexual norms (Walser 1994; McClary and Walser 1994; Fuchs 1996; Hawkins & Niblock 2011), reading his representational obfuscations through the Black discourse of shapeshifting is in alignment with Prince's cultural roots. Given America's underwriting of the Middle Passage which helped shape Black music culture in the new world, viewing Prince's music as connected to the slave culture of self-determination and liminality is not illogical. Built upon the mythology of Eshu, the crossroads as a theory of interpretation is a useful framework for understanding Prince's musical performances of liminality, his blended representation of mainstream sexualities, and his sartorial strategies. The discourse of the crossroads helps us understand why and how Black people have maneuvered through and around the power dynamics of white supremacy to survive outside the hull of the slave ship these past several hundred years.

Over the course of several decades, Prince has been a locus where some musicologists have used European critical theory to analyze his work. Black performance theory is a flourishing space of critical discourse that is important for assessing the way Prince strategically blurred binaries. Examining the way Prince subtly integrated representations of eroticism with complex political messages is a musical strategy we should study. "Lady Cabdriver" from the 1999 album (1982) reveals such a strategy. In

"Lady Cab Driver" at 3:10 Prince goes into a diatribe about inequality in American society. Given that Prince performs these criticisms in dialog with the musical counterpoint of orgasmic, female sounds that ebb and flow as they crescendo into a climax, the listener is led to believe that Prince' dissatisfaction with American society is performed as a sexual act as if to say we are all getting violated by society. In a song that talks about a female cab driver as a sexual metaphor, Prince begins to criticize crooked politicians, racial discrimination, white supremacy, and greedy wealthy people who refuse to share their fortune with the impoverished: "This is for the politicians who are bored and believe in war…/ This is for discrimination and egotists who think supreme/ And this is for whoever taught you how to kiss in designer jeans/ That one is for where you have to live/ This one's for the rich, not all of them, just the greedy, the ones that don't know how to give/ This one is for Yosemite Sam and the tourists at Disneyland." Prince criticizes tourists for being enamored with the fantasy that Disneyland presents. He finds fault with people who mimic the lifestyle sold in designer jeans commercials. These political messages arrive midway in the song, juxtaposed with female orgasmic sounds. The liminality displayed in the song is the surprising political commentary in a work that initially focuses on a lady cab driver with double entendre sexual statements. In his display of heterosexual dominance, Prince tricks the listener into believing that representing vehicular eroticism is his musical goal while he is using that eroticism to critique American society. In "Lady Cab Driver," Prince was not expressing anger at the female subject. The Lady Cab Driver is given control over Prince's destination, taking him to her mansion but is also submissive to his tirade during the erotic simulation. In a kind of signifying multitasking, Prince represented erotic sex with the female subject while also showing his frustration with a litany of social ills such as consumerism (tourists at Disneyland) and warfare. The listener is invited to question what Prince's music is really about and what are his strategies for creating multiple meanings. Yet Prince was not a musical artist whose goal was to be evasive in continual musical circumlocution. One example is the Glyph sign. A man of tactics and strategies, the Glyph or Love Symbol Prince adopted in the 1990s was a deliberate design that fused "the astrologically inspired Mars-male and Venus-female symbols" (Rhodes 2016, 39). Prince told the designers that he wanted his icon to evoke a cross. The crossbar was intentionally crafted asymmetrically, to achieve a sense of subtle imbalance.[10] In songs like "Black Muse," Prince reveals his strategy of drawing the listener in on the first part of the song only to communicate another message. For example, at 4:55, "Black Muse" shows a different harmonic melodic and rhythmic scheme from the song's first several minutes. Perhaps warning us that he is taking us to a different place intellectually, musically, and spiritually, Prince sings "now that eye got your attention/eye think it's 'bout time eye mention/ the reason why I wrote this song." Prince then goes on to communicate a cryptic vision for the future. We will address "Black Muse" in depth in the latter part of this essay. That Prince "became a character in timbre to say something he really meant"[11] was not limited to the manipulation of his voice in songs like if "I was Your Girlfriend" or "House Quake." He also manipulated the timbre of his instrumental sound in real time using the delay, chorus and flanger pedal settings. Prince's music is rarely about one topic

[10] Ibid, Rhodes

[11] Red Bull Music Academy interview with Susan Rogers 2016

but occupies a space between meanings. Prince showed this trickster intentionality and work ethic from the beginning (Nilsen 1999), taking 5 months' studio work to complete his first album *For You* (1978). To defy our musical expectations, Prince had to be equally well versed in understanding what the musical conventions of his time were over the span of his career as well as which of his forbears and contemporaries were breaking those musical conventions. We live in a sea of musical codes and chopped up musical genres that have inculcated our collective nervous systems across the various eras, telling us how to feel and where to shop on cue. Yet music has never been biologically universal. Music is a collection of conventions that reflects the time and space of its era (Rosenthal and Flacks 2011). Prince also lived with us in the sea of those codes and deliberately avoided adhering to the prescribed clichés of what was supposed to be Black sound.

Black innovative sound made by Black musicians can never be consigned to a checklist of musical gestures. Even the most iconoclastic compositions and performances by white musicians are marked by hegemonic aesthetics of whiteness and a degree of elite privilege not accorded to Black musicians. Members in groups like the Black Rock Coalition[12] were never able to create a list of Black aesthetics because the nature of the Black rock aesthetic is rooted in the freedom to explore any sonic landscape members chose (Mahon 2004). From the beginning, Prince understood this and knew that a ruthless independence was needed for him to realize his musical visions. Susan Rogers, Prince's former recording engineer and technician, discusses about how Prince described music as "the street you live on. And by that he meant that is your home base. The music that feels the most right to you. It's like the call of your people" (Rogers 2016). Prince believed exploring other musical neighborhoods was O.K. while rooted in your own neighborhood.[13] Early on Prince was influenced by singer and composer Joni Mitchell. As a young musician, he attended Mitchell's Minnesota concerts, often sitting in the front row (Brown 2005). Prince sought the native Canadian's attention by writing her fan mail but the admiration became mutual in later years. Mitchell stated that Prince was her favorite unofficial protégé.[14] Given Prince's documented admiration of Mitchell's music, Prince was likely influenced by her use of bold harmonic and melodic colors, asymmetrical phrasing, and lyrics that had a timbre of their own on albums such as *Hejira* (Mitchell 1976). Mitchell studied jazz, worked with celebrated jazz musicians such as saxophonist Wayne Shorter and bassist Jaco Pastorious and one of her Black muses was iconic vocalist Billie Holiday. In that sense, Prince shared the same philosophy of post-war Black modern jazz musicians who believed that being cosmopolitan world citizens who explored other musical languages was not out of step with being rooted in one's Blackness (Porter 2002). Duke Ellington, Miles Davis, and many other African American musicians shunned musical categories and the term Jazz long before Prince was born. The right to name, change your name, or discard your name completely has long been part of the diasporic Black experience. This is why innovative Black musicians refuse stifling musical categories that fail to define even a small percentage of

[12] Founded in New York City 1985, the Black Rock Coalition (BRC) has sought to make an intervention into racist American music industry practices that define rock music as white while denying Black artists their music heritage of creating the music they call Rock. Rock as a moniker, a shortened version of the term "Rock and Roll," has been used for generations by white music business persons to obfuscate the Black origins of rock music while privileging white artists as the most visible players of Rock and Roll music.

[13] Ibid, Rogers

[14] http://nymag.com/nymetro/arts/music/pop/11888/. Retrieved on January 14th, 2017

the music that they create as a critique of the status quo. The core of Prince's musical projects and persona was rooted in the tradition of self-determination and creating his own game within the larger systemic game whose rules he defied.

> No, my living shall not be in vain
> No, my living shall not be in vain
> If I can help somebody, as I'm singing the song
> You know, my living shall not be in vain
> ~Alma Bazel Androzzo[15]

"Our Own Game": Self-Determination and Prince

As a teenager, Prince learned music through listening to his father John L. Nelson play piano and transcribing music from various artists. Prince's cousin Charles "Chazz" Smith tells a story of how he and Prince would study the elder Nelson's sheet music in his absence, trying to "figure out the chords" Prince's father had played. Prince also studied Latino-American guitarist and bandleader Carlos Santana's melodic lines and improvisations. Smith describes Prince's insatiable appetite for knowledge this way:

> His thirst for knowledge was always there because he would pick up any kind of book, philosophy … you could tell by his writing, its depth. Prince would never have a commercial conversation. You had to come with the goods … we were taught by our parents to read … our family educated us. They insisted and forced reading on us. The discipline, and all that, comes from our family, so I am going to give credit to the ancestors on that; all that knowledge, the wisdom, the hard work, the never giving up.

The love of philosophy, a derivative from (philosophia) which etymologically translates into the love of wisdom, was partially the root of Prince's self-assurance. However, Prince's pride, dignity, and trust in his creative abilities were primarily instilled by his family. This confidence was noticed by his music teachers.

Though he studied music in high school, Prince was largely a self-taught musician. The Minneapolis Central High School music program provided an outlet for Prince's work ethic. Whereas he excelled in guitar, music theory and stage band, it was Prince's self-motivation and natural gift that transformed him from a mediocre musician to a great musician (Nilsen 1999). That self-motivation inspired Prince's boundless ability to teach himself music theory and several instruments. Prince's former music teacher Jimmy Hamilton writes "If he (Prince) wanted to accomplish something, he would really work at it. If there was something he was going to practice, he would sit there for an hour or two hours, and he would not stop until it had been accomplished" (Hamilton quoted in Nilsen 1999, 21). Prince had an African American high school music teacher named Mr. Darby who was an accomplished pianist specializing in the repertoire of Frédéric Chopin.[16] When Prince, his cousin Charles Smith, and other musician friends auditioned for Darby's

[15] Alma Bazel Androzzo's work was written in 1945 and made famous by Mahalia Jackson.

[16] Chopin (1810–1849) was a Polish virtuoso pianist and composer from the Romantic era of Western music who is revered for his lyrical and harmonically complex solo piano music.

music class, the classically trained Darby was open-minded enough to allow Prince and his friends to study and perform the contemporary music they loved (C. Smith Skype presentation at Purple Reign Conference, May 26th, 2017). This is important because music teachers often insist that their students learn music theory and repertoire from the Eurocentric point of view due to their own Westernized inculcation. Mr. Darby told Prince and his musically advanced cohort to "come in tomorrow and play me the songs you guys know and if you'll do that, you won't have to learn all the other stuff the kids are learning. You can focus on the music you're learning." With delight, Prince's cousin Charles "Chazz" Smith recalled Darby's reaction: "We came back and we had him (Darby) flabbergasted. From that point on, no one could tell Prince how to learn music or what to play (C. Smith Skype presentation at Purple Reign Conference, May 26th, 2017)." The music curriculum in high schools, colleges, and conservatories are not designed for musical polyglots. A music student specializes in the performance practices of his or her instrument through an apprenticeship with an older, master musician over several years. Prince was not interested in this hierarchy or specialization. He was interested in learning from other musicians. Prince's uncanny maturity, self-discipline, and trust in his musical vision and abilities that propelled him through high school is the same trust that informed his career choices. Prince, for example, rejected the record label recommendation of Earth Wind & Fire bandleader Maurice White as a producer for his first recording (Nilsen 1999). Despite the scant information about John L. Nelson's musical training, it is clear he was an important influence on Prince.[17] Nelson, a jazz pianist and composer who also worked at Honeywell to make ends meet, likely evolved as a self-taught musician on the bandstand through alternative networks of instruction rooted in transcribing music from jazz records and sharing theoretical information and performance techniques between musicians. Despite the clear intellectual nature of their theoretical systems which formed the basis of their compositional and improvisational processes, many Black musicians refused to think of their music as academic since it represented a particular way of thinking that was anathema to their cultural and spiritual beliefs (Monson 2007). While statements about Black music as "more natural" had the potential to reify stereotypes about Black musicians as nonintellectual,[18] Black musicians were creating a space for defining their art on their own terms according to their own political imaginations. Prince is the son of a jazz musician who worked in a music tradition rooted in taking control of one's music education, proving that a vibrant and deep intellect existed beyond the white imagination of Black musicians as mere entertainers. Prince's craft, however, had limitations. He chose not to bring music charts to his rehearsals, recording sessions or performances, using only lyrics to guide his processes. Horn Section Arranger for Prince Michael B. Nelson states, "We never got charts from him. I never saw any laying around either. Only lyrics. He certainly knew chord basics, but I think he pretty much worked from ear. When we were working on "Sexy MF," he told the horns to stab on an A7. We played it and he said, no,

[17] Jazz and contemporary music programs are common today in the USA but Black musicians had to develop their own ways of theorizing because official Black music programs did not exist. Jazz musicians studied harmony books on their own, imitated recorded improvised solos, and improvised along with rhythm sections on vinyl recordings. They read jazz publications such as *Downbeat,* which codified jazz vocabulary licks that would be internalized to the point of becoming natural when performed. Most importantly, jazz musicians developed their own theories for their own music where none previously existed. Black musicians have historically been suspicious of academia, which they felt diluted the cultural foundations of their music.

[18] Ibid, Monson 2007

make it minor, so we played that. He said no that's not it either. I said, "I think I know what you want," and voiced out an A7#9 and we played it. he said, "yeah that's it." So, I think he could hear interesting chord extensions, just not necessarily name them" (Horn Section Arranger Michael B. Nelson, personal communication, January 11, 2016). While music charts or lead sheets often facilitate rehearsals because there is a document with cues for everyone to read, teaching band members music by ear has also been a traditional way of learning music. In some rehearsal situations, teaching music by ear is a more direct and faster way of internalizing the musical form. Moreover, Prince produced songs so quickly that he would not have had time to wait for his music to be typeset in music notation software. This do-it-yourself attitude and ethos seeped into Prince's consciousness. Prince's genius, as so many critics and admiring musicians have argued throughout his career, was not only his ability to play several instruments and make recordings by himself but understanding that applying agency in music could equal creative and financial freedom. Remarks from Prince's acceptance speech for his Soul Train award for Male Artist of the Decade (2000) indicate how he viewed the relationship between self-determination and being a Black artist

> Some people find it odd that when we win anything in this game, we give praise back unto God. Well in somebody else's game any triumph makes us feel blessed. When it's your game, you make the rules, everything comes easy, all of your friends are in key positions, so when you decide you don't want to play anymore, you never leave empty-handed. Can someone say golden parachute? Well it's not your game, you didn't make the rules, so everything comes hard. As long as you are signed to a contract, you're gonna take a minority share of the winnings. A select few of us will do well. The majority will not. So, as a people, we will be considered a minority. But stop. Let's take a moment and look at yourselves. There's nothing minor about you. You are a blessed people. You're the most talented on earth and you are still grateful. This is why upon winning in their game, you always thank God. Tonight, I would like to ask one favor of you: Imagine what we'll all be like in our own game. Peace and love for one another.[19]

Exhorting his musical colleagues to remain standing while he delivered his brief sermon, Prince did not criticize his fellow Black artists as having faux spirituality when they express gratitude immediately after winning an award. He interprets their public display of devotion as relief at being recognized in a competitive business historically controlled by music executives who have sought to commodify their creativity for corporate gain. Prince links gratefulness to God and the industry to Black people's ignorance of their musical gifts. "Winning in their game" comes at the expense of recognizing and implementing possibilities for transforming collective Black brilliance into entrepreneurial music business models that lead to creative freedom and a majority share of the winnings sans contract.[20] Prince's belief in self-determination led him to

[19] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WgD4-Xm2zlg

[20] From the 1990s onward Prince understood contracts within the master-slave relationship.

support Black led movements against police brutality and donated money to help foster equity and entrepreneurialism in the Black community.[21]

Close friends and associates of Prince testify that social justice issues were just as important to Prince as his musical praxis. Van Jones, a close friend and collaborator of Prince, is an attorney and activist who has created and led organizations that support social and environmental justice. *#YesWeCode*, which trains underprivileged youth to become computer programmers, The Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, which focuses on criminal justice issues, and Rebuild the Dream, which focuses on creating an economy that supports future generations, are three examples of the kind of work Jones does. Jones, like millions of people, was impressed with Prince's immense creativity. The mutual admiration between Jones and Prince, however, was rooted in helping less fortunate people. Prince did not suffer sycophancy. As Jones recounts, Prince gave financial support to many of these organizations in secret because of his religious beliefs:

> He was a Jehovah's Witness so he was not allowed to speak publicly about any of his good acts, any of his charitable activity. He helped to create something we call *#YesWeCode*. *#YesWeCode* now has 15 major technology companies working with kids in the hood, getting them ready for jobs in Silicon Valley. That was Prince.[22]

Prince was able to apply the same organizational brilliance he had in creating bands over decades to create coalitions of public intellectual activists in order to foster social change. Jones: "Just like he had a whole roster of musicians, he had a whole roster of intellectuals, a whole roster of political activists, a whole roster of change-makers… just like he was a bandleader on the musical side, he was a bandleader on the social side" (Grow 2016). Prince's politics were never separate from his music:

> Even if it wasn't readily apparent to his fans, social causes were an interest that permeated Prince's whole being…"I think people misinterpreted him as being cool for cool's sake, or mysterious for mystery's sake, or aloof for its own sake," he says. "But that aspect of his personality was him trying to understand the world, the universe, God, people, everything. He was trying to understand the world so he could change it. He wasn't trying to change it so he could be famous or rich, he'd already achieved that by the time he was 20. So, what do you do for the next 30-plus years? (Grow 2016)

A cultural worker is someone who uses art to create on the ground commentary on social matters that impact the daily lives of marginalized people in the most crucial ways. Creating music is a way of not just working out musical problems but it is also a powerful tool for thinking through social problems. Issues of social injustice were never considered extramural, or in Prince's case extramusical.

For Prince, social problems were matters to be addressed subversively and directly, depending on how he structured his compositional forms and the gradation of the urgency. Prince used his music to talk about poverty, climate change, and religiosity in

[21] http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/prince-the-secret-philanthropist-his-cause-was-humanity-20160425. Retrieved on May 10, 2017.
[22] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cMwH-4pA1NA. Retrieved on Sunday May 7, 2017

"Planet Earth" (2007). He sings "50 years from now what will they say about us here? /Did we care for the water and the fragile atmosphere?" It is interesting the way Prince links a balanced eco system with his religious belief system in the chorus: Just like the countless bodies/That revolve around the sun/Planet Earth must now come into balance with the one." "Planet Earth" is also an opportunity for Prince to link his belief of the futility of war with poverty: "Imagine sending your first born/Off to fight a war/With no good reason how it started and what they are fighting for/And if they're blessed to make it home will they still be poor?"

In addition, he recently addressed police brutality in Baltimore which he used as a metonym for discussing police violence in urban cities across America. In the wake of Prince's death Alicia Garza, one of the founders of the Black lives matter movement, wrote a poem on her website stating that Prince "was from a world where Black was not only beautiful, but it was nuanced and complex and shifting and unapologetic and wise" (Garza 2016). Garza's statement reveals how she sees Prince connected to the *#BlackLivesMatter* (BLM) movement. For Garza and so many others, Prince was not a social text to be read in abstract ways. He was a human being who articulated through his innovative music a desire for total freedom from oppressive forces in society. His philanthropy towards the BLM and similar organizations is evidence of his support for youth led movements. Prince was an otherworldly Black muse that inspired Garza to write a poem about him as "nuanced," "complex," "shifting," and "unapologetic." While this poem seems solely connected to Prince, Garza is defining the movement's notions of radical Blackness through her poem on Prince. Prince's illusive, captivating ability to self-realize the Black tradition of self-determination in the most cosmopolitan ways while being committed to human rights and the Black community inspired Garza and the BLM. For Garza and for many people in the movement, Prince was an example of an artist using music as the practice of freedom.[23]

For Prince, creative freedom was tantamount to human freedom and that belief was manifested in his sound. Prince often used his father's chord sequences in songs like "Purple Rain" and gave his father a song writing credit when he did. What else did Prince hear in his father's harmonies? He must have heard John L. Nelson's flight from racism in Louisiana. He must have heard the frustration of trying to make it as a musician while working as a plastic molder at Honeywell Electronics. It was perhaps his father's migration to the north and professional struggles that convinced Prince to pursue unfettered musical forms as he created a professional and personal life on his own terms. Prince quietly donated money to BLM. Garza writes about his philanthropy in her poem: "Early on in the evolution of Black Lives Matter and this new upsurge of Black Freedom dreams, he quietly and yet deliberately made sure that we had what we needed to be successful. I remember asking what we could do to acknowledge him, what could we do to show our gratitude and the response was to keep going. To keep building. To keep moving towards freedom" (Garza 2016). Prince did not seek acknowledgement for his financial contributions and was musically and financially invested in ending systemic violence towards marginalized communities. We may

[23] There is a great discussion of music as the practice of freedom in Robin D.G Kelley's book on Thelonious Monk. Freedom for Monk was not just bending notes. He inherited the memory of freedom that his ancestors felt during reconstruction and also the obliteration of those gained freedoms due to Jim Crow laws. This memory is as important to Monk's musical innovation as knowledge he must have gained from his peers.

never know the full extent of Prince's philanthropy to human rights organizations given his desire for secrecy. Yet there are clues of his involvement with organizations. The Prince photograph featured prominently on the Ferguson Action Movement (FAM) 2016 website indicates that perhaps he contributed funds to that organization as well. Prince's picture was featured first on the FAM website whereas no other pictures of celebrities were featured. In the upper hand corner of the Prince photograph is a quote from one of Prince's most well-known songs "Let's Go Crazy": "Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to get through this thing called life." At the bottom of the photograph is written "Thank you, the movement" near a purple heart. The idea of the purple heart immediately brings the US military to mind as the purple heart is given to servicemen and women for bravery, suffering wounds or paying the ultimate price by being killed in action. It is interesting to think of Prince as a nonviolent soldier against the dehumanization of Blacks; a soldier who used the profits from his musical excellence to do humanitarian work in the tradition of his faith.

Black Muse Defined

Prince viewed the Black experience—the struggle for freedom, equality, self-determination through individual and social movements—as a source of creative inspiration. But what did he mean when he wrote a song called "Black Muse"? The etymological origin of the word muse is unknown. The nine Muses have been called water-nymphs and were worshipped in ancient Greece near Mount Olympus. The poetry of Homer linked the Muses with the power of knowledge and the creative force in singers. Mousikē thought to be synonymous with Greek culture in general became linked to the field of liberal arts and sciences and was reduced to what we think of as music. In this Hellenic context music represents intellectual rigor and grace.[24] In our everyday parlance muses are often thought of as a source of inspiration that fuels an artists' creativity. Muses are both something private and public, something that we fixate on to do creative work. If our muse is taken away, we often believe our inspiration is taken away. A muse, however, is not just a noun but a verb that means to contemplate or ponder on a matter. Though it's a likely connection, it would be a mistake to attribute Erato, the ancient mythological Muse of song, dance and of erotic lyric, often represented with the lyre[25] as the concept on which Prince bases this song. The patina of heteronormative patriarchy is immediately activated in my mind when I think of male artists who prop up women as muses. Within this context music itself is understood as property, feminized like a boat or car, which requires hours of devotion. Prince did not understand the concept of a muse in this way but as women musicians who could help build his musical vision.

Prince had several muses who made direct contributions to his sound. Prince preferred to work with women and often promoted them over men (Nilsen 1999). In the last several years of his life, Prince mentored artists Janelle Monáe, Ledisi, Judith

[24] Warren Anderson and Thomas J. Mathiesen. "Muses." *Grove Music Online*. *Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed December 31, 2016, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.libezproxy2.syr.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/19396.

[25] "Erato (i)." *Grove Music Online*. *Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed December 31, 2016, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.libezproxy2.syr.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/08908.

Hill, Lianna La Havas and likely many more young artists who were on his radar. Earlier in his career, keyboardist Lisa Coleman and guitarist Wendy Melvoin were major Prince collaborators over several years and contributed a great deal to Prince's work. Coleman and Melvoin introduced Prince to various types of classical and popular music and both played an instrumental and compositional role[26] on *Purple Rain* (1984), *Around the World in A Day* (1985), *Parade* (1986) and *Sign O' The Times* (1987).

When Prince calls his composition "Black Muse," those signifiers eradicate the idea that he is conceptualizing muse within the context of Greek mythology that has informed the European philosophy of aesthetics. Prince, as Henry Louis Gates (1988) might argue, is signifying on the term muse, emptying of its white etymological roots. Black Muse is a term for Prince that connotes Black pride and a rich genealogy of music that is evidence of Black survival throughout American history. "Black Muse" also compels me to understand how the song fits within his other political compositions. For now, we will focus on analyzing Black Muse, a song Prince purportedly wrote for a young African American lady who was his muse in the last 6 years of his life.

Prince had a Black muse and her name is Damaris Lewis. Born in 1990, Lewis is a Brooklynite born to parents from St Kitts. Lewis is an accomplished model and an alumnus of the famed Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School where she had professional training in dance. In multiple interviews Lewis claims that she was Prince's documented muse from 2010 until his death in 2016. In a video interview with online magazine The Root, Lewis states that Prince's "Black Muse" was written for her: "I've never said this on camera but "Black Muse," he wrote that for me."[27] Lewis met Prince at an afterparty during his 2010 Welcome 2 America Tour. Prince took Lewis on his Welcome 2 Australia Tour and began listing her as Muse on his concert programs. Lewis features this corroborating statement on her website:

> The late, great musician Prince selected her as his Muse & Dancer during his Welcome 2 Australia Tour 2012 with The New Power Generation. She continued touring with Prince & NPG for his 2012 Welcome to Chicago Tour, appeared with the band on Jimmy Kimmel live, and served as his muse for his closing show at SXSW 2013 in Austin Texas. In the summer of 2013, Damaris traveled to Switzerland to perform with the band at the Iconic Montreux Jazz Festival. She remained his muse and dancer up until his passing in April of 2016.[28]

I was interested in what Ms. Lewis could tell us about Prince's socio-political views and how those views connected to his lyrics about the slave trade in "Black Muse."[29] To

[26] Prince was a sponge who absorbed and incorporated the musical ideas of other musicians and put them into his music. He was known to take other musicians ideas since Junior High School. Renown producer Terry Lewis who worked with Prince in Minneapolis stated, "As great as Prince was, he pulled stuff from all of us" (Jam & Lewis lecture, Red Bull Music Academy 2016).

[27] http://www.theroot.com/watch-damaris-lewis-prince-s-Black-muse-1794432474. Retrieved on April 29th, 2017.

[28] http://damarislewis.com/bio. Retrieved on May 1, 2017

[29] Through her publicist, I made repeated requests to speak with Ms. Lewis about Prince but she did not respond.

understand Lewis as solely as an aesthetic inspiration for Prince's musical craft would be to misunderstand the larger significance of what she meant to Prince. Reportedly their relationship was not sexual, but based on mentorship and improvised, jocular tournaments of quick wit. "Black Muse" is not the first composition where Prince uses muse in the title. "Muse 2 the Pharaoh" is a composition on Rainbow Children (2001), one of Prince's lesser-known recordings. In this song, Prince describes his muse as having "ebony and milk in her thighs." Prince also sings that the future of the nation rests in her belly" and that "There's so much information 4 the next generation/Who's gonna drop it if you are not there?" This muse must be a virtuous woman and we know this because Prince ties virtuousness to the muses' ability to be Muse 2 the Pharaoh. The mention of ebony skin, the positioning of the muse as mother of the next generation who holds vital information, these signs indicate that Prince is imagining the muse as a Black woman. That Black women have often been thought of as the mother of civilization is far from novel and has existed in Afrocentric literature for generations. A Jehovah's Witness, Prince's vision of a muse was informed by his faith and his sect's interpretation of the Bible. "And if the proverb of the 31 and verse 10/becomes a song she sings again and again/she might be queen. A wife of noble character who can find? / She is worth far more than rubies." "Holocaust aside, many lived and died, would you rather be dead or sold/ Sold to the one who can now mate the displaced bloodline with the white jail bait, thinkin' like the keys on Prince's piano will be just fine." Prince had a vision of a muse that is Black, loyal and a model of virtuous womanhood. His lyrics for "Muse 2 the Pharaoh" reveals a notion of a muse linked to a bloodline of past African royalty, free from the type of forced race mixing detrimental to Black people's ability to thrive. Prince criticizes the forced breeding of enslaved Africans during the Middle Passage and later on the plantation when he sings "sold to the one who can now mate the displaced bloodline with the white jail bait." Nevertheless, given his professional and personal relationships, Prince didn't believe in segregating the races. While he may have appreciated saxophonist and composer Rashaan Roland Kirk's[30] "Blacknuss" composed using only the 36 Black notes of the piano, while Prince may have used the piano as a visual analogy for simplistic understandings of race, Prince's music tells us he believed in the complexity of chromaticism, music that embraces the palettes of possible colors. Prince's muse is a conflation of layers that constitute Prince's Black radical imagination that reflects his complex multilayered existence and his people's multilayered existence.

While the personification of salacity was part of Prince's stage identity and musical strategy for the better part of his early career, it was not sex that truly nourished his intellectual appetite. In fact, we can define the concept of Black muse in many ways. The Black muse is an idea that extends beyond Prince's relationship with Lewis. Black muse is an idea connected to Prince's broader mission of mentoring the younger

[30] Rahsaan Roland Kirk (1935–1977) was an iconoclastic, jazz composer and multi-instrumentalist who played tenor saxophone, flute, clarinet, nose flute, piano, and various types of percussion. Kirk was a visionary whose imagination and dreams launched him past his physical blindness and gave him the courage to break a plethora of musical conventions. Kirk played several instruments at once whereas most musicians play one instrument at a time. Prince was also a multi-instrumentalist, although he played one instrument as a time, who was inspired by otherworldly visions and dreams, often biblical in nature. Both musicians were inspired by the sounds of the Black church.

generation. Lewis talked about Prince's wish to bequeath a kind of deep knowing and trust in one's abilities to the future generations.[31] I believe Prince also saw himself as a Black Muse. In order to claim a Black muse, Prince must have understood himself as creative inspiration for millions of people. For Prince, the concept of Black muse was prismatic. He wanted to inspire his people with his musical brilliance but he in turn was inspired and rooted in his Black heritage. This is why Prince "made sure that every person in his life that influenced him, was influenced by him."[32] Prince's philosophy of using one's creative gifts to uphold the well-being and humanity of the less fortunate, while avoiding credit for philanthropy, is a core component of his Black Muse philosophy. Thirty-two years his junior, Lewis must have represented the potentiality of the younger generation to create a better world with less war, political strife and a green environment–the kind of world he envisioned and sang about in "Resolution": "The main problem with war/is that nobody ever wins/the next generation grows up, learns how to do it all over again."

At a particularly fraught time in American race relations due to the increasing visual evidence of police brutality against Blacks, Prince released HitnRun Phase Two (2015), which features "Black Muse." The song was released when the *#BlackLivesMatter* movement was thriving and in the penultimate months of Obama's presidency.

Exploring Black Muse

Reading the work of Prince requires an act of faith and the acceptance of the liminal quality of his creative process. Whereas orthodox performance practices is valued in other musical traditions so as to canonize those traditions and place the esthetics of that music above others, the music of the street reflects the fierce and quick adaptability necessary to survive the asymmetrical ebb and flow of a system designed to commodify Black music culture while also seeking to marginalize that way of life. Those who seek a definitive analysis of Prince's life and work miss the point. Prince's constant reinvention of his compositional, textural and lyrical forms prove his lack of interest in a definitive, permanent musical form or style, even if we can point to consistent musical strategies throughout his career. The nature of lyrics never translates into clear meanings and it is wise to consider the lyrical forms, how the composition is structured, and the use of instrumentation when analyzing music (Rosenthal and Flacks 2011). We should also consider that some music is deliberately esoteric, defying the decoding process. Whether the arcane nature is about protecting Black intellectual property or just being mysterious, this too is part of the African American music tradition. Prince begins the song speaking to the Black Muse telling the muse that he has "mighty good news to share, that a new day is dawning" and that there is a lot of work to do. It's not clear if the muse is personified as a male, female, the ancestors or an entire community. It is unclear how Prince defines work. Is "work" creating awareness amongst Black people? Is he discussing the work of entrepreneurialism in the Black community as he did when I heard him express the importance of self-determination in the Rally 4 Peace

[31] http://www.cnn.com/videos/entertainment/2016/04/26/prince-muse-remembers-legend-lemon-intv-cnt.cnn/video/playlists/celebs-pay-tribute-to-prince/. Retrieved on April 29th, 2017
[32] ibid.

concert in Baltimore? In the next group of lyrics, Prince tells the story of how "our mothers were good looking and our fathers were too" suggesting that it is important for our generation of parents to stay together in order for the current generation of African Americans to walk properly in the shoes. The shoes become a metaphor for the responsibility passed down from the older generations of Blacks to the current generation. But shoes also represent mobility, not in the sense of simply getting from point A to point B, but to a type of social mobility that achieves more equality for Black people. Prince connects violent acts to those of previous Black generations. Prince sings about how Black people have been beaten and humiliated by those who cracked the whips on our back: "we've been so abused." Prince appears to be commenting about prior generations of enslaved Black people transported through the Middle Passage who suffered through extreme torture and death. Prince makes this clear when he sings "long ago 2 men held one of us down/another took a whip and made a terrible sound/baby watched her father falling down to the ground/ that was you and me/. Prince is singing about slavery, about how the masters controlled Black people with violence and systematically humiliating Black men in front of their families. A child witnesses the slave master crack a whip on his or her father. Even though lyrics can be interpreted numerous ways, the evidence of Prince's racial commentary on the condition of Black people in America exists in numerous songs. In "Family Name" from *Rainbow Children* (2001), Prince orchestrates a disembodied robotic voice to discuss the fallacy of racial categories which sings "When a minority realizes its similarities on a higher level…the so-called minority becomes a majority in the wink of an eye." Prince was referring to Blacks and indigenous people of color. This is a stark contrast from Radiohead's use of a disembodied voice 4 years earlier in "Fitter Happier," a track on OK Computer (Radiohead 1997), to mock an idealized life. Prince also samples a Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. speech (1963) at the end of the song… "Black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing with the Negroes in the spiritual of old: Free at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty, we are free at last!"[33] There are uplifting lyrics in the song that define what Prince might mean when he sings "Black Muse." Prince equates Black music with Black people's ability to make it through the trials and tribulations that afflict Black existence in this world. The creation of music's, Rhythm and Blues, Rock and Roll, and Jazz, is evidence of Black survival and longevity.

> Black muse, we gonna make it through
> Surely people that created rhythm & blues
> Rock and roll and jazz
> So, you know we're built to last
> It's coo-ooo—ool

[33] http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_speech_at_the_great_march_on_detroit.1.html

Telling Black people specifically that they will "make it thru," Prince teaches Black people that the music culture that we have created is symbolic of enduring strength through hundreds of years of chattel slavery, through persistent segregation on the levels of housing, education, health care and through the growing incidents of state police violence against African American women and men in interactions with police departments from California to New York. For Prince, the art music that Black people have created, and continue to create, becomes a testimony that represents Black people's collective strength. While Prince explored other sonic neighborhoods (Rogers), Prince was rooted in Black music culture. For Prince, Black music was a repository of intellectual and cultural history that evinced the impact of Black music on the world. Racial uplift as an idea is not only in the lyrics but also in Prince's sound.

Sonic Impact of "Black Muse"

This analysis focuses on the first section of "Black Muse." A non-tonal sliding or glissando ghost note pick up cues the beginning of the song. A vibrant, driving, bassline that opens "Black Muse" is a two bar pattern of an eighth note connected to two sixteenth notes on beats one and two and two eight notes on beat three followed by a rest on beat 4 (see Fig. 1).

The rest on beat 4 serves to emphasize the cymbal crash on beat 4. That the emphasis is on the lower eighth note gives "Black Muse" a feeling of being grounded. The base line is composed mostly of octaves, which, much like the perfect fifth, has traditionally signified harmonic rootedness in Western music. Before any lyrics are heard, the bass line communicates a forward motion that tells us that Prince is on a mission. The two-bar phrase keyboard riffs that are introduced in mm. 13 occur on beats two and four in the first bar and on the beat one and the second eighth note of beat two—held through the third beat (see Fig. 2).

The chord riffs provide a rhythmic, melodic and harmonic foreshadowing of the lyrics to come, especially since the lyrics "Black Muse" fall directly on beats 2 and three of the first bar of the two-bar phrase. Prince emphasizes these key lyrics by placing the lyrics directly on the beat.

The harmonies of the first part of "Black Muse" are composed primarily of a series of major and minor chords. The chord that caught my attention is the c major 7th with g in the bass chord which falls unpredictably on the second eighth note of beat two in mm. 10 and held through beats three and four. This is a liminal chord that is a chord between chords. It had no clear functionality and therefore has no clear name. Prince was not influenced by conventional harmonic patterns in Western music that ultimately resolve into stock cadences. The clear naming of chords and identification of harmonic functionality was not Prince's goal as a composer. Transcription is an interpretation and, perhaps on some level, a ruse. The transcription of Prince's chordal patterns only serve to point to examples of Prince's ideas, which were fluid and resistive of stasis. Since the chord is preceded by three major chords of

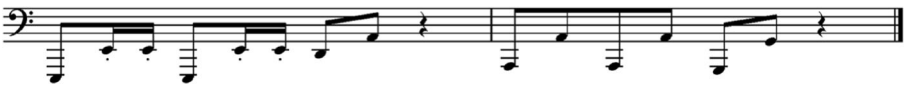

Fig. 1 An electric bass guitar pattern of an eighth note connected to two sixteenth notes on beats one and two and two eight notes on beat three followed by a rest on beat 4

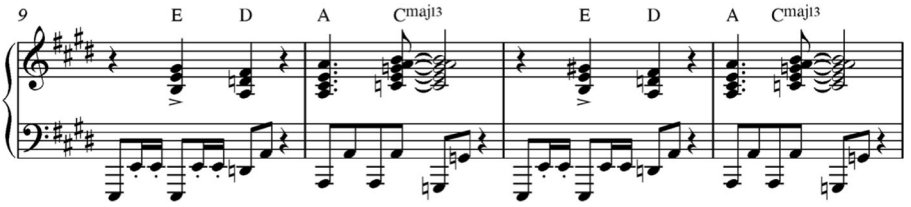

Fig. 2 The two-bar phrase keyboard riffs that are introduced in mm. 13 occur on beats two and four in the first bar and on the beat one and the second eighth note of beat two—held through the third beat

E, D, & A, its complex, liminal color is more striking. Whereas music arrangers would typically call this chord c major seventh slash chord with a g in the bass, reducing the chord to an inversion to avoid ambiguity in notation, I contend that this chord which ends the two-bar phrase is meant to be undefinable adding a complex splash of color in the keyboard parts. Prince, whose musical sophistication lies in the layers of subtleties, both exploited and promoted musical mystery. Prince also signified on other pieces of music, showing his historical knowledge of other Black music and his willingness to demonstrate musical intertextuality. Musicologist Griffin Woodworth writes,

> As the young lion enters his fifties, Prince's work is marked by a more conservative approach to sexuality and gender, a curatorial attitude towards Black music, and a nostalgia for an imagined musical continuity between jazz, R&B, and Pop…Prince is assuming the role of patriarch of Black music, but he is doing it the Miles Davis way– refusing to acknowledge the historical divisions between musical genres, and refusing to pander to audience expectations of what a "real" Black man sounds like (Woodworth 2013, 146-147)

"Black Muse" is an example of a Prince composition that blends the musical genres of jazz fusion, funk, soul, and gospel inflected vocals. I would contend, however, that Prince's refusal "to acknowledge the historical divisions between musical genre" was a result of Prince never buying into the notion of a musical genre in the first place. Genres catalog aesthetic features on the level of form and style. The essential role of a genre is to simplify and divide creativity into digestible compartments, often to sell that art as a product. Prince's music, in all of its kaleidoscopic variety, would be better understood as a genre unto itself that formed beautifully from various schools of Black musical thought.

Prince copied a melodic riff from Donny Hathaway's "This Christmas" (1970) in "Black Muse"[34] using Hathaway's melodic idea, as did Hathaway before him, to cue the listener that he will be singing the verses of "Black Muse." It is a compositional device that bolsters Black Muse's compositional structure (see. Fig 3):

Though Prince uses different notes and orchestrates the band to play the melodic cue in unison, he is clearly referencing Hathaway's well-known Christmas song (see Fig. 4):

[34] Donny Hathaway (1945–1979) most famous for his duets with singer Roberta Flack was an influential African American pianist, composer, singer, and bandleader whose innovative style continues to inspire countless musicians.

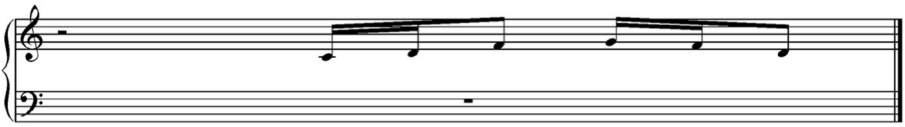

Fig. 3 Donny Hathaway's riff is a compositional device that bolsters the composition's structure by cueing the beginning of the form.

Since this composition was recorded in 2010 but released on December 12th 2015, it is interesting to wonder if Prince was listening to Hathaway's "This Christmas" at the time he was writing this song and decided to use Hathaway's musical idea in his piece. The parallel minor chords on the bridge of the song are used to create drama under the most harrowing lyrics: "Long ago 2 men held one of us down/Another took a whip and made a terrible sound/Baby watched her father falling down to the ground/That was you and me." The adjacent, parallel minor chords color the drama unfolding before our ears; the drama of our enslaved ancestors being whipped and humiliated by white men before their children. The f major chord colors the temporary resolution of the tension and the acceptance of our past when the words "that was you and me" are sung. In this way, the suffering of past generations of his people become a force for his creativity. "Black Muse" also has an instrumentation of two trumpets, tenor sax, a trombone and a baritone sax which alternates with another ensemble of flute, clarinet and muted brass. It is clear that Prince gave arranger Michael B. Nelson leeway to create brass and woodwind arrangements that reflected Prince's aesthetic of tension and release. Nelson however did not know what the subject of "Black Muse" was about as he stated to me, "I'm not sure how much insight I can offer on that. For instance, on "Black Muse," he sent it to me as an instrumental, so I didn't even hear the lyrics until it came out" (Horn Section Arranger Michael B. Nelson, personal communication, 12/27/16) Prince apparently compartmentalized the creation of a musical work to the point where his collaborators may have not understood the politics of his music until a song or album was released. Some partners were less concerned with the subject matter and focused more on the sound in a formalist way. Nelson admitted that as a horn player he chose to focus on creating the instrumental arrangements because he connected to "the instrumental of a song more than the lyrics in most cases" (Horn Section Arranger Michael B. Nelson, personal communication, 12/27/16). This suggests that Nelson, and perhaps other musician collaborators, may not have been concerned with the political messages of Prince's work. The late drummer John Blackwell, who worked closely with Prince over ten years in the recording studio and on tour, stated that "Black Muse" reminded him of the jazz fusion they recorded on *Rainbow Children* (2001). For Blackwell, working with Prince on "Black Muse" was was similar to working with an erudite professor of music who welcomed input from all of the creative partners involved (Murphy 2016).

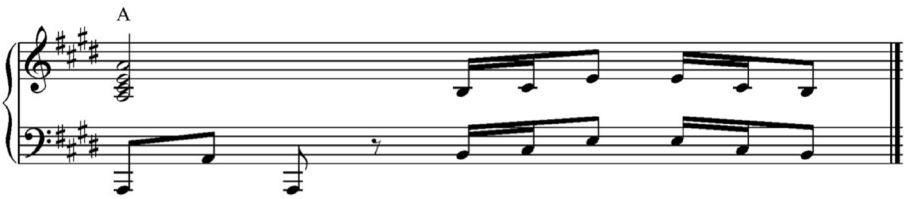

Fig. 4 The figure below is Prince's version of the Hathaway riff from "This Christmas."

Purple Cadence

The final product of Prince was not his fame but a lasting body of work he used to promote goodwill in the world. Prince created music through an aesthetic rooted in Black experience. Using a range of his songs from different periods in his career, I have argued how liminality, activism, and self-determination played a role in his work. We have seen how Black Muse could be defined in several different ways through Prince's activism and music. Prince's notion of a Black muse was fluid as the array of his musical ancestors and diverse as the Black community who laid down the path for his success. While various women artists functioned as a muse for Prince, Blackness itself was a muse for Prince. He understood his life and Black people within the infinite creative potentiality of Blackness. Blackness gave Prince the malleability and purpose needed to drive his imagination, which was the catalyst for his tireless creation of new musical forms. The larger discourse on Prince's music career created before his death could be enriched by analyzing Prince's liminality within hermeneutics rooted in Black thought. I have explored the interpretive frameworks of Ishmael Reed's Neo Hoo Doo, George-Graves's diasporic spidering, Gate's signifyin' theory, what Thompson called the "lessons from the crossroads" and Dubois's concept the doubleness in Black life to look at Prince's music from the position of Black thought. This article is part of an intervention into the dominant discourse that has universalized the work of Prince. Russian artist and theorist Wassily Kandinsky wrote "The artist must be blind to distinctions between "recognized" or "unrecognized" conventions of form, deaf to the transitory teaching and demands of a particular age. He must watch only the trend of the inner need, and hearken to its words alone" (1977, 35). Prince achieved the artistic independence Kandinsky treasured through defying audience expectations with unconventional compositional forms while also creating vital commentary on glocal issues. I maintain that Prince was our Black muse because he refused to produce his complex sonic art in a cultural vacuum that would have been out of step with his clandestine philanthropic efforts that valued Black life. Like Kandinsky, Prince was deaf to the restrictive musical conventions of his time but saw it as his responsibility to be a Black Muse for all of us by responding to the vital issues our time.

Acknowledgements Thanks to special issue editors Judson Jeffries and Shannon Cochran. George Lipsitz and Amanda Eubanks Winkler read versions of this essay and provided valuable feedback at different stages. Herbert Ruffin brought this issue on Prince to my attention and encouraged me to contribute. Kirsty Fairclough, Mike Alleyne, and other conveners of the Purple Reign Conference in Manchester, provided a forum for me to work out my ideas. Musician, friend, and Princeologist Benny Steele provided keen insight. Lastly, I acknowledge the flatted fifth which Prince used effectively as a color.

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