
THE SONIC AFTERLIVES OF DAVID BOWIE & PRINCE
BLACK STAR RISING AND THE PURPLE REIGN
EDITED BY DAPHNE A. BROOKS

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REFIGURING AMERICAN MUSIC

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In memory of
D. A. Pennebaker
and
Greg Tate

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Introduction

"Dearly Beloved," "Give Me Your Hands"
Toward a (Rock and Roll) Commons

Daphne A. Brooks

Something happened on the day he died
Spirit rose a metre and stepped aside
Somebody else took his place and bravely cried
I'm a blackstar, I'm a blackstar.
—David Bowie, "Blackstar"

We are the new power generation
We want to change the world
The only thing that's in our way is you
—Prince, "New Power Generation"

"Let all the children boogie."[1]

And watch them as they move together, watch them as they sway ever so gingerly in step with one another. Watch them as they fall in line and set off on this fantastic voyage. They are bundles of about-to-burst joy. All shy smiles, they make furtive eye contact with the camera, so earnest and true. This space that is theirs is mug-free. Not a pose in sight. No hints of "doing it for the views." This is Philadelphia's Girard College Lower School Band circa 2015, a gorgeous ensemble of Black and brown little wonders, as awkward and oh-so-sharp as they wanna be in their uniform plaids, their button-down collars and boiled wool sweaters, and giving full-on, *Abbott Elementary* good vibes. Make way because they've come to jam, sing, and move as one as they lovingly crush a cover of "Starfish and Coffee," Prince's ode to playground euphoria and the simple daily delights of unencumbered childhood mischief.[2] Everything ineffably pleasurable about being young, the feeling of being free—free to experiment and take risks, to discover and insouciantly own the power and preciousness of one's own eccentricities, and to feel

I.1. Philadelphia's Girard College Lower School Band, circa 2015, covering Prince's "Starfish and Coffee."

bold enough to flaunt those eccentricities—is afloat in their voices. Listen closely for those gentle instrumental imperfections percolating all through this performance, those sonic cues that tip us to the work of novices—beautifully askew harmonies and fleeting, misplaced notes. They are the reminders that this is an ardently amateur effort, one that nevertheless brims with the traces of weeks and months of afternoon rehearsals, caring instructors' cues and guidance, and rock solid support from the elders who love them.

Standing in the round, they've trained their focus on fulfilling a single goal: to bring it for the ones documenting this occasion. They are unfailingly on point, refusing to miss a beat, passing that mic back and forth to one another while humbly delivering one fanciful line after another: "All of us were ordinary compared to Cynthia Rose / She always stood at the back of the line / A smile beneath her nose." They sing an ode to childhood mischief, and the girls are the ones who overpopulate this scene—rocking the piano, bass, and guitar. A drummer here, a gleeful percussionist shaking bright yellow and orange maracas there, and a horn section in lockstep with the rhythm. This is their own form of fellowship, their own conversation with Prince's love letter to youthful enchantment and that place where "butterscotch clouds, tangerine" and "a side order of ham" are always on the menu.[3]

And *this* is where we want to dwell—with the young ones—the ones who keep alive the spirit of what Prince and fellow icon David Bowie invented and transmitted across their two equally majestic careers, the reinvigorated rock and

I.2. Girls to the front in Philadelphia's Girard College Lower School Band 2015 performance of "Starfish and Coffee."

roll notion that "everything is possible." This is what the Girard College Lower School Band beams out to the world in this performance, and they were not alone—particularly in the 2010s. YouTube clips of this sort and from this era are especially abundant: tweens and toddlers devotedly belting out the songbook classics of these two legends went viral in 2016, the year in which both artists died barely within a season of each other. One favorite from the Bowie canon, 1972's "Starman," has, for instance, received the children's choir treatment from numerous choral collectives in performances captured online—from nursery school classes to rock and roll camper showcases to formal recitals featuring multipiece orchestras. Like "Starfish and Coffee," Bowie's outer space fairy-tale is an invitation to trip the light fantastic with him, to push our penchant for whimsy, speculation, and curiosity, to dream, in this case, about "a starman waiting in the sky" who knows we can't yet handle the heaviness of the universe. He'd "like to come and meet us / But he thinks he'd blow our minds."[4]

Playground experiments. Cosmic revelations. Bowie and Prince were both artists who repeatedly returned to utopic scenarios in their music, capturing everything from the soft yet euphoric rebellion of oddball girls wearing "different colored socks" while plastering happy faces on "every single wall" to grandiose visions of an intergalactic messiah yet imploring us to "lose it," to "use it," to "boogie" our way onto other planes before it's too late. These were the kinds of parables and missives that they each launched into the atmosphere. It was the stuff of ecstatic fairy tales, our pathways, our

I.3. The Mayo Children's Choir covering David Bowie's "Starman," April 3, 2019, Royal Theater, Castlebar, Mayo, Ireland.

portals, our playbooks—the means by which we might somehow dream our way out of our most suffocating racial, gender and sexual hegemonies. So "let the children use it," as Bowie would say.

And use it, they did. Those Gen X and millennial parents took Bowie and Prince's pedagogy to heart—especially in the tumultuous year of fresh grieving that was 2016. Social media from that era tells the tale: of family sing-alongs featuring small ones reveling in the music of their parents' sonic youth and proudly sporting a visual style that meets the music with neon-colored, *Aladdin Sane* lightning bolt makeup, purple raincoats, and the swashbuckling romance ruffles of the Revolution. They absorbed the pedagogy of the rule breakers, flexed their fluency in otherworldly anthems, and reminded us of those other planets that these two supernovas had sonically insisted to us were real destinations to run toward. Seeing the rekindling of all that glorious cultural defiance turned into an invitation to reclaim those stone-cold dares of theirs that had us falling in love with them in the first place. The tiny ones in their purple majesty and glam rock garb reminded us of what it was like to peel off our old, ill-fitting clothes, ditch our archaic labels and habits, and embrace who we'd been all along: the children of unfinished twentieth-century social and cultural movements who keep looking for shelter when the retrenchment sets in (again and again and again). We bided our time in the wild places they designed for us, absorbing their pop sermons, declarations, and conundrums (to party in the face of the apocalypse, to question whether there's "life on Mars"), receiving them as maps for our own survival.

Yes, rock nostalgists will be the first to argue that the post-'68 era gave us no shortage of iconic critical darling superstars who had all the rizz and often carried the mantle of "voice" of and for the masses—from Springsteen to Stevie to Tina and Madonna to Michael and Whitney—and those legends each indelibly manifest and reflect the moments in which they rose up to dominate pop. But Bowie and Prince are uniquely resonant with and tied to each other, this volume suggests, for a number of reasons. Wonderfully weird and boundary-pushing in life and, still more, conjoined in death, the two of them, as Katie Lofton has argued, made "the work of mass popularity always also about serious experimentation and human freedom." And late in both of their too-short lives, each continued to impart messages that stayed true to their faith in liberatory community. Think of Prince appearing at an anti–police brutality rally in Maryland supporting the effort to hold a broken legal system accountable for its systemic failures at the dawn of the Black Lives Matter movement. And think of Bowie's parting directive to his fans, the guiding theme of his fiercely effulgent 2016 "Blackstar" swan song, in which he exhorts his listeners to "take [his] place," released some forty-eight hours before the very "day he died." In both instances, Prince and Bowie seemed unafraid to trade on their own legacies—as resistors, as contrarians, as singular beings—in order to galvanize the masses. Little wonder, then, that hearing and seeing these children of the 2010s singing Bowie and Prince feels like prophetic truth. Their performances are perhaps the most poignant assurance that their own versions of a rock and roll commons—that place where utopian hopes and rambunctious, daring collective desires take root and run—was still a live thing on the other side of their departures.[5]

Yet even still, pop culture memory can be unnervingly fleeting, and with the emergence of new generations—the Z(oom)ers and rising Alphas—who know less and less about either musician, it's clear that the time is ripe to revisit their meaningfulness to those of us who were forever shook by the gargantuan dimensions of their sounds, the grandeur of their visual lexicon—in short, an aesthetics of the marvelous that defied easy categorization and whispered our wished-for fantastical future to us in the form of everything from shimmering space epics to oh-so-earthly, feverish rock erotica. To lose both of them in such quick succession felt like watching overlapping pop epochs disintegrate in the blink of an eye. Memorializing them felt raw, instinctive, urgent, necessary. It was the best way to nurture broken hearts and attest to the myriad ways that their artistic philosophies made us and changed us. For good.[6]

Blackstar Rising and the Purple Reign: The Sonic Afterlives of David Bowie and Prince rose directly out of that long first year of mourning, and it brings

together the critical reflections, remembrances, visions, and meditations of scholars, artists, journalists, curators, and cultural critics whose explorations of their equally remarkable repertoires give us new ways of recognizing the magnitude of their work. The thinkers and creatives in this volume offer fresh insight into why and how David Bowie and Prince each forever and fundamentally undid and opened up pop culture, pushing our understanding of how popular music articulates and gives voice to the intricacies of intersectional identities and affirms the sensuous, mischievous, and unruly feelings of the marginalized. Each was a sonic architect of struggle and wonder, conflict and catharsis, and each of them shaped the terrain of late-twentieth-century pop by centering resistance and transformation, *the promise of something else beyond the given*. *Blackstar Rising and the Purple Reign* explores the detailed and lasting impact of their artistry by juxtaposing cultural critique and creative think pieces alongside a cluster of conversations with some of the trusted and intimate interlocutors—fellow musicians, artists, and collaborators—who worked closely with Bowie and Prince, as well as dynamic museum curators and public historians who've thoughtfully cared for and inventively engaged with their dense cultural archives.

From a variety of critical and artistic vantage points, this volume considers the weight and resonating force of Bowie and Prince's respective artistry, and it considers from a variety of perspectives the ways in which they each served as crucial conduits of a pop zeitgeist that was born out of multiple modern justice movements—post–Civil Rights Black freedom struggle campaigns, second-wave feminist and LGBTQ+ liberation organizing. It treats them as unique repositories of all that fervent oppositional energy and traces the ways that each artist translated that power and spirit into a mélange of pop experimentalism and culturally omnivorous reinvention. David Bowie and Prince lit up the pop music cosmos, and they also shook up and galvanized our already socially, politically, and culturally volatile post-'68 social and cultural worlds. Rarely was either inclined to interpolating specific politics into their lyricism (making, for instance, Bowie's allusion to Nixon on "Young Americans" or Prince's AIDS reference on "Sign O' the Times" all the more striking). Rather, the poetics of struggle, resistance, and refusal were endemic to their repertoires and the driving force undergirding their aesthetics. They were two musicians who translated the desires and dreams of people who'd typically been left behind by rock and roll mythos and master narratives—freaks and geeks, people of color, queer folk, and women—into irresistible spectacle for the masses. They reached out, danced, crawled, did the splits, and spun their way into the mainstream while simultaneously and insistently crying out to those folks in the

margins to "gimme your hands 'cause you're wonderful" and "you're not alone," mantras that Bowie belted out on "Rock 'n' Roll Suicide," his glitterific alter ego martyr Ziggy Stardust's 1972 farewell anthem. Years later, in 1990, Prince would offer up one of his many swaggerific proclamations, another reminder of his lasting affinity for the kinds of counter-cultural crews that he'd been running with since the days of the Revolution when the racial and gender diversity of Sly and the Family Stone came back to life in the form of Prince's most famous accompanying band. He and his new outfit were now, as he tells us, "the new power generation," the ones who were out to "change the world" if only the wax museum elders would get out the way. This is 1990 Prince, earnest (on this track, at least) to the point of being borderline cringe about upholding the general concept of rebellion and social transformation as things worth fighting for. On the other side of his '80s pop-domination years, he's still beseeching would-be-foes on his *Graffiti Bridge* album with the NPG to "lay down your funky weapon" and "come join [them] on the floor" because "making love and music's the only thing worth fighting for." It's the same song he'd been singing since his *Dirty Mind* years decked out in underwear and a raincoat while rejecting war in favor of leading a raging party.[7]

These core principles in the worlds of Bowie and Prince are practically synonymous with their names—in other words, hardly revelatory ideas. But to *think them together and alongside one another*, as this volume aims to do, creates the opportunity to grapple with the twinned scale and impact of their legacies. It enables us to pay close attention to the meaningful parallelisms and, in more than a few cases, the deep and vibrating resonances between the respective communities they were each forging through their sounds and rapturous visual spectacles. Each did the work of curating conceptually outsize and ferociously immersive experiences. They were designers of the astonishing, the sublime, and the resplendent in popular music culture, and each invented striking, sensual, urgent, at times opaque, and at other times bright, incandescent visions of other places where we might yet go together. They were pointing us toward "uptown," as Prince did on his 1980 album *Dirty Mind*, a destination where we might locate and seize hold of the free life that always begins from within. They gave us a new pop iteration of the marvelous, of (inter)planetary ways of looking at ourselves outside the confines of some of Earth's most stubbornly constrictive labels, instead beckoning us, as did Bowie alt-ego Major Tom, to float "in a tin can . . . far above the world."[8] They did all of this against the slow drift of increasing racial retrenchment, the evisceration of '60s freedom movement reforms, the backlash in response to 1970s counterculture ludic excesses, the rise of the Moral Majority, the expansion of neocon Cold

1.4. Prince in the *Lovesexy* era: forever "chasing androgyny."

1.5. Androgyny Bowie style, circa 1970, donning his famous dress for *The Man Who Sold the World* album cover photo shoot.

War patriotism, right-wing media, the steamroll of mass incarceration, and the birth of an overtly branded "culture wars" set of initiatives that demonized (Black) popular music with newfound social and political force and action. In the wilderness of a Reagan–Thatcher empire of austerity, the extravagant pop bohemias of Bowie and Prince emerged as pop versions of Baby Suggs's deep-in-the-forest clearings, sources of refuge for the outsiders, the misfits, the spirited nonconformists to gather together, soak in the sound and vision, and own their own pleasure and beauty.[9]

The boldest of "envelope-pushers," Bowie and Prince were each unafraid to transgress social and cultural mores in ways that brazenly critiqued the presumed fixity of racial, gender, and sexual identity formations. Their music and performance repertoires were often notoriously "adult fare," to be sure (both were, for instance, drawn to a variety of onstage sexual spectacles in their youthful, ascendant phases, and Prince in particular gained well-known infamy in his early years for a full-on commitment to what one might describe as his own distinct, funk subgenre of "tender blueness" in song). Yet, as the twenty-first-century kids' performances keep telling us, their work can never be reduced to merely trafficking in the "taboo." Rather, the fugitive elements of their repertoires that repeatedly embraced fantastical, fluid ways of being in the world as well as escaping this world are the sorts of ideals that convey an erotics of social purpose and self-realization, of the kind Audre Lorde famously describes in her manifesto on the subject. "When we begin to live from within outward, in touch with the power of the erotic within ourselves, and allowing that power to inform and illuminate our actions upon the world around us," says Lorde, "then we begin to be responsible to ourselves in the deepest sense. For as we begin to recognize our deepest feelings, we begin to give up, of necessity, being satisfied with suffering and self-negation, and with the numbness which so often seems like their only alternative in our society. Our acts against oppression become integral with self, motivated and empowered from within." Bowie and Prince's most lasting gift to the generations is what amounted to a sonic translation of Lordeian erotics, an affirmation of spectacular pop pleasure as a worlding, transformative force, and one that can still be felt in some corners of pop: a belief in the romance of the sonic as the means by which we might perpetually dream ourselves radically and wondrously anew and out of our present-day dangers.[10]

That said, it isn't all stardust and house parties when it comes to Bowie and Prince. To embrace what's ravishing about both artists' bodies of work without addressing some of their most well-known ambiguities and failures risks papering over the contradictions that made each of them human, more "man" than "myth." Each of their careers is at once a study in feminist, queer, and Black

liberation affinities and allyship *and also* at times entangled in varying degrees of patriarchy, sexism, misogyny, homophobia, and, in the infamous case of Bowie, white supremacist fascism cosplay. A number of *Blackstar Rising and the Purple Reign*'s contributors address these ambiguities head-on with probing care, and all of the critics, thinkers, and creatives included here are mindful of maintaining a focus on the way each artist's music traveled, circulated, and took root in the lives of fans and publics who championed, treasured, and used their work in contexts that far exceeded its origins. Rather than asking the question of whether their work can or should be separated from the conflicting ideals and actions of Bowie and Prince at various points in their careers, the essays, think pieces, and tributes ahead are best read, in sum, as holding onto the kernels of utopic futurity in each artist's material as radical rejoinders to their own missteps and immaturities and disturbing human error. These essays live in the space of exploring the lexicons of refusal and reinvention launched into the galaxy by Bowie and by Prince; they follow the spirit of the OG cultural studies theorist Stuart Hall, who argued long ago that "the struggle over cultural hegemony . . . is these days waged as much in popular culture as anywhere else." Wise man Hall urges us to recall that cultural hegemony "is never about pure victory or pure domination." It is "never a zero-sum cultural game; it is always about shifting the balance of power in the relations of culture; it is always about changing the dispositions and the configurations of cultural power, not getting out of it."[11] Bowie and Prince did much to disrupt our relationship to forms of power, how it felt as it washed over our everyday lives, by giving us fresh, gripping, often rhapsodic paths toward envisioning our own escape from its stranglehold on us through culture itself. We keep returning to them for succor—and as a reminder that the alterity they insisted on is always available to us on other frequencies . . . if we give ourselves over to it like the "rebel rebel" kids do. . . . They are the ones joyously plotting refuge and reminding us—just as the music does—that we can still "go crazy" on our own terms, despite endless catastrophes. They're way out ahead of us now dancing in the Bowie and Prince sonic clearing grounds that we once knew. What a perfect time to follow them back to the places where we felt most fearless and alive.

"THIS WAY OR NO WAY": BOWIE, PRINCE, AND THE SIGNS OF OUR TIMES

Blackstar Rising and the Purple Reign first took shape as a gathering in the early weeks of 2017, the inaugural weekend marking the start of the Trump 1.0 presidency and the executive order restricting travel from a cluster of

Muslim-majority countries that resulted in citizens across the country flooding into airports to protest what would become the first in a long, four-year wave of anti–multiracial democracy policies that came to define the beginnings of a new era of rightward brutalities. What had started one year earlier as a casual invitation to assemble a few folks who shared a twinned grief in losing two cultural titans in such quick succession quickly turned into a large-scale affair, our formal chance to band together and draw on the knowledge, wisdom, and theories born out of Bowie's and Prince's respective songbooks and performance playbooks as comfort and catharsis. We leaned hard into the music as we faced a newly robust epoch of precarity for the most vulnerable folk who were poised to suffer the most as a result of this new administration's flagrant cruelties. If Bowie had, himself, insisted in his parting "Lazarus" dirge that "this way or no way / You know I'll be free," we were ready to take up that mantle, to forge ahead with making public statements about what these artists meant to us as both nostalgic beacons of light entwined with our own coming-of-age tales as well as what they symbolized as enduring icons of revolutionary hope and possibility.[12]

We came together in a spot on Yale University's campus long referred to as the Commons, a site rife with symbolism of its own that we mined for the purposes of our event's endeavors. Originally designated as the University Dining Hall, Yale Commons "was one of the three Bicentennial Buildings . . . erected in 1901–2 to honor the bicentennial" of the university, according to Yale historian Jim Sleeper.[13] As Sleeper notes, the campus Commons is a place of which generations of alums have fond memories, for instance, standing "in the wings" on the big open floor and "watch[ing] Janis Joplin, . . . Duke Ellington," and, much later, "Tito Puente" in that cavernous space. Indeed, as he points out, the communal spirit of the site is rooted in the original vision of a "Commons" space at Yale dating back to 1717, when the first such building was given this name as a way to designate "a public place and [site for] dining for those who had to eat the regular, more common fare."[14]

Fitting, we thought, to grieve, memorialize, dance, and swoon over the sounds we hold so dear in this location. We relished the opportunity to infuse a spot that colonial American Yale had clearly never intended for a bunch like us—the descendants of both the property owners and the property, the immigrants and the stateless—with countercultural thought and love. We ran toward the idea of filling up and reinhabiting this Commons space in memory of two masters of the culturally unruly whose music captured the feeling of being outside a conventional body politic and learning to love it. We found each other and found ourselves again in these sounds, congregated,

and held fast to the idea that popular music culture, this "common" form, might yet still radically transform how we experience our everyday lives—or, at the very least, help us to "get through this thing called life" in the turbulent and uncertain late 2010s.

In our most hopeful moments, we envisioned our conference—free and open to all—as a gathering that might traverse the city of New Haven, Connecticut's infamous and long-standing "town and gown" divide, and we took particular inspiration from the gutsy undergraduate leaders of what was then the newly formed NEXT YALE movement, the audacious and visionary, multiracial, multi-ethnic, all genders coalition of students who look like America and who, one year earlier, had peacefully and ambitiously organized their own ceremony to rechristen a campus site bearing the name of "Hall of Fame" white supremacist John C. Calhoun. They marched together, carrying the names of the "blood donors"—the captive and the unfree, the overlooked and the banished, the Indigenous, the forced migrant, and the immigrant—whose lives were sacrificed in the creation of Yale itself.[15] Taking a cue from Prince, an artist whom many were just coming to know in the wake of his death, they named the site "The College Formerly Known as Calhoun" and walked to an open space where they cranked up "Let's Go Crazy." They were, like *Sign of the Times* Prince, "play[ing] in the sunshine," and they were just as ready to stay the course and dance to the glow of "the serious moonlight," as Bowie once invited us to do.

Bowie was, in fact, a startling new discovery for many of these students as well. Imagine their reaction to the 1983 MTV interview with the superstar wherein he roundly criticizes the network for its anti-Blackness, engaging in a pointed dragging of veejay Mark Goodman over the network's racist resistance to incorporating Black artists in its video rotations. In 2017, some three years before the nation's fleeting "racial reckoning," what white artist of their own generation had shown such an aggressive and confrontational critique of systemic, corporate structural inequality in popular culture?[16] What was stunning to them was the extent to which both musicians had long been associated with stupendous feats of "gender trouble" in rock and roll. The thrill of discovering Bowie, an artist who, long ago, had staged "one of the most spectacular rejections of gender convention in pop history," was an affirmation of the long-standing and impactful ubiquity of queerness at the heart of pop music culture. Likewise, Prince's ability to sustain "a totalizing androgyny" for such a remarkable length of time in pop, and with such great pop success, was a kind of historical forecast for their own present-day articulation of pride and the fullness of their own humanity. In many ways,

they were continuing to come to terms with their own youth activism as the realization of each artist's sonic futurity.[17]

Bowie and Prince, those "cosmic twins," as Simon Critchley once referred to them, were each known for "channeling the spirit of Little Richard," the queer Black architect of rock and roll. They were also figures who carried what Tavia Nyong'o refers to as Richard Penniman's "transgressively queer," "world-shaking" performance practices and aesthetics into the next generation of rock and roll, the post-'60s hangover cultures (funk, glam, disco, metal) that furthered the loosening of gender formations, upending—though by no means abolishing—conventional representational regimes all across the music industry. Bowie's early '70s inspirations streamlined his teen passion for Little Richard with the Warhol Factory community of trans women trailblazers, often lifting their styles and interpolating them into his burgeoning repertoire, as Sasha Geffen points out in their excellent study of queerness in pop. And Prince, as Geffen contends, "chased androgyny" throughout his career, so much so that it "seemed to be a part of who he was, reflected not only in his clothes but in his voice, mannerisms, and presence." Absorbing this history was, not surprisingly, the seeming turning point for our Gen Y student audience in the house with us throughout the conference. They were all in. This was the moment when it became abundantly clear—and particularly by way of placing them in conversation with one another—that Bowie and Prince had long been sounding out to us that mantra fresh in our minds that winter, that "the future is female" (or, to put it perhaps more expansively now, "the future is gender fluid") and steeped in Blackness as well.[18] Bowie might even say that it was written in the stars. . . .

THE SERIOUS MOONLIGHT: BOWIE'S BLACK(NESS) ODYSSEYS

Blackstar Rising and the Purple Reign starts with the premise not only that both Prince and David Bowie were pivotal figures in the disruption and transfiguration of racial, gender, and sexual identity formations but also that, crucially, Blackness is a central trope in their equally riveting repertoires. As this volume insists, Blackness—as a social, cultural, and political concept, as identity, as mythos, as indelible style, as singular spectacle, and as a mode of cultural performance driven by improvisational adventure—proves key to these artists' renegade moves, their route to cultural upheaval, their thrilling performative disturbances, and their penchant for fervent risk and magnificent change.[19]

Blackness is, for instance, the heart and soul of the dense, alluring signs that David Bowie left behind in word, music, and code two days before he died, on the title track for the *Blackstar* album, a mystery of a masterpiece. Abstract symbols and codes are strewn all across this beauty of an epic finale to a rock and roll life lived on the edge and perpetually in pursuit of the unusual and the new. It is a record that has spawned endless online chats and debates in a Bowie fan world intent on dissecting *Blackstar*'s mythology. But these discussions always fall short of considering all that work the *Black* in *Blackstar* is doing, plunging us deeper into a confluence of the earthly and the philosophical and way beyond the cosmic metaphors that hold the attention of most fans.

Most have trained their focus on enigmas such as the "Villa of Ormen," name-checked in the opening moments of "Blackstar" as a cyclical mantra in the dirgelike first half of this stunner of a ten-minute epic. This is the place, Bowie sings to us, where there "stands a candle . . . at the centre of it all." The secrets woven deep into the texture of this song and final album of Bowie's, released on his last birthday on Earth, have left us with plenty to consider—from the pointed, parting references he makes on the album to earlier selves, including his 1976, *Station to Station*–era obsession with Aleister Crowley occultism and tree of life imagery that resurfaces here, and the moving meditations on the *Blackstar* title itself and all that it suggests. It is, as critic Jude Rogers observes, "a name for a cancer lesion, although one usually associated with breast cancer," the name of a "hidden planet" that some might think might "crash into the Earth," "another name for Saturn," or, perhaps most compellingly (given the contemplative ways that David Bowie was reflecting on his life and career on his last two releases, 2013's *The Next Day* as well as *Blackstar*), "the term for the transitional state between a collapsed star and a singularity (a state of infinite value) in physics—which," as Rogers argues, "makes sense if Bowie is placing himself" in afterlife relation to these tropes.[20]

As a performance, a song, a video narrative, "Blackstar" is, from another standpoint, a parable about the importance of Blackness, womanhood, and gender nonconformance to Bowie, and it is a testimony to the ways that he viewed and valued the potency and radical potentiality of these forms of being. Bowie's visual rendering of this song ritualistically summons them as forces tied to reverberation, transmogrification, and fugitive movement. Blackness is immanent to the sprawling, fusion jazz language of the track, a "restless" and "mercurial" song that, as Jon Pareles notes, is filled with "sputtering off-beats and silences. . . ." It is the substance of the tradition of jazz itself and of its subsequent revolutionary subgenres across the twentieth century, products of Black musical genius, audacious experimentation, and

1.6. Bowie "holds up the good book" in his epic video for "Blackstar," released in November 2015, less than two months before his death.

the historical conditions navigated by a people who, as Toni Morrison suggests in her sixth novel on the subject, refused the tyranny of being trapped in a system not of their making, who were instead "busy being original, complicated, changeable—human." This driving music that captures all of that is an important context in which to read "Blackstar," a track that crackles with the heterophonic looseness of this music also referred to as "the new thing" in modern jazz. And here too is where this Black sonic principle creates paths for further undoings. If, as music scholar Kwami Coleman suggests, jazz fusion's heterophony is a phenomenon characterized by multiplicity, by "differences within oneness," then we might think of what other ruptures and revisions emerge in this atmosphere of "emotive and cryptic" musical chaos where, in the video, bodies of all hues and sizes rhythmically pulsate and shake to the incantatory beat of Donny McCaslin's mournful-turned-pugilistic saxophone.[21]

The "women" of "Blackstar" (if we can call some of them such, since we know that at least one figure in the opening frames of the video is poised between animality and the human, with a tail gently curling out from under a dress) hold court together, oscillating between ecstasy and trance as they twitch their bodies like nineteenth-century Shakers. They are gathering energy, conjuring a kind of collective portal for the remains of Major Tom, "a star man," "a space invader" to pass off through and on to other worlds. We are at the divides—between man/woman, human/alien—and surpassing

those divides. Bowie appears in the video holding up the "good book" like a holy tome—the word and the law by which he has written his own ending (of which we see scenes in the accompanying video for "Lazarus"), but it is also an ending that gathers up so many supposed opposites and contradictions and effectively transduces them into a dark jazz fusion magic that permeates the entire album.[22]

The images and lyrics of "Blackstar" are rife with ambiguities, and surely Bowie would want it that way. Consider the string of conundrums: A sole woman of color holding the bejeweled skull of a fallen star—or is that a rising star? What does it mean to be "executed" on this day in which "only women kneel and smile"? (as he declares here). Has he been slain and extinguished from this earth? Is he nonetheless exalted? Are his remains the properties through which they draw new life? Do the women "smile" because they share a secret with the departed? Do they genuflect in order to honor the messianic one or to bid him farewell? These are puzzles all the more poignant because of the way in which now, in hindsight of Bowie's death, it's clear that "Blackstar" is a kind of deathbed message, the final public letter composed by an artist preparing his own way to the grave. And here too the return to heterogeneous elements of the Black musical tradition, a passion since his youth, are poignant if one considers how the ethical project of "blackness," as Sharon Holland has shown us, is "to tell the story of death-in-life . . . to let the dead—those already denied a sustainable subjectivity—speak from the place that is familiar to them." Here on "Blackstar," Bowie follows the line of the dispossessed, as he did for so much of his career, by "embracing the subjectivity of death," which, as Holland points out, "allows marginalized peoples to speak about the unspoken—to name the places within and without their cultural milieu where . . . they have slipped between the cracks of language." David Bowie's (late) body of work loudly and spectacularly attests to the fact that, out of that terrible situation, people on the margins—Black folks in particular—nonetheless made modern music which they innovated both before and subsequently against the narrow, normative logics of dominant culture. Bowie sought to hold up that torch and follow. "I'm not a white star," he chants to us, "I'm a blackstar." Bear witness to his artistically empathic theories of alliance.[23]

The "Blackness" of Bowie in this his final act is one that amounts to mammoth and resounding, shape-shifting alterity. All those fits and starts that we hear in "Blackstar," all that tension, the undulating prayer, lamentation, and slinky playfulness, all that despair contrasted with sass and verve, is an encapsulation of the very idea of Afrodiasporic art. The arcane, the enigmatic,

is both a symptom of captive cultures and exigent sustenance. It is Motenian "righteous obscurity," "ontological totality," spectacular opacity in the face of being subjugated to hypervisibility.[24] From this standpoint, the *Blackstar* Bowie that we see and hear, in this regard, is one that has less in common with coked-out 1970s occultist mythologies and perhaps more to do with Black invention and ambition, that which can be characterized by Black nationalist Marcus Garvey's Black Star shipping line, which sought, for a brief moment, in the early years of the twentieth century, to realize the vision of Black diasporic movement, shipping, transportation, and global economic exchange on Black peoples' own terms.[25]

Bowie's Blackstar "Blackness" has multiple meanings, multiple resonances. It takes the shape of a sound idea that he learned from Richard Penniman and everything that came after him, the "*black/ness*" that amounts to "the order of a lawlessness of musical imagination calling the diatonic and even the chromatic into existence. . . . The law of movement, the law of anoriginarily broken law, that takes up the local habitation and takes on the name of the homeless, nameless ones."[26]

And its heaviness, its formidable language, its prodigiousness live on in the covers of this song which often fly far afield of "Black" culture, per se. Consider indie rock musicians Anna Calvi, Amanda Palmer, Jherek Bischoff, and the Stargaze ensemble's vast and imposing classical avant-garde reading of "Blackstar," a delicate, shimmering "critique of the proper" inasmuch as it features Calvi, Palmer, and Bischoff stripping away and slowing down the tightness of Bowie's McCaslin ensemble arrangement and pulling forward both the turmoil and hope of the song's lyricism.[27] They hold onto and magnify those "restless" and "mercurial" elements of Bowie's arrangement, ultimately lingering on the figure of Bowie's message-in-a-bottle effigy, which he plants in the song as a riddle to solve and do right by. When Palmer sings quietly yet resolutely that "I can't answer why . . . / But I can tell you how," we hear the full weight of Bowie laying out a plan for us to consider receiving from him: I cannot offer the reason for my transition, but I can pass on to you a roadmap to take my place and bravely cry, "I'm a blackstar / I'm a blackstar."

This open-hearted declaration of Bowie's on "Blackstar," this return to the modern jazz that inspired him to pick up the saxophone in his teens, signals as well an embrace of the expansiveness of this music's futurity embedded in the form. We are worlds away from the vacuity and apolitical ersatz "jazz" of everything from F. Scott Fitzgerald's roaring twenties West Egg to Damien Chazelle's twenty-first-century *La La Land*. Bowie's "Blackstar" rock and jazz fusion of the galaxy tips its hat to the collective improvisational miracle of

this music. As Robert O'Meally reminds us, jazz is "the instruments talking to one another, now with intoxicating allure, now with prophecy, now with what Ralph Ellison has termed 'shit, grit and motherwit': jazz is a Harlem-inflected discussion in music. Jazz is all of the above." Both the album *Blackstar* and its title track came together while Bowie and the Donny McCaslin Quartet, "a rugged jazz-rock combo featuring Mr. McCaslin on saxophones, Jason Lindner on keyboards, Tim Lefebvre on electric bass and Mark Guiliana on drums," had Kendrick Lamar's hip-hop magnum opus *To Pimp a Butterfly*, which features millennial jazz crossover saxophonist Kamasi Washington, running on a figurative loop while in the studio. The result was an experimental brew shot through with Black radical logics of sound from one end of the twentieth century all the way through the twenty-first.[28]

This, then, is the record on which Bowie doubled down on Blackness as unbridled enchantment and an exquisite expression of complex selfhood. His dark dreaming ran parallel to and was surely in conversation with landmark Afrofuturists—from Sun Ra and Parliament-Funkadelic to Alice Coltrane and funk, rock, and R & B trio Labelle—a group that Bowie famously admired on the pop scene in the early 1970s.[29] Perhaps most provocatively, he invoked the lessons he learned from his all-time idol, Penniman. The visionary producer Nile Rodgers's reflections on Bowie's passionate investment in the latter artist sheds light on the extent to which Blackness held center stage for him during his and Rodgers's seminal work together in the '80s—not as primitivism but as a kind electrifying and demanding avant-gardism that pushed the dimensions of his aesthetic experimentation. In his recollection of the making of the pivotal "Let's Dance" recording that Rodgers and Bowie embarked on with each other, Rodgers describes how they

> walked around New York and visited famous museums and libraries; either people who had great vinyl collections, or we actually went to the New York Public Library and listened to all different types of jazz. It was all types of music that wasn't readily available in the stores, because we just wanted to hear and be influenced by the stuff. We were looking up content just to figure out what would be the inspiration [for] this new thing that he was looking for. The first incarnation of "Let's Dance" that he played for me, he walked into my bedroom and he said, quote, "Nile, darling, I think this is a hit." And he proceeded to play a folk song on a 12-string guitar that only had six strings on it. And I was like, "Oh man, this is so weird." And the reason why that was weird to me was because we had been going out to museums and listening to records and looking

at photographs and we amassed an amount of rock & roll imagery way before we did one note of music.

So I had a visual picture of what the record should sound like. When David finally realized what the record should sound like, he came to my apartment one day and he had a picture of Little Richard in a red suit getting into a red Cadillac. And he said to me, "Nile, darling, the record should sound like this!" And he showed me the picture. And I knew exactly—think of how crazy this was—I knew exactly what he meant. He didn't mean he wanted his record to sound like a Little Richard record. He said, "This visual thing is what we want to achieve aurally in every sense of the word." Even though the picture was obviously from the Fifties or the early Sixties, it looked modern. The Cadillac looked like a spaceship, and Little Richard was in this monochromatic outfit which then later on became David Bowie in the yellow monochromatic outfit with the yellow hair.[30]

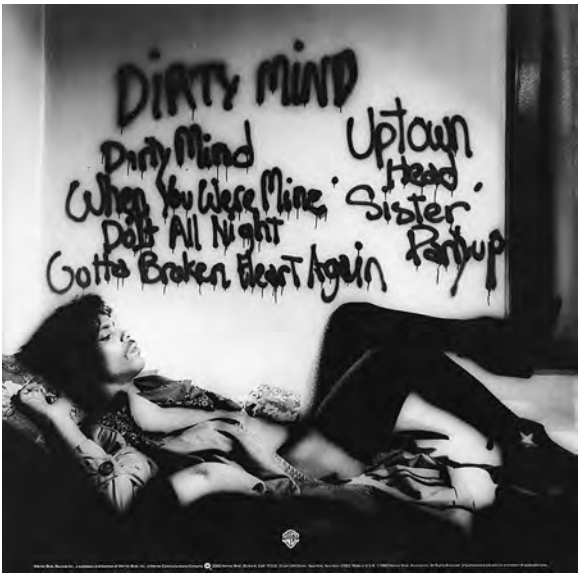
Rodgers's reflections indicate the extent to which, as Jonathan Flatley brilliantly points out, David Bowie was working the "aesthetics of inaccuracy" in his sonic engagement with "Blackness." Bowie's pursuit of the ineffable qualities he found in Little Richard's magnetic style—qualities rooted in what Little Richard called his role as "the originator" and what Wesley Morris described as "rock 'n' roll's rambunctious wing"—led him to aspire toward an approximation of the spirit of Little Richard's work: an ethos fused with aesthetic. This aspiration drew on the "frank and exuberant world" from which Little Richard emerged—"a Black sexual underground," as Nyong'o describes it, "that was remarkably widespread, durable, and even popular in the Jim Crow era"—and was shaped by the brash experimentation and fabulosity of transgressively queer performers and sped-up blues. Nyong'o reminds that "we might also consider the ways in which Little Richard draws upon, or in fact prefigures, a performance modality that [Jack Halberstam] identifies as kinging." Drag-kinging, he reminds, "is not the converse of drag queen camp any more than females are the 'opposite sex' of males. Rather, kinging is a performance on and upon cultural codes of masculinity that alternately satirize and identify with the prestige of 'manhood' in a male-dominated society. Little Richard's self-fashioning—face powder and makeup, hair stylized in elaborate tresses—could as easily be associated with a long tradition of regal masculinity as with female impersonation, per se."[31]

While Bowie's *Let's Dance*–era pastel suits and canary-colored 'do were conscious forms of Little Richard "kinging" that mirror the sleek and fastidious extravagance of the artist's trademark look—a signature sign of the

epoch in which Black musicians like the Motown crew manifested their ambition and mobility through sartorial and hirsute precision and elegance—the sound that he and Rodgers innovated to correlate with that visual set piece was all sumptuous grandeur and meticulously curated excess, a big, brassy, and buoyant combination of '50s sock hop jamboree, '80s runway vamping, intergalactic ballroom romance, slinky blues, his own trademark angular vocals, and insistent horns—including Bowie's beloved saxophone—running rampant across a rolling, swaying percussion. This was the sound of extreme pop plenitude and daring cultural admixtures—even in the era of New Wave excess and spectacle inspired by the paths that Bowie had, himself, paved throughout the previous decade. But in the 1980s era of reactionary Civil Rights rollbacks and newly resurgent cultural segregation (on early MTV), few were willing to identify what Bowie and Rodgers had accomplished together as a fundamentally Black thing.

"WE DON'T LET SOCIETY TELL US HOW IT'S SUPPOSED TO BE": PRINCE AND THE REVOLUTION IN BLACKNESS

Prince, however, knew what was up. When he joined Nile Rodgers on the stage at the 2014 Essence Festival for a blistering rereading of Stevie Ray Vaughan's classic guitar solo on "Let's Dance," he openly embraced and once again made audible the ferocity of that Black sound running through Bowie's music. That night, as he had done throughout his earthquake of a career, Prince casually dipped into this performance as the bright star–black star of Generation X, effortlessly laying down pop canon guitar licks that hold big histories of Black innovation submerged in its grooves like codes waiting to be reactivated. It was a reminder of how he'd been working way, way down "in the quarter of the Negroes," as Langston Hughes might say, all along and right in front of us for so many years, working as a son of Minneapolis, a sonic contrarian who was always interested in corrupting the putative boundaries between "Blackness" and "whiteness," "manhood" and "womanhood," so as to become something more, working as a multi-instrumental adventurist, inventor, and experimentalist way, way down in the Midwestern basement of his own hard-fought-for underground to make something else out of the divisions and ambiguities of post–Civil Rights America. Like Bowie, Prince showed an interest in offering up his singular sounds as the way in which we might get to the underground too and find with him "the funk of forty thousand years" that he first studied with intensity, clarity, intent, focus, and precision as a teen sporting an impressive 'fro and an omnivorous passion for, in



I.7. The "boldest of envelope-pushers," Prince assumes the role of casual, contemplative renegade on the back cover of his 1980 *Dirty Mind* album.

part, the sound of his big brother brethren—Chocolate President (George) Clinton and his ambassadors of Black Power body music.[32]

Young Prince's form of Black study consisted of consuming and mastering an entire continuum of early-to-mid-'70s popular music culture—claiming it all, dismissing altogether the borders between the dominant and the dispossessed that Josh Kun rightly reads as his transgressive space and then scrambling all of it in the makings of his own singular mode of expression. He fused Clinton's funk wave that made audible and palpable the Black body in euphoric, house party pleasure with the lexicon of cock-rock patriarchs; melded the wistful melodies of Canadian "Blue" songbirds with the electricity of Seattle-born psychedelic heroes and the house-wrecking tactics of Philly-bred, take-my-shoes-off, sweet potato pie–baking powerhouse belters; invoked the delicacy and pop sensibilities of Abbey Road romantics and the "tell-me-something good," "sweet thing" torch song soul of ex-Black Panther seductresses.[33]

In "the quarter of the Negroes," in the 1970s and '80s Midwestern basement where the luxurious and precious sounds of Black intimacy reaching its "do-me-baby peak," where the godfather's squeal gets resurrected and reborn as the sound of queerly speaking, "either/or" vulnerability—where, as Scott Poulson-Bryant suggests, the subject floats fluidly as one, the Other, both, or none of the above—here in this downlow space with the "1,369 light bulbs" borrowed from an Oklahoma native jazz romantic, Black radical freedom

dreams were taking root. Here in this place, the voice of what Andreana Clay calls that "light skin-ded free Black sex, girlfriend," is alive and ready to disturb and reimagine the articulation and actualization of sensuousness in sound as Black feminist revolution.[34] Yes, to be sure, his string of global ("I like 'em brown, yellow, Puerto Rican, or Haitian"—not to mention Scottish and Asian) lovers and protégées would keep the Svengali mythos (*Svengali* being an ethnically charged word if ever there was one, as Gayle Wald points out) swirling about him up to the very last weeks before we lost him, with striving vocalist Judith Hill and model Damaris Lewis alternately by his side. An "Irresistible Pimp," a rolling stone 'til the day he died, he flirted with this sexist caricature for sure, as our dear brother Greg Tate has testified.[35]

But let us not sleep on the sly trickster he was as well—bright star, black star—a little man at the Minneapolis underground railroad station who was perpetually taking the signifying title refrain of Hughes's 1960 epic freedom poem—"Ask Your Mama"—and turning it literally on its head to mine the genealogies of the modern musicking maternal—particularly the Black maternal—long repressed in the American pop music psyche: with echoes of Patti and Mavis and Shirley Caesar and Ree Ree running all through his repertoire, alongside Sly and Jimi and Joni, worrying the line in the melismatic tradition of the sisters who thrived on the theater of their voices and all that those voices could cultivate in the production and sustenance of old and new collectives, of generations past and heterogeneous genealogies pointing us toward a future not yet known.

Key to that revolution as well was the feminine family tree that he kept growing—the older sibling (Chaka), the symbolically fraternal twins (Wendy and Lisa), and the endless parade of baby sisters, nieces, and cousins (Lianna, Esperanza, Misty, Third Eye Girl, nonbinary Janelle, and, oh yes, Yoncé)—who played central roles in the making of an Afrotopic soundscape shaped and fueled by cross-gender, sometimes painfully fraught, other times transcendent forms of collaboration and sonic coalition-building. In the voice of one of his iconic, queer alt-ego "Camille," a figure who takes the form of technologically tricked-out vocals tracks such as "If I Was Your Girlfriend" and "Housequake"—the vocals that he once dreamed of showcasing on an entire album's worth of material—in this at turns eccentrically tender and strikingly disruptive, nonconforming voice—he calls out to us to couple with her/him/them in close, "kissing friends" confidence (on the former song) and in furious, cataclysmic, dance floor urgency (on the latter, a nearly-set-my-Berkeley-freshman-dorm-on-fire *Soul Train* line anthem for the ages).[36] It was as though he had taken George Clinton's Afrofuturist masculinist "Sir Nose" aqua funk persona, feminized and

queered that sound, and taken it to the bedroom for a makeover. That sonic androgyny signaled to multiple publics that we might articulate things we'd perhaps yet to express before—strange, beautiful, and uncategorizable ways of being that fell outside of the conventional pop register.

Black star, bright star, not a gang star—how we need him, her, them, you now more than ever. We need those liminal vocals that swing between the "I," "the you," and "the we" on "Controversy," the ones who meld the high spiritual ("Our Father, who art in heaven") with the suggestion of the profane ("I wish we all were nude"), the one that dreams of no boundaries ("I wish there were no black and white / I wish there were no rules"). We need that voice to sing those songs about longing to be emancipated from our most wretched and oppressive inhibitions and biases, as the Purple One does on that particular track when he climbs a register and takes us to the gripping bridge ("Some people want to die / So they can be free"). We hear the suggestion of other places where we might go by way of that voice. "Let your body be free," our Minnesota wunderkind implores on the throbbing manifesto "Sexuality," making liberal use of that signature squeal—filthier and more erotically intimate than James Brown's scream, filled with lust, mischief, orgasmic delight, gasps and exhalations, and the sound of revelry in the body that gives way to a call to "Stand up, everybody," to join him in envisioning "revolution" and a "new age revelation."[37]

The militancy of Prince the rock star can be seen and felt by the early '80s as he stood on the verge of his international breakthrough. But back in those days, he also knew what he was up against. He weren't no fool, as Black folks might say. The sound and look of what he'd been crafting for years in the club scene back in Minnesota and further on record across what was, up to that point in early fall 1981, three increasingly daring albums that fused sensuous R & B with greasy funk rhythms, glam guitar, Afro New Wave synth, post-punk energy, and vocals all caught up in gender mayhem, were indicators that he was holding fast to the belief that another kind of Sly riot was possible and about to go down. Yet Prince's insistence on "sexuality" as the key to liberation in the early '80s when he recorded the one-two-punch, back-to-back albums *Dirty Mind* and *Controversy*, works strewn with insurgent cries for carnal liberation as well as collective social resistance and political critique, may have seemed, in their own time, about a decade too late: post the free love era, post the official timelines for the feminist and queer revolutions, post the golden years of funk and disco, and, of course, post the canonized Black freedom struggle. As much as critics were, at this point in time, increasingly fawning over the fearless edge and hybrid genre- and gender-bending that he had first exhibited with abandon on the former album, there

were those who considered the content of Prince's message out of time and place, the cries of an oddball brother from the cold Midwest.[38]

But the intensity and insistent propulsion of this music was, it turns out, a fundamental rejection of "the post." His music sounded then as well as now like the antidote to anti-Blackness. At his most radical moments, he was giving us an anthem for a new human—what the pioneering philosopher Sylvia Wynter might famously characterize as a different "genre of being human," chanting the lines "Reproduction of a new breed, leaders, stand up, organize" (a lyric he would later repurpose on 2001's *The Rainbow Children*) and calling for a new insurgent collective, the kind that might "tak[e] the place of the black star" and draw power from the pleasure, knowledge, and agential control born of our own bodies. This was a kind of protest sound that had largely fallen out of fashion by the early '80s, when he began his stunning ascent to crossover superstardom, but he held onto variations of its spirit as his signature message throughout his career.[39]

He and Bowie had to have known that we'd keep needing them for sustenance and wisdom. At that moment back in early 2017 when we mourned them so intensely, their music was still there for the taking, still singing out to us in high ("Turn to the left!") Bowie "Fashion" all over again, as we were "standing by [a Trumpian] wall" so high and feeling as though "the gunshots" were just "above our heads." We, the people inclined to resist, in that dark winter of '16–'17, conjured the "'Heroes'" resolve at the center of Bowie's classic serenade: to "kiss / As though nothing could fall," while holding fast to the belief that "the shame was on the other side." He/she/they/them of Prince and Bowie's I-refuse repertoires kept calling out to us and trying to assure us across the cresting of that particular terrible epoch that "we can beat them, for ever and ever."[40] We have yet to turn the volume down. . . .

CODA: "WE CAN BE US, JUST FOR ONE DAY"

March 25, 2016. Toronto. Alone on the stage for his *Piano and a Microphone* tour, nearly two months after David Bowie's death and just over a month before he would himself pass, Prince staged his own fulgent yet stirring and understated collaboration, of sorts, with Bowie. What begins as a gentle foray into the little-known track, "Dolphin," a deep cut R & B ballad off 1995's *The Gold Experience* album gradually transitions into the summoning of an anthem. "How beautiful do the words have to be / Before they conquer every heart," our one-man wonder at the keyboard sings. "Dolphin" adds to the tenderness supplied by the hit single off that record, "The Most Beautiful

I.8. "Together, we can win." Prince pays a "'Heroes'" tribute to Bowie in Toronto, one month before his own passing.

Girl in the World." But it is also distinct from that come-on serenade, a meditation on power, compassion, and empathy rather than on the pleasures of adoration. "If I came back a dolphin," Prince ponders, "Would you listen to me then? / Would you let me [be] your friend / Would you let me in? . . . I'll die before I let you tell me how to swim." Big injury and how to repair it are this song's principal lines of inquiry, rather than bedding a lover—making it all the more fitting that Prince would *go big* for his improvisatory mashup medley tribute at the piano, turning to a song that contemplates the intimate dimensions of solidarity, resistance to tyranny, the enormity of love itself, as shield and weapon. The bridge from one song to the other comes in the form of a dolphin, one of the earth's most intelligent animals. "I, I wish I could swim, like the dolphin, the dolphins can swim," sings Prince, sparking yelps of recognition from the audience that night.[41]

They were palpably responding to the most enigmatic line in Bowie's "'Heroes,'" his iconic 1977 track, the epic title song off his second entry in the artist's Berlin Trilogy of recordings and a song that made direct reference to the Cold War peril all around. In the midst of a sweeping track saturated with King Crimson guitarist Robert Fripp's multispatial feedback and coproducer Tony Visconti's spatially sublime, psychedelic "Wall of Sound"

production, Bowie and co-songwriter and collaborator Brian Eno's lyrics pivot from romantic dreams of grandeur ("I, I will be king / And you, you will be queen") to escapist longing that simultaneously traffics in the pragmatic as well as the fanciful ("I wish you could swim / Like the dolphins, like dolphins can swim"). "'Heroes'" is a song about gaining, losing, and regaining faith in one's own ability to fight a kind of tyranny made manifest in the ominous presence of the Berlin Wall. It's a song that opens with a flourish of hope in imagining a kind of quixotic, majestic strength summed up in those proclamations of everyday people seizing the grandeur of monarchical romance and triumph and then faltering. It's both an intensely intimate and epic love story that shifts back and forth between heavy doubt and unstoppable hope. "Nothing will drive them away," Bowie declares in one verse before assuring his lover, "We can beat them, just for one day." Laced with undercurrents of tension and tentativeness as fraught and persistent as Fripp's searing (and somehow both blistering and hypnotic) guitar lead, Bowie's classic pushes against the historical headwinds, wending its way through an endless whirl of ambient feedback.[42]

Prince picks up the drama of "'Heroes'" in that moment of speculative drift toward the dolphin, the gateway onto a plateau of lyrical improvisation: "Maybe nothing will keep us together / But together we can win / We can be heroes, again and again." If one man wishes for a partner who can be fugitive like a dolphin at sea with him, the other envisions his own reincarnation in brash lyrics that declare, "You can cut off all my fins / But to your ways I will not bend / I'll die before I let you tell me how to swim / And I'll come back in the end" Prince issues a defiant addendum to Bowie's apocalyptic tale of romance and flight. And in the shadow of losing Bowie, in the early months of a dark political year unlike any other in the modern US era—at least up to that point—Prince melds and draws out the ethical resonances of "'Heroes'" with those lovers "standing by the wall," with "the gunshots above [their] heads" and "kiss[ing] as though nothing could fall," marrying this vision with his own plangent cry in "Dolphin." "Why," sings Prince, "does my brother have to go hungry / When you told me there was food for all?"[43] Both versions of "'Heroes'" reject fascist brutality and aggressively contemplate other ways of being in the world.

To get out of this emergency called twenty-first-century America, Prince turned for a moment to a newly departed compatriot in sound, rewriting his anthem's most striking lines: "I can remember standing by the wall," he continues, adding one stark and poignant lyrical revision: "The guns, they shot over *my head . . . and missed every one of us all . . . that's why we can*

be heroes . . . you and I. " It's a promise, a steadfast commitment to stay the course, to be brave on the battlefield, to believe in our survival, to come out of the wilderness when necessary, to keep fighting the fight that he and Bowie never abandoned: that colossal battle to be humanly free and to dream into being sites for radical congregation.[44] The prodigious beauty of their ongoing struggle continues to ring loud and clear in the sounds that the "this way or no way" "Lazarus"-era Bowie kids—the kids who are, no doubt, Prince's *next* power generation—are continuing to (re)cover and play loud and long in the commons known also as the playground. Race you there . . .

NOTES

1. Bowie, "Starman."
2. Girard College Lower School Band, "Starfish and Coffee."
3. Prince, "Starfish and Coffee."
4. In his pathbreaking tome *Lipstick Traces*, Greil Marcus famously argues that "the sixties were based in the belief that . . . everything was possible," but he adds that this sort of "utopian ideology by the 1970s [was] reduced to a well-heeled solipsism." Marcus, *Lipstick Traces*, 48. Taken as a whole, this anthology suggests that the cultural lexicons of Bowie's and Prince's respective repertoires ultimately pushed back against the conventions of rock and roll solipsism. Bowie, "Starman." Among the many beautiful children's tributes to Bowie and cover performances of Bowie songs that have popped up online through the years, the Mayo Children's Choir in Ireland stands out for its symphonic treatment of "Starman." See also the Kids Rock Chorus's 2016 performance of the song.
5. Bowie, "Blackstar." The *Blackstar* album was released on Bowie's birthday and two days before his death on January 10, 2016. See also *Let All the Children Boogie: A Tribute to David Bowie*, described on its record label's website as an "all ages album dedicated to the music and artistry of David Bowie" and benefiting the It Gets Better Project, with its "mission to communicate to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth around the world that it gets better, and to create and inspire the changes needed to make it better for them. . . . In addition to celebrating Bowie's catalog and life's work, the project introduces him to today's kids. From 'Kooks' to his narration of Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf* to his role in *Labyrinth* and his own role as a father, it seemed Bowie always knew that children were a different species and he welcomed them into his world." See Spare the Rock Records, "About."
6. Evidence of this generational change in attitudes toward and appreciation for Prince, for instance, can be found in coverage of a 2023 student-curated exhibition of Prince memorabilia in Newark, New Jersey. As the *New York Times* noted, "This is not a show put together by Prince fans" but rather by "high school students—born long after Prince's 1984 album 'Purple Rain' was released—and many of them did not know much about the artist until now." Adds journalist Tammy La Gorce, "Enthusiasm for Prince among the student curators has its limits. 'People ask us,

"Why Prince?"' said Princess Clarke, 16, a junior at Bard High School Early College Newark. 'That's just the cards we've been dealt.'" La Gorce, "Prince Exhibition."

7. Bowie, "Rock 'n' Roll Suicide." Prince's most famous and influential backing band, the Revolution—first formed in 1979—through the years featured in its lineup Lisa Coleman, Wendy Melvoin, BrownMark, Bobby Z, and Matt Fink, as well as Dez Dickerson and Andre Cymone, evoking the multiracial, cross-gender spirit of Bay Area–based rock, funk, and soul trailblazers Sly and the Family Stone. See Sulcas, "The Revolution"; Epstein, "How Sly and the Family Stone Changed Music"; Prince, "New Power Generation"; Prince, "Partyup."

8. Prince, "Uptown"; Bowie, "Space Oddity."

9. In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison sets the scene of the clearing wherein enslaved peoples might come together to gather themselves up again, guided in sermon by the prodigious wisdom of preacher and matriarch Baby Suggs. On the rise of late-twentieth-century conservatism, see, for instance, Perlstein, *Reaganland*; Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream*; and Kelley and Lewis, *To Make Our World Anew*.

10. On Bowie's envelope-pushing early career profile, see, for instance, Rockwell, "David Bowie Keeps on Flirting"; Pareles, "Bowie Creates a Spectacle"; and Blevins, "Night David Bowie." On Prince's boundary-pushing repertoire, see, for instance, Stephen Holden's early '80s reading of the artist's "stylized salaciousness," "Prince, a Renegade"; and Schudel and Langer, "Prince." Also see Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic."

11. Hall, "What Is This 'Black'?," 106–7.

12. Bowie, "Lazarus."

13. Jim Sleeper, email to the author, January 2017.

14. Sleeper, email.

15. Shimer and Wang, "Students Hold Calhoun Renaming Ceremony"; Wang and Svrluga, "Yale Renames Calhoun College."

16. MTV News, "David Bowie Criticizes MTV." The summer of 2020 examples of white artists' efforts to engage with questions of systemic racism in the recording industry and beyond were widespread and ubiquitous in the wake of Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin's murder of George Floyd. Numerous examples of white artist social protest saturated the pop music culture landscape, from the much-maligned social media "blackout" to Lady Gaga's online class of 2020 graduation speech. See Coscarelli, "#Blackout Tuesday"; Lady Gaga, "Commencement Speech Transcript."

17. Butler, *Gender Trouble*; Geffen, *Glitter Up the Dark*, 31, 103.

18. Critchley, "What Would David Bowie Do?"; Nyong'o, "Too Black, Too Queer"; Geffen, *Glitter Up the Dark*, 104.

19. On the prodigiousness of Blackness, see Fred Moten's entire oeuvre, including but not limited to *In the Break*, *Stolen Life*, *Black and Blur*, and *The Universal Machine*.

20. Rogers, "Final Mysteries."

21. Renck, "Blackstar." For more on the making of the video, see Ryan, "David Bowie," the *New Musical Express* (NME)'s late 2015 interview with director Johan Renck, in which he describes the track as "a song that has a biblical aspect to it; it

promises impending doom." Pareles, "Blackstar." Morrison, *Jazz*, 220. For more on the New Jazz studies, see O'Meally, *Jazz Cadence of American Culture*; O'Meally et al., *Uptown Conversation*; Coleman, *Change*.

22. Pareles, "'Blackstar.'" See also Chinen, "On David Bowie's 'Blackstar.'" For more on jazz fusion, see Coleman, *Change.*

23. Holland, *Raising the Dead*, 4–5. See also Christina Sharpe's formidable and influential meditations on this topic in *In the Wake*. For Fred Moten's meditations on "ante" and "anti" Blackness—that which is prior to and also existing outside of systems of anti-Blackness—see Moten, *Universal Machine*.

24. Moten, *Stolen Life*; Moten, *Black and Blur*; Moten, *Universal Machine*; Moten, *In the Break*; Rowell, "'Words Don't Go There.'"

25. Bandele, *Black Star*.

26. Moten, *Universal Machine*, 154.

27. Palmer and Bischoff, "Blackstar (Featuring Anna Calvi)."

28. O'Meally, *Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, 4; Chinen, "On David Bowie's 'Blackstar.'"

29. The kindred spirit connections between Bowie and Labelle are particularly well-documented. See Mahon, *Black Diamond Queens*.

30. Rodgers, "Nile Rodgers."

31. See Flatley, "Like David Bowie"; Morris, "Little Richard Wasn't Conceited"; and Tavia Nyong'o's unpublished manuscript "Rip It Up"; see also another version of Nyong'o's "Rip It Up" in DeFrantz and Gonzalez, *Black Performance Theory*.

32. Minsker, "Prince and Nile Rodgers Cover"; Bowie, "Let's Dance"; Hughes, *Ask Your Mama*. On Midwestern Prince culture, see also Nicole Fleetwood, "Prince, 'Darling Nikki,'" in this volume.

33. See Josh Kun, "Heroes Across the Border," chapter 6 in this volume.

34. Scott Poulson-Bryant, roundtable remarks, "The Prince Revue," American Studies Association 2016 conference, November 2016; Ellison, *Invisible Man*; Clay, "Light Skin-ded Free Black Sex." See also Andreana Clay, "Prince, 'If I Was Your Girlfriend,'" in this volume.

35. A Tribe Called Quest, "Electric Relaxation"; Wald, "How Svengali Lost"; Greg Tate, roundtable remarks, "The Prince Revue," American Studies Association 2016 conference, November 2016.

36. Cava, "'There Was a Boy Named Camille.'" For more on the "Camille" project, see also Walmsley, "Prince"; Hermes, "Inside Prince's Groundbreaking"; Brooks, "Everybody Still Wants to Fly"; Prince, "If I Was Your Girlfriend" and "Housequake."

37. Prince, "Controversy" and "Sexuality."

38. The infamous 1981 Rolling Stones gig during which Prince was booed off the stage is just one example of the complicated road that the artist and his multiracial, cross-gender band the Revolution traveled early in his career in racist, sexist, homophobic rock and roll culture. See Heller, "Twelve Wildest Prince Moments"; Brooks, "*Controversy.*"

39. Wynter and McKittrick, "Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species?," 9. Sylvia Wynter's scholarship on the ways in which "the figure of the human is tied to epistemological histories that presently value a *genre* of the human that reifies

Western bourgeois tenets" is extensive and pathbreaking. See Wynter and McKittrick, "Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species?," 9–89.

40. Bowie, "Fashion"; Bowie, "'Heroes.'"

41. Prince, "'Heroes'/Dolphin"; Prince, "Dolphin."

42. Bowie, "'Heroes.'" On Tony Visconti's production techniques and the making of "'Heroes,'" see Clerc, *David Bowie: All the Songs*, 278–79; see also Hewitt, *Bowie: Album by Album*, 125–35.

43. Prince, "'Heroes'/Dolphin"; Bowie, "'Heroes.'" Paolo Hewitt notes that "it is said that two works of art" inspired Bowie to "write a song about two lovers set against the divisive image of the Berlin Wall. . . . One was a short story called *A Grave for A Dolphin* by the Italian writer Alberto Denti di Pirajno; the other, a painting by the German expressionist Otto Mueller called *Lovers Between Garden Walls*." Hewitt, *Bowie: Album by Album*, 127. The liberation politics of Prince's "Dolphin" are rooted in his long, high-profile battle with Warner Bros. Records over ownership of his music catalog. As Benoit Clerc notes, "'Dolphin' was unveiled to the general public on 30 September 1994 in a music video that saw Prince sporting the word 'slave' on his cheek for the first time—as a sign that he would not be controlled by his record company which was refusing to release *The Gold Experience*" album. Clerc, *Prince: All the Songs*, 276. There is a way in which to read Prince's elegiac mashup cover of his song and Bowie's as a recognition of their shared quest for creative independence and artistic autonomy in a recording industry that they perpetually sought to artistically (and, in Prince's spectacular case, professionally) subvert.

44. Prince, "'Heroes'/Dolphin," emphasis added.

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