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"A FIRE DON'T BURN UNLESS IT'S STARTED": PRINCE'S PROVERBIAL LYRICS

Abstract: This article explores the use of proverbial language in songs by the late rhythm and blues and rock music artist, Prince. This article uses a selective array of the songs in which Prince used proverbs, proverbial sayings, and proverbial expressions during the time frame that spans from his first release, *For You* (1978), through his last release before his death in April 2016, *HITNRUN Phase Two* (2016). Using Sw. Anand Prahlad's grammatical and situational categories of meaning as primary tools for the discussion, the author interprets the meaning of Prince's proverbial language in the larger context of three "masks" or personae that the artist adopted during his long career (The International Lover, Goldnigga, and The Purple Yoda). Finally, the article compares Prince's proverbial output in song to those of known proverb users in literature.

Keywords: Prince, R&B lyrics, rock lyrics, proverbs, folklore, masking

1. Introduction

One of the first things I ever read about Prince, in the popular teen magazines of 1979 or so (*Rock & Soul* and *Right On!*), was that he wrote all his songs, played all the instruments and produced each song. As a youth, I found those qualities simultaneously unusual and appealing. Years later, as a scholar who collects and studies proverbs, I noticed that while part of his prolific

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song-writing ability could be attributed to his musical prowess, the other portion was related to his lyrical prowess. Proverbs, that small, nearly ubiquitous piece of folklore, formed part of the scaffolding he used to erect a song-writing career that includes literally hundreds of official releases. Like other some other successful songwriters who emerged before him in the world of R&B (such as Ashford and Simpson, General Johnson[1], and Smokey Robinson), Prince's use of proverbs was extensive. This article is an intellectual exercise in identifying and interpreting proverbs in Prince's songs to discern what light this process may shine on the meanings of his songs. To that end, this article identifies proverbs in select songs, determines their meanings, and interprets them in the context of the remaining lyrical content of Prince's songs. Three Prince personae provide the structure for this exploration of this aspect of the artist's creativity: The International Lover, Goldnigga, and the Purple Yoda.

2. What are proverbs?

Proverbs are a form of folklore. My definition below draws from the example noted by Archer Taylor in his definitional attempt in 1962. At the simplest level, he noted, the proverb may be defined (as Britain's Lord Russell apparently did in the 19th century) as a brief phrase that contains "the wisdom of many and the wit of one" (Taylor 1962: 3). In Judi Moore Smith's 1984 radio program "Proverbs: Wit and Wisdom," African American proverb scholar Jack Daniel referred to proverbs as those statements that "old people used to say;" Smith, the host, referred to the speakers as "grandparents and parents" and "aunts and uncles" (1984). In her text, Newroth maintained that she compilation her collection of proverbs so that future readers might know "the words of wisdom from our ancestors" (2007: 9). Using the ideas of antiquity

[1] General Johnson was the lead singer of the R&B group Chairmen of the Board. He also wrote songs for the group and other acts at Motown and Invictus Records. Over time, I began to notice his name as a songwriter on a number of songs containing proverbial lyrics and began to seek out his songs as a result. One of his songs with the female group Honey Cone, 1971's "One Monkey Don't Stop No Show" includes a proverb as the title. Some of his later songs (circa 2006) include songs like "You Gotta Crawl Before You Can Walk" and "The Blacker The Berry."

from Taylor (citing a more than century old definition) and wisdom of "old folks" implied or stated by previous definitions, I chose to define proverbs as relatively short sayings that convey ancestral wisdom. In this way, I sought to create a definition that could reflect the proverb use in African American culture. Just as some people cite specific "old folks" who used them in the past (as my father often cited his mother's proverbs), I wanted to highlight the idea that many of the original speakers of proverbs are now deceased and are now among the ancestors (like the grandmother who died when I was a toddler). Though my definition reminds me to respect the proverbial wisdom of those who lived long before me, it is not intended to cover every instance of proverb use everywhere.

No matter how these researchers (or myself) have defined them, some scholars have shown the importance of proverbs to Africans as part of their communication and native pedagogical strategies, noting that proverbs appear to be conveyed in novels, court proceedings, plays, and music (Messenger 1959; Yankah 1989: 221; Prahlad, "All Chickens," 1998). Indeed, as one scholar showed, one can wear proverbs in Africa's Akan culture (Domowitz 1992)! Building upon such scholarship, some (like Whiting) have contended that proverbs should be found in African American cultures. Subsequent research has proved that quite conclusively. Yet, the search goes on for other venues, other areas wherein African American proverb use may be found and other writers have contributed their own definitional approaches.

3. Proverbs in African American Culture

Sw. Anand Prahlad, for example, released two books on proverb use among black folk (in 1996 and 2001): the former about U. S. African Americans, and the latter featuring Jamaican proverb use in reggae music. Wolfgang Mieder has produced several journal articles and some book-length studies of proverbs used by African Americans, including studies of Frederick Douglass, President Barack Obama, and Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (2001; 2009; 2010; 2011). Prahlad's *African American Proverbs in Context* is, thus far, the most comprehensive look at African American proverbs using an ethnographic approach (Prahlad

1996). *Reggae Wisdom*, however, may be a more direct model for this article, as Prahlad uses several chapters to explore specific reggae artists' use of proverbs in their lyrics (Prahlad 2001). Mieder's studies of the proverbial usage of political figures such as Frederick Douglass, President Barack Obama and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. have shown the presence of proverbs in political speeches by these renowned African Americans (2001; 2009; 2010; 2011). This paper seeks to demonstrate that a fruitful area to explore in pursuit of African American paremiography and paremiology might be African American popular music.

Beyond that broad range of materials, there is not a great deal of extant literature on proverbs in African American music. As noted earlier, one chapter in *African-American Proverbs in Context* explores proverbs in blues lyrics (1996); a chapter of Mieder's *American Proverbs* takes on the proverb "Different Strokes for Different folks." Mieder focuses on the use and popularization of the proverb in the Sly and the Family Stone song "Everyday People" (1989). Taft discusses proverbs in blues lyrics in a 1994 article. That general dearth of works exploring proverbs in African American music is one of the factors leading me to the subject at hand. As a paremiologist and paremiographer, I am continually in search of new sources I can use for collecting African American proverb use. Over the past decade, I noticed that Prince used proverbs in some of his songs, and I began collecting them. To collect these proverbs, I use blank journals to write down proverb containing songs I hear during any listening session. I didn't set out (initially) to systematically collect the Prince proverbs. As my general collection grew, Prince songs began to stand out for this Prince fan. This article is the fruit of that labor.

The discussion here is also influenced by the categories of meaning outlined by Prahlad in *African-American Proverbs in Context*. When dealing with proverbs and proverbial expressions, Prahlad's **grammatical** category of meaning calls for the determination of the meaning of the words as rendered, thus deriving a literal meaning of the proverb (Prahlad1996: 23). At the next level of meaning, Prahlad's **situational** category of meaning comes into play (Prahlad1996: 24). With a situational meaning, the interpreter of the proverb attempts to discern the "intent

of the speaker" in the context of the utterance (Prahlad1996: 24). In the absence of being the author of the song or interviewing the songwriter, situational meaning is the final level of Prahlad's categories an interpreter could reach. I treat each song as a very short story, with the singer as the protagonist and the meaning(s) derived from the contexts displayed within the song. The limited selection of songs used in this article fit the length of a scholarly article. While I have not yet surveyed his entire output, I have gone through the lyrics included in Prince's first twelve releases. In total, 66 instances of proverbial language appear on those releases. This article includes songs that go beyond his first twelve album/cd releases because the collection became more systematic only when I started noticing the proverbs in songs I listened to for my own recreational purposes. My initial collection of his proverb use lumped Prince's proverb use with instances from many other songs in African American popular music. An exploration of his entire output over four decades would likely need a book-length study.

4. Prince's "Masks": The Personae of the Artist[2]

Prince Rogers Nelson was a prolific songwriter and a performer who, while wowing people with his technical skills, took time to develop his persona simply known as "Prince." Young Prince was perhaps not ready for the spotlight and he was probably most "himself" during the time of his first album, *For You*. This was his adolescent romantic stage. The album cover shows him with an Afro in a close-up picture. It is not a particularly memorable cover. His artistic control with the album design did, however, begin to show some uniqueness with his second album, *Prince*, where a perm-wearing shirtless Prince appears on the front while a possibly nude Prince rides a winged horse on the back of the album. His overtly sexual side is more fully expressed. Folklorists like me look for "masks" or "personae" that a person might inhabit or perform at certain moments in life. The persona on

[2] Prince is not the only public figure to engage in masking or the creation of different personae. As D. A. Boxwell argued, Zora Neale Hurston performed as a trickster (Sis Cat) during her anthropological research, using her skills to make people feel comfortable enough to share their folklore with her (Boxwell 1992).

display at the beginning of his career was that of the child prodigy/musical genius. He was also a romantic. He was becoming "Prince" the performer he would later become. In his first performance on *American Bandstand* in 1980, he showed strong performance chops, but was mute in his interview with Dick Clark (*American Bandstand* 1980; Draper 2008: 13).

At the time of *Dirty Mind* (1980), Prince moved to overtly sexual display and songs that were not radio appropriate for the most part (Draper 2008: 25). As the Revolutionary Rock and Roller Prince wore a trench coat, bikini bottoms and thigh high boots on the album cover photograph. He began to bring forth his "International Lover" persona/mask with the song "Do Me Baby" on his third full-length release, *Controversy*. I pose it as a distinct persona because Prince showcased his seductive side in that song and later tunes like "International Lover," "Scandalous," "Adore," "The Most Beautiful Girl in the World," "Betcha By Golly Wow," and "Breakfast Can Wait." Prince, however, was multifaceted. Sometimes, he wanted to perform another persona. "The Kid" that he played in *Purple Rain* was a rock star, perhaps the same rock star that Prince became with the release of that film and album. In his 1986 song "Movie Star" (available on *Crystal Ball*), Prince runs through a humorous monologue that shows him attempting to portray that character in a trip to a club. In the movie *Under the Cherry Moon*, his comic trickster (who also tries to be a serious International Lover) hints at his Goldnigga persona. While Goldnigga has poise, swagger, and never loses the woman or his cool, Christopher Tracy loses his cool and his life in *Under the Cherry Moon*. The Artist Formerly Known as Prince incorporates the mystery Prince displayed early in his career while also bringing forth hints of several other personae. When he wrote "Slave" on his cheek while battling with Warner Brothers over control of his masters, his Purple Yoda (the "deep" thinking Prince) persona met real-life opponents. In no way do I propose that these are mutually exclusive categories or personae. Each persona was Prince in performance mode. Sometimes, he blended these personae and clearly more research needs to be done on this subject. However, I do not have space to explore the many personae he employed throughout his career; I chose to use three personae to showcase Prince's use of

proverbs: The seducer also known as The International Lover, Goldnigga (a comic trickster), and the deep thinker: The Purple Yoda. While it appears that I pulled these personae at random, it is more accurate to state that the proverbs used here led me to these personae. The personae are vehicles for showcasing a discussion of Prince's proverb use.

4.1 Proverbs from The International Lover

The "International Lover" moniker derives from a song of that name on the *1999* album. In that song, Prince portrays himself as a veteran seducer of women. In producing this song, Prince situates himself within a tradition of creating songs designed for love and seduction (while also using proverbs to argue for that seduction). He promises to be the best and most attentive lover in "International Lover." Using this persona, Princes identifies and performs the swagger he would perfect over time. An early hint of that swagger appeared in real life when Sheila E first met Prince in 1978. In a 2014 interview, Sheila E. said she had "never seen a man so beautiful" and that she had to get to know him. She was attracted to his look and his charisma. Though *1999* is Prince's fifth studio album, he would showcase himself as a woman lover on his first album, with "Soft and Wet," "I Wanna Be Your Lover" on the second album, and "Do Me, Baby" on the third album.

Prince's proverb use debuts with songs on his first album, *For You* (1978). I have also collected proverbs from his last release prior to his death, *HITnRUN Phase Two* (2015). That nearly forty-year span includes wildly popular releases and relatively obscure ones, but the focus here scratches the proverbial surface of Prince's proverb use. Of note is that proverbs remained part of his writer's toolbox throughout his career. In an attempt at inclusivity, I have collected sayings that appear to be bona-fide "true" or authentic proverbs, a number of proverbial expressions, some proverbial allusions (alluding to a proverb that is not fully uttered), and some statements that seem proverbial but *may* have been invented by Prince himself.[3] That said, sometimes an in-

[3] Alan Dundes' discussion of the distinctions between proverbs and proverbial expressions is useful here. Dundes wrote of the true proverb as something in sentence

vented saying does, in fact, become a proverb when people begin to employ it as such (Arora 1985: 1). A statement can only truly be considered "proverbial" when it becomes part of a "tradition." Shirley Arora describes "traditionality" with respect to proverbs via "the sense of historically-derived authority or … community-sanctioned wisdom that they convey" (1985: 1). Traditionality derives directly from two sources: active use of the saying as a proverb, and relative age. Scholars verify that a given saying is proverbial through "repeated or widespread records in the field" (Arora 1985: 5). Relative age is critical in that the "older" the statement, the greater likelihood that it is considered "true" and is accepted as proverbial. The listener must also recognize that he or she is being addressed in a traditional proverbial fashion (Arora 1985: 4). Since some of Prince's proverbial (or proverb-like) statements have yet to gain wide currency, I include them here, but make no argument for their use as proverbs beyond Prince's invention of them.

Prince's first single "Soft and Wet" from his first album, *For You* showcases his early use of proverbs. As the album's liner notes indicate, Chris Moon was both co-producer and co-writer on this song. The lyrics, however, do seem to carry on the sort of themes Prince would cover many times in his music: a salacious highly sexualized love affair. This song showcases Prince's falsetto voice singing a love/sex song designed to be mildly titillating, as the lyrics suggest. Prince sings to and about a woman he calls "lover" with whom the song alleges a tryst. He sings about being with her and that she "loves him to death." He sings multiple times in the chorus about her "love" being "soft and wet'. The song was a hit for Prince, peaking at 92 on the Billboard Hot 100 chart in November 1978, the first of 46 of his songs to reach that chart, while reaching 12 on the Billboard Hot R&B chart (Billboard)[4]. He sings about his desire for her and her desire for

form that consists of a "minimum of topic and a comment" citing examples like "money talks" and "honesty is the best policy"(vii). Proverbial phrases, proverbial comparisons, and proverbial expressions include statements like "as blind as a bat" or "to call a space a spade" (vii-viii). Whereas the "true" proverb is usually a fixed phrase, the largely descriptive proverbial expressions change subject, agent, and tense.

[4] The song reached the same position as "If I was Your Girlfriend" from *Sign O' The Times* did later.

him. He also begs her to tell him that she loves him. In describing how he sees her, Prince uses two proverbial expressions: "*you're just as soft as a lion tamed*" and "*you're just as wet as the evening rain*." What the song lacks in subtlety, Prince makes up in proverbial expressions. Each of these proverbial comparisons seem to be of Princely origins. In the end, though, Prince proclaims that he is "crazy" about her love. Whether that is her emotional love, or her body is debatable, but the song strongly suggests that Prince is enamored of her physical self. Yet, he asks again and again if she loves him. This duality introduces a theme Prince would repeat in his music. He sang about carnal and spiritual (or emotional) love in the same song, the lyrics playing that out. The sacred and the profane appear in complementary fashion in this early song as it would in several other songs later in his career (Azhar). While his songs would become much more explicit by his third album, the "soft and wet" phraseology in use for that song is meant to communicate carnal desire in a slightly less obvious fashion. Prince's credited co-writer on that early song indicated that Prince was only suggesting in this song what *Dirty Mind* would overtly state. By the time he wrote *Dirty Mind*, Prince indicated that he wanted the matter to be made explicit on that 1980 release (Miller). If the songs became more explicit, they also showed a maturing songwriter whose attempts to woo lovers became more polished, with Prince using proverbs to buttress his arguments while perfecting his International Lover persona.

What Prince is doing here, though, reflects a man using his words, his "rap," to get a woman to pay attention to him in the way that he desires. In doing so, Prince is following a long tradition of using proverbs in conversation or in song for the express purpose of seduction. In her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Hurston writes about one of Eatonville's finest citizens employing a proverb in his attempted seduction. Hurston (as a child) witnessed a verbal exchange in which of the men on the perpetually-occupied front porch of Joe Clarke's general store/post office tries to seduce of one of Eatonville's women. The man asks the woman to hold her ear close as spoke to her with a proverbial expression stating that "he had *a bug to put in her ear*" (Hurston 1942:46). The woman bends over to hear what the man has to say, but very quickly stands up and exclaims in disgust

saying, "The idea of such a thing! Talking like dat to me, when you know I'm a good church-worker, and you a deacon (Hurston 1942: 47)! Surely, that would be enough to shame him into backing off. Yet, as Hurston writes the story, the man appeared undeterred. In fact, he confidently pursued the issue further, citing a proverb to promote his case: "Dat's just de point I'm coming out on, sister. Two clean sheets can't dirty one 'nother, you know. (Hurston 1942:47)." With his use of that proverb, the man argues that since they are both church people, there's nothing wrong with a sexual union. He attempts to persuade her with a prevalent image, that of two clean sheets drying on a wash line or in a closet on top of each other.

The literal meaning conjures the image of two clean bed sheets coming into contact. If neither is dirty, each will come away unsoiled by the connection. The proverb's performed situational meaning, however, is that these two religious folks should develop no problems from engaging in a sexual relationship. Those without strong religious convictions are "dirty" and will only soil each other with such activities. The man's argument made it clear that he believed (at least outwardly) that both he and the woman could easily emerge from the union in the same "pure" state in which they both entered it. Though Hurston left the story at the point of the man's use of the proverb, one may safely assume from the woman's reaction that the proverb failed to sway her. The way Prince portrayed his efforts in song, it appears that he had few such problems.

Prince's 1986 song "Kiss" addresses the issue of mis-communication in a potential courtship. One imagines a succession of women approaching Prince and wanting to be "with" him (at least, that's the way Prince tells the story). Yet, it appears, many of these women don't know how to properly approach Prince or how to gain his attention. Maybe some of them acted a role they thought appeal to him. Perhaps others changed their looks to suit him. Prince, however, sings that he wants a woman who doesn't do any of that.

Prince sings that he wants something "real," not a woman playing games and not being herself (or the best "version" of herself) in his opinion. The song begins as a response to a query outside the song, along the lines of "what type of woman do

you (Prince) like"? His responses are that she need not be rich or cool, but simply herself. There's no zodiac sign or type that he prefers. Again, she simply needs to be herself. Invoking a proverb, Prince sings "*act your age, Mama, not your shoe size*" in a proverbial lyric. She needs to know herself, behave like herself, and be a grown-up. His surmise, then, is that games are for children. Real life and real relationships require adults to be involved. Women who learn about relationships from dramatic television shows, for example, are not his type. If she were to behave like herself, not a character from the nighttime soap opera *Dynasty*, then she has a shot with him. One presumes that if he were to revise the song for today's world, a reality show might substitute for the old-time soap opera. This forms part of an imagined dialogue Prince is having with a composite woman representing an amalgamation of concerns different women might have raised at one point or another.

Like some singers who emerged before him, Prince used proverbs as part of his direct efforts at seduction through song. Barry White's 1994 CD, *The Icon is Love*, for example, contained the song "Practice What You Preach." In that tune, White appears as a seducer engaging in a playful banter and proverbial signification with a potential lover. According to White's "character" in the song, she (his potential sexual partner) has been making assertions about her desirability and skills as a lover. White challenges this woman with the consistent proverbial refrain, *practice what you preach*. White tells the woman to dare to *turn him out* (a proverbial phrase itself), insisting that if she thinks she can get him to go crazy for her, show him so new sexual trick, she should do so. White's refrain, *practice what you preach* exhorts his potential lover to make good on her threat to showcase her allegedly considerable sexual talents. The only thing that really matters in this case is the action. The proverb is part and parcel of the "rap" (seductive talk) in the song; the romantic rap's intent is to "get over" on women (Smitherman 1977: 83, 95). Prince's International Lover uses the music and the lyrics to accomplish his goals, situating the artist in a tradition of using proverbs to generate romantic or sexual contact.

An unreleased tune from a similar time frame as "Kiss," one featuring the singer Boni Beyer, with Prince is "The Line" (also

known as "Cross the Line"). Beyer was a member of the band in *The Sign 'O' the Times* era, singing a prominent accent line with Prince on "I Could Never Take the Place of Your Man." The Prince Vault information suggests that the song was recorded during the *Lovesexy* sessions and was originally slated for that 1988 album release. In "The Line," Prince is attempting to convince an intended lover who is a friend to "cross the line" from friend to lover. He seems to recognize that the effort is a difficult one, but he nevertheless persists. On this fast-paced song, Beyer sings first as the friend and intended lover, asking him to name a very good reason to potentially toss out the friendship, asking if he can be her lover and still be her friend. The chorus exhorts her to "cross the line" multiple times. As the chorus' lyrics state, life would be so much better if she would only cross that line. Prince sings back that life is so much better on the other side of the line. He cites or invents the proverb *the water's so much better on the other side*. At the grammatical level, it is truly hard to believe that the water could be any better across the imaginary line. If, however, as I imagine, Prince intended the utterance to be similar to "the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence," he intended for it to have a similar meaning. Where she was, situationally, was not preferable to the side on which she could currently be standing, he intimates in song to Boni. The song proves to be another lyrical attempt at seduction by the International Lover. The song, however, does not reveal a resolution to this hypothetical seduction event.

In his 1989 song "Scandalous," Prince moves into the physical intimacy one can maintain in a long-term relationship. He is no longer in the apparent begging mode of "The Line." This later song is a seductive ballad designed to show Prince as an attentive lover desirous of making sure his lover knows she is wanted. While the song doesn't specify a marriage, it implies something long-term, noting at several steps his desire for her. At the heart of the song is Prince's suggestion that they will do "scandalous" things that might call for the neighbors to call the police.

Prince initially released "Scandalous" in 1989 on the *Batman* soundtrack. Later, "Scandalous" appeared on *The Scandalous Sex Suite* extended single/EP in three parts. One of Prince's apparently beloved slow/love songs, it remains in rotation on

old school/Quiet Storm format radio. I heard it one evening on Atlanta's Kiss 104 in 2017. Along with with songs like *1999's* "International Lover," *Controversy's* "Do Me Baby" and "The Most Beautiful Girl in the World," this song helped Prince secure a reputation as a sexy song-maker.

Prince returned to falsetto on "Scandalous," The song's subject is seduction. Prince portrays himself as the quintessential "International Lover," the type of lover who would do anything it took to please his woman. In this song, Prince employs the braggadocio that the romantic rapper uses to talk himself into an intimate encounter (Smitherman 1977: 97). The song showcases a fervent desire to make her needs, desires, and fantasies come true. As Prince sings to the fantasy lover, he will do all these things and more:

(1) Come closer
Feel what you've been dying for
don't be afraid, baby

The goal, again, is to explicitly seduce this woman. He explains that he simply cannot wait to make her his lover before moving to the chorus, stating:

(2) Tonight it's going to be scandalous
'Cause tonight I'm going to be your fantasy

Prince sings as if that moment is imminent, but that he also needs to convince her that he's the lover she needs or wants him to be. If the listener "reads" through the lines of the lyrics, it becomes clear that she is not yet convinced.

The proverb comes into play just before Prince sings that he can no longer wait for her to realize the obvious choice. Using the proverb as a rhetorical tool designed to make a very convincing argument even more convincing, Prince sings:

(3) Everybody always told me
Good things come to those who wait
But *I've got so much on the menu*
I just can't wait

The proverb and proverbial expression in use in this section of the song are designed to light the pathway to his seduction of this imagined lover. In the process of employing a proverb and a proverbial expression, he hopes to finally convince her. In this instance, Prince employs a formulaic proverb precursor by using the statement "everybody always told me." In some settings, that is seen as a dispassionate way to make the proverbial argument but without taking full charge of the proverb. It simply makes logical sense that all the accumulated wisdom that existed prior to this conversation/song makes the point that "*good things come to those who wait*." At the situational level of meaning for this song, Prince is the good thing that she's been waiting to find. A second situational meaning could be that she is the good thing for which he has been waiting. The song is unclear on this point, but this dual meaning may be what Prince intended in the first place. Nonetheless, this is what may be inferred. The proverbial expression *so much on the menu* is used to alludes to the idea that he has grand plans for their rendezvous. He intends to "serve" her the sort of love she craves at the desired level and in the desired abundance.

As a rhetorical tool, The International Lover uses proverbs to lure his conquests. Like the brother in Eatonville decades earlier, Prince used the proverb as <u>part</u> of his seduction effort. While the mere fact of his being Prince might have enticed many, Prince sings about women who pose some a challenge for him. Prince's songs suggest that he'd rather have to work hard to seduce a woman than secure an easy conquest. Prince also used proverbs that allowed him to showcase his sense of humor. His sometimes subversive and devastating sense of humor comes to light in the story Charlie Murphy told on a 2004 episode of *Chapelle's Show* and the fact that he appreciated Dave Chapelle's portrayal of him (Parker). To show his appreciation (and to perhaps get back at Chapelle), Prince later included the image of Chapelle as Prince on the cover for his 2013 single "Breakfast Can Wait." More than a year later, the song appeared on Prince's thirty-seventh album release.

4.2 Goldnigga: The Trickster Prince

That Prince could be laugh--out--loud funny was known by those paying close attention to some of his interviews, film roles, and

songs. This section borrows inspiration from the 1992 NPG cd *Gold Nigga*. Prince showcases a biting sense of humor on this release, though taking something of a backseat to the rapper Tony M. He showcased the same biting humor on an unreleased project from the 1980s, *The Black Album*. Though the release is on NPG records and NPG is listed as the artist. As he did with the group Madhouse or his producer alter ego Jamie Starr, Prince put his creativity to use while reserving the right to not use his regular name as a performer; he recorded so much music that he needed other outlets other than his usual outlets through his own name (Azhar). Some of his more experimental efforts emerged with pseudonyms attached, from the initial efforts of The Time, the Family, or Madhouse (Miller 1983). The "Goldnigga" persona straddles two related trickster categories, that of the comic trickster and the malevolent trickster. Prince's trickster persona was never truly malevolent, but his humor would occasionally cut with a very sharp metaphorical knife. I posit here that the character leans toward the comic side. Prince's style brings dark humor to a difficult and dark subject on "Black M.F. In the House" wherein Prince voices the racist white character who disparages the Black people who've wandered into the fictional bar that is the backdrop of the song. The bar is the "house" into which the "Black Mfs" entered. On *the Black Album*, "Dead On It" is an earlier attempt by Prince to showcase the world of rap (rap from hip-hop culture, not love rapping). While on the *Gold Nigga* release, rap is privileged, it is used but comically disparaged on *The Black Album*.

As the comic trickster, Prince as Goldnigga performs in a fashion similar to "John" in that he and the stories about him usually employ humor as part of the trick and the story in those older African American folk-tales. John manages to trick his slave owner through ingenious subterfuge. In *Mules and Men*, for example, Zora Neale Hurston includes several John stories, including one ("How the Negroes Got Their Freedom") in which John manages to gain his freedom and that of everyone else on the plantation through a well-orchestrated illusion (Hurston 1935: 82-83). Elsewhere in African American culture, the folkloric trickster Hairy Man becomes the character Harry Mention (a malevolent trickster) in the 1990 Charles Burnett film *To Sleep*

with Anger. He does cause harm to befall the family of "friends" on whose doorstep he appears after being out of contact with them for decades. As a trickster, Prince's Goldnigga character uses subversive humor to make a point on racism and cites a proverb along the way on the 1987 song "Dead On It." In that song, Prince muses that rap isn't really music. As such, it and the rappers who perform it, should be annihilated.

The Black Album was released by Warner Brothers in 1994. I had the bootleg cassette in my hands in 1988. With the official release, a good studio version was finally available and immediately purchased. The songs are a mix of unusual subjects for Prince. On "Dead on It," Prince sings; Prince also raps on "Dead On It." An objective observer might conclude that Prince should not have put himself in the position to rap. Aesthetic questions aside, Prince released a song that made some rather humorous yet ludicrous statements about rap and rappers along the way.

In the fourth verse, Prince leaves the subject of rappers in something of a non-sequitur, rapping about what women want. He riffs on the proper way to please a woman before moving in to a "semi" dozens moment at the end of the verse. I contend "semi" only because he doesn't begin with "your mama" before making the statement. As Prince raps at the beginning of that verse:

(4) All the sisters like it when you lick them on the knees
Don't believe me? (no)
Try it once then stop, they'll be begging
Please, please, please (please, please, please)

Prince then raps that what he just said has nothing "to do with the funk," but that is his song and the song is on his dime, so indicating that he could rap about whatever he wanted. It is his song, after all. At the end of the verse, he moves to the dozens:

If you don't want to lick my knees, I'm sure your mama will.

The verbal game known as the dozens has a long presence in African American folk life. As a form of signifying, it does tend to be associated with children and their "your mama" jokes. "The dozens" is a ritualized game, a sort of playful contest, of-

ten played by African Americans. The object of the game is to insult one's opponent, hurling insults at him/her or his/her mother until he/she breaks away from the game. Basically, a player humorously signifies on the other person's kinfolk (Smitherman 1977: 128-131). In doing so, it is hoped that the opponent may be rattled and lose concentration, and therefore lose the match. The dozens is also known by the contemporary names "cutting," "joning," or "battling." Prince's reference does not begin a full-fledged dozens game, but can be understood in that context by those who recognize the game.

In the first verse of "Dead On It," however, Prince deploys the anti-proverb that brings the song into this article. Anti-proverbs can be parodies of known proverbs or variations that negate the meaning of the original proverb or even jokes based on the original proverb (Mieder and Litovkina1-3). In that initial verse Prince raps:

> (5) Riding in my Thunderbird on the freeway
> I turned on my radio to hear some music play
> I got a silly rapper talking silly shit instead
> And *the only good rapper is one that's dead* on it

Prince pauses at the end of dead, delaying his uttering of "on it." This places emphasis on the proverb construction: *the only good rapper is one that's dead*. Later, he would simply use the phrase "dead on it" in the chorus of the song.

Prince here apparently coins an anti-proverb based on a much older formula. As Mieder argues, the proverb the *only good Indian is a dead Indian* emerged during the times of Euro-Americans' Western expansion and paired with the concomitant need to either subdue or eliminate the Native Americans who so unwillingly moved aside to make the move possible. Another old proverb, going back to post-bellum days, is the *only good nigger is a dead nigger*, reflecting racist whites' ideas that if Blacks could not be properly subservient, as they appeared less likely to be in their new-found quest for freedom and full citizenship, they should probably be killed (Mieder 1993: 53). This very idea gave rise to American-grown terrorist hate that saw the killing of Af-

rican Americans as necessary to make the rest of the population subservient enough to maintain white advantages.

In that vein, Prince as Goldnigga coins the anti-proverb *the only good rapper is one that's dead*. Of course, he could not mean that he wanted rappers dead because he also had his dancer Cat do a rap on his song "Positivity" from 1988's *Lovesexy*. He later employed rapper Tony M as part of his band. At a situational level of meaning derived from the context of the song, it appears that Prince wanted to take a swipe at a genre that would later come to eat at his share of the popular music market. It does not appear that Prince's anti-proverb gained any currency as a proverb, either. Anti--proverbs also appear in Agatha Christie's novels and short stories, for example, when she has the fictional Belgian detective Hercule Poirot incorrectly use proverbs or re-word them as a way of showing how the character remains somewhat set apart in his adopted home, England (Bryan 1993). Advertisers invent anti-proverbs to suit their needs (Mieder and Litovkina 2002). In that case, the anti-proverb usually never goes further than the advertising slogan as in the case of "different volks for different folks," an ad campaign for Volkswagen (Mieder and Litovkina 2002: 67). Prince, however, wasn't selling anything but his music at that time, must have had a reason to invent this anti-proverb.

One good approach to understanding Prince's anti-proverb "the only good rapper is one that's dead" comes through an exploration theme of the entire song. Prince used the song to trash talk other performers. Whereas the dozens involve the "yo' mama" jokes, this kind of signifying allows for comic putdowns of rappers and otherwise fine musicians who had the misfortune of not being from Minneapolis. Prince's "rap" lampoons the idea of tone-deaf rappers attempting to sing during their concerts and clearing the arena as a result. He says bassists from Brooklyn are good, but the ones from Minneapolis really know how to play. If they really want to be good, though, they would have to be like him: dead on it. In his private life, he was also known as a trash talker. On the day that Prince died, his friend Van Jones remembered that Prince "… would kill you in ping-pong and talk trash the whole time" (de Moraes 2018). In this song, the anti-proverb

is part of his trash talking other performers. After all, the song indicates, he was Prince and they weren't.

In another song using this edgy comic trickster persona, "Black M.F. In the House" from the cd release *Gold Nigga*, Prince constructs a story about a band (presumably like Prince's) wandering into a bar/club somewhere in the United States. This bar is apparently located in a territory hostile to the largely African American band. While it appears this song is done as a tongue-in-cheek take on life on the road, it delivers a message about racism. Prince plays the part of a racist white man dropping offensive racial epithets at every turn while Tony M raps some aggressive lines. It also appears to be a satirical effort to highlight white racism. As such, it is not simply a traditional song; it is more of a musical skit.

As the song proceeds, the band begins interacting with people in the club and one of the young women in the club takes a liking to one of the guys in the band, while the bar's patrons are heard continually expressing their discontent and contempt for the African Americans in the club. Prince voices the character "Clem" who consistently states that they aren't on *Soul Train*, so why are they flailing about in their club. They simply don't belong there. Clem's (Prince) derisive comments read as follows

(6) Don't you hate it when a jig is in the house
He ain't been in the club 5 minutes
'Fore 6 or 7 cuss words flyin' out his mouth
...
Next time we need a big white sign at the door saying
no Black motherfuckers in the house

Prince, the writer of the NPG scenario, orchestrates a tune, then, wherein the casual racism of these people in the club escalates from merely derisive to life-threatening. Additionally, Prince inserts a short version of the jigaboo epithet here. Following an instrumental break, Prince's Clem character cites a proverb, "*best place 4 a coon's in a tree*." The other racist in the conversation ("Billy Bob") replies, "Yep, get a rope!." At this point, Prince has either cited or coined a racist proverb that seems to fit the bill of standard proverbial wording. I can find multiple proverbs

wherein coon is the subject, but nothing quite matches the use here. Including the standard coon racial insult lends a level of verisimilitude, but the grammatical meaning suggests that there's a call for a lynching of these African Americans. That sentiment is reinforced by Billy Bob's affirmative reply, showing that the character agreed that the implied lynching is a good course of action, even suggesting that they get a rope. At the situational level of meaning it suggests the need for these African Americans to leave from this place. The use here showcases a continuing confrontation that threatens to degenerate into race-inspired violence. Upon introducing this proverb, Prince calls attention to racism in the present (circa 1992) by referencing racism from the past. Prince ends the song abruptly with the chant "Stop racism now.!" The comic nature of Prince's satirical performance as Clem on the song comes across to me as something worthy of a skit on something like a *Chapelle's Show*. At other times, Prince would put on the deadly serious mask of The Purple Yoda and leave the comic trickster behind.

4.3 The Proverbial "Purple Yoda"

Prince also has a history of releasing songs that highlighted his intellectual acumen. That side would make commentary on a myriad of social ills and would often inject Prince's version of religiosity into the songs as well. Proverbs can be used as a didactic tool. During the time of enslavement, for example, African Americans used proverbs to teach the value of silence. The words indicated that certain things were best left unspoken, lest the wrong ears overhear and negative repercussions ensue. Two proverbs, *mole don't see w'at his naber doin'*, and *a locked jawbone's sure to be out of trouble*, express the need for silence and secrecy in relationship to potentially dangerous white folks (Roberts 1978: 131). At the times when Prince donned the guise of the "Purple Yoda," like the fictional Jedi Master of *Star Wars* fame, he disseminated his own special wisdom via his songs. He called himself the Purple Yoda on the last song on *20Ten* (listed as "Bonus Track #77" or "Laydown"). I surmise here that Prince recognized the intellectual musical personality he had shown before, but finally named it on that song.

Prince addresses the finality of death in a song from his 1986 release *Parade*, "Sometimes It Snows in April." The slow acoustic song, not sung in falsetto, begins with the lyric "Tracy died soon after a long fought civil war." Thus, Prince sets the stage for a very sad song that closes the cd and deals with the character Christopher Tracy (portrayed by Prince) who died in the movie *Under the Cherry Moon*. Prince muses that Tracy was doing better than those left behind to mourn him. The lyric "sometimes it snows in April" equates with sadness and mourning in this song. The song also muses that Tracy is in heaven and Prince sings about him as if he were a friend.

That April snow may be the harbinger of a longer darker winter in locales like Minneapolis, Minnesota. The song also portrays Prince as crying for Tracy because he was that rare thing: a true and only friend. April snow makes one feel sad, then. The passing of a friend also makes one feel sad. Snow in April forestalls Spring and reminds him of his friend's tears. Included in the chorus of the song is the proverb: *All good things never last*. The full lyric is as follows:

(7) Sometimes it snows in April
Sometimes I feel so bad
Sometimes I wish that life was never-ending
All good things, they say, *never last*.

As the final of those four lines in the chorus, it brings to mind the finality of death, the ripping away of that presence from friends and family. At the grammatical level, sentient beings know that nothing lasts. Things change. People change. Circumstances change. Friendships end. New friendships begin. People relocate and change jobs. People die. For many, it never stops it from being painful and it never stops people from regretting the loss of what was before. At the situational level of meaning, the proverb indicates that the friendship described in this song was never destined to continue forever. One or the other of these friends would likely die first. This is also one of the few times Prince employed the formulaic marker of the presence of a proverb with the included statement "they say." The "they say" statement indicates some received wisdom that Prince merely conveys in

verse. As Prince sings of Tracy's death, a profound sadness is apparent through the music and Prince's singing. The song evokes an actual loss, not a filmic loss.

After Prince died on April 21, 2016, the tribute channels on Sirius XM radio and iHeartRadio put the song in rotation. Some of Prince's fans saw it as Prince singing his own epitaph. It was as if he were a prophet predicting his own death three decades later. One need not believe the artist happened to be prophetic to see this as a truly effective musical epitaph. I may have been one of the few who purchased every Prince release from 1978's *For You* to *HITnRUN Phase Two* (2015), never really contemplating that it would all come to a screeching halt so quickly. As Prince sang, though, even his good thing would never last. If he had predicted that he would die in April, the Purple Yoda would be truly profound.

He may not have been a prophet, but he managed to tackle some other difficult and sensitive subjects in addition to death. Before he released a dance song in 1987 that managed to weave in concerns about gang violence, drugs, and AIDS, I might have predicted that such a feat was impossible. He wrote, recorded, and released the song and it became a hit. With the 1987 release *Sign O' The Times*, Prince had managed to release two double albums in less than a decade (*1999* being the other one). The rumor mill suggested that he had so much material that he wanted to release a triple record, but Warner Brothers balked (Chesterton 2017). Apparently, Warner Brothers was concerned that Prince's two previous releases didn't sell as well as the company thought they should and didn't want to invest in a potentially risky triple record (Chesterton 2017). The title song and first single release, "Sign 'O' The Times," discusses several social ills, from drug use to gang violence, but never leaves the funk behind.

Prince began the song with a verse about a man dying of a "big disease with a little name" that he never actually names, but one may safely presume that he meant HIV and the disease that could result from that viral infection, AIDS. The Purple Yoda was bringing his audience's attention to a very serious issue: death from an incurable viral infection. At the time of the album's release, March 1987, President Reagan had yet to utter the words HIV or AIDS during any official public address and

his administration had reduced funding for the effort to find a cure (Partridge 2017, Topping 2015, Eschner 2017). President Reagan's first public address about AIDS occurred in May 1987, months after Prince sang about it to his whole audience (Topping 2015). While dancing to the tune, perhaps curious listeners researched the issue themselves. The person Prince sang about in the opening verse died of AIDs due to intravenous drug use (heroin). Prince then sang about teenagers in gangs running around "high on crack" and "toting a machine gun," a reference to the damage crack was currently wreaking in the African American community by at least 1985 (Oetting et al. 1989: 128). Again, Prince addressed a topic before it appeared to be a household topic, though scholarship would soon address the devastation.

"Sign O' The Times" also addresses infanticide, the devastation of hurricanes, a cousin using marijuana before moving on to heroin, the potential for nuclear war, and the space shuttle Challenger explosion, among other desperately bleak topics. Despite the shuttle explosion, Prince sang that people still wanted to fly and included what may be an invented proverb: "Some say *man ain't happy truly until the man truly dies*." It seems odd, at the grammatical level, to suggest that anyone would be happy with impending death. He invokes the formulaic "some say" as a way to introduce the proverbial statement, again providing the listener with an unidentified authoritative source for the proverb. At the situational level of meaning, Prince contrasts the negative images with the great achievements of humanity like sending people to the moon, suggesting that until we have all our people taken care of and mothers no longer kill children they cannot afford to feed, we should perhaps concentrate on taking care of those who cannot take care of themselves. With the proverb, Prince suggests that our priorities as a species (and country) may be askew. Additionally, it fits with Prince's religious views. Touré argued that Prince used the proverb as an affirmation that he believed earthly death only led to heavenly ascension (Touré 2013: 130). Prince called for specific forms of social justice with this song, among them ending gang violence, treating HIV/AIDS, and feeding our poor. He also focused his listeners on the possibility of entering the kingdom of heaven following their physical deaths.

"A Large Room with No Light" emerged from the sessions that would lead to *Sign 'O' The Times*; it was originally slated to appear on the three-disc album *Dream Factory* that was never officially released (Prince Vault 2018, Chesterton 2017). The proverb "*A fire don't burn unless it's started*" appears in the first verse of Prince's "In a Large Room with No Light;" the entire song considers deplorable and avoidable situations that would have been better not begun in the first place, including criminal activity and wars. Briefly interpreted, the proverb indicates that a destructive force doesn't just appear from nowhere. It must be deliberately initiated.

The web-site Prince Vault reported that while the song emerged first in 1987 recording sessions, Prince played it live at the Montreux Jazz Festival in 2009. Recordings of that performance made the rounds and fans have disseminated it through the usual channels, resulting in my possession of that version. The studio version discussed here appears on YouTube, where I heard it in 2016. The song discusses the idea that life brings unknown challenges. Often, the song suggests, we may be wandering around without any clear answer or foreknowledge of the correct path to solving the problem we've just faced. The chorus lyric states "did U ever feel that life was like lookin' 4 a penny in a large room with no light?" In that statement, Prince conjures a visual image of one seeking that elusive coin in a space devoid of lighting, bumping into furniture, perhaps feeling along the baseboards, checking under obstacles like tables and chairs, or even searching drawers for that penny. A shiny new penny might readily reflect bright light, but darkness would make finding that penny remarkably difficult. The difficult search for a penny in the dark correlates with the, sometimes, daunting task of facing a trying life situation for which one has no roadmap. When facing the unknown, one may grope about for the correct action. Often, experiences lead people to make seemingly rational decisions knowing that they don't know where they're going or what they're doing. If one, for example, faces the imminent death of a loved one due to a terminal cancer diagnosis, how does one proceed at that point? When is it time to dive in--to treatments like radiation or chemotherapy? When is it time to recognize that it is best to let one's loved one go, that loved one having been made

as comfortable as possible under hospice care? One may struggle to find the correct action just as Prince posits it would be difficult to find that penny "in a large room with no light."

Sometimes, the choice is as seemingly mundane as choosing a career, mate, or new home. Sometimes, it is as grave as deciding what to do for a loved one with a terminal illness. Prince posits several difficult circumstances to begin the song. One scenario has a child's drawing depicting her mother's drinking, with the result of making her mother sad; another lyrical vignette shows a guy who implicates his girlfriend in a crime so that he would not be the only one serving time. In each circumstance, Prince posited a clear idea of some seemingly intractable problems. Prince used the proverbial phrase "*drop the dime*" (*to drop a dime*) to refer to the boyfriend's act of implicating his own girlfriend in a crime. In the next lyric, Prince cites a proverb, "*a fire don't burn unless it's started*."

Back in the days (early 1980s) before cell phones were a ubiquitous feature in our lives, one could literally "drop" a dime into a pay phone coin slot to make a call.[5] The **grammatical** category of meaning suggests that one would simply make a phone call (Prahlad 1996: 23). Long after the cost increased and even after pay phones all but disappeared, some still refer to that process as "*dropping a dime*." Once the phrase moves into the realm of the proverbial expression, Prahlad's **situational** category of meaning comes into play (Prahlad 1996: 24). At the level of situational meaning, having heard and used this proverbial expression many times over the years, it means to tell something on someone (Prahlad 1996: 24). If one were to be a police informant, for example, one could "*drop a dime*" by calling the police about that crime. If one were a gossip or deeply concerned about a friend's child, one could "*drop a dime*" by calling that child's parent to report errant behavior. One could even *drop a time* by texting said information. The child then arrives at home, none

[5] The R&B group Skyy released the song "Call Me" in 1981 where the female singer suggested that her intended love interest should call her because his then girlfriend wasn't treating him properly. She sang "here's my number and a dime; call me anytime." By 1981, as Sinclair reported in *The Washington Post*, phone companies were pushing to raise the cost to a quarter from a dime. Some states had already seen the dime pay call disappear by that time.

the wiser, only to face punishment for that indiscretion. In the case of this song, the boyfriend in question *dropped the dime* on his own girlfriend based on a truly selfish motive. As Prince wrote, "Danny *dropped the dime* on his girlfriend. He said he didn't wanna go 2 jail alone." He didn't want to be the only one charged and convicted of a crime. It would be one thing to implicate himself, but to implicate someone else in the crime is a selfish and malicious act.

In the next few lines of the song, Prince raises the specter of seeds being sown (*to sow a seed*), a proverbial expression that appears to allude to the proverb *you will reap what you sow* (though Prince never actually cites that proverb). The lyric reads "seeds are sown" after stating that people are always looking for angels above them when they're "broken hearted." Even if Prince isn't alluding to the proverb *reap what you sow*, the proverbial expression *to sow a seed* at the grammatical level of meaning indicates that something is beginning to grow. What that is, at the situational level of meaning is that something has begun in the relationships previously discussed in the song.

If the proverb refers to those persons' actions, then the girl is slated to be damaged in adulthood as she is shown to be in the drawing described (a girl with no eyes holds her mother's hand while the mother holds a drink in the other hand). If the mother is abusing alcohol, as the lyrics suggest, it may result in serious damage to the child. In other words, the seed was sown for the child's inevitable damage through the mother's actions. In dropping the dime on his own girlfriend, the boyfriend has probably irreparably damaged or destroyed his relationship. Incarceration issues aside, relationships begun prior to incarceration can persist and sometimes people are able to reconnect upon release. His having implicated her is likely problematic to the relationship. It may be fatal to the relationship.

The proverb that immediately follows *seeds are sown* is *a fire don't burn unless it's started*. A grammatical reading of that proverb strongly indicates that one must, indeed, actually light a fire in order for it to burn. We need a starter, like a spark, a lighter or matches to start a fire in the fireplace, for example. Then again, "everybody" knows that. The situational meaning allows for interpretation based on the previous troubling scenar-

ios Prince referenced at the beginning of the song. Prince may be indicating that none of the results he alludes to - a damaged child and snitching for a crime - could have been started without the "original" sin that precipitated those problems. The mother's drunkenness precipitated damage to her child. The boyfriend's bad decision to commit a crime leads to the cowardly decision to falsely implicate his own girlfriend. Prince suggests that the solution for a myriad of the social problems he discussed here was knowledge of history when he sings "if you could just pass your history class, then maybe life would be all right." Perhaps knowledge of previously bad situations and their outcomes could deter one from making poor decisions oneself. With this song, Prince again addressed substance abuse (as he had with "Sign O' The Times.") as a problem that he needed to shine light upon.

When he heard about Freddie Gray's death, Prince was moved to write a song about it. He would later perform in a benefit concert. *Washington Post* reporter Justin Moyer wrongly thought Prince was new to the world of writing protest songs. Moyer's writing revealed that he did not know about any of the many songs Prince wrote on a variety of controversial racial, social ills, and other social justice topics (Moyer 2015). Freddie Gray died on April 19 and Prince wrote and recorded the song by the end of the month, releasing it for a streaming audience on 9 May 2015, the eve of the Rally 4 Peace benefit concert in Baltimore (Perez 2015). Prince told reporter Isis Perez that he "had a lot" to get off his chest with the song "Baltimore."

After the Rally 4 Peace concert, Prince released the song on his last album/cd, *HITnRUN Phase Two* on Sunday 10 May 2015. In *Vanity Fair,* Bruce Handy described the single release as follows, "'Baltimore,' released as a single, is a protest number about police murders, which Marvin Gaye or Stevie Wonder or Brown might have admired, though its melody and arrangement are oddly upbeat, at least until the disco strings I mentioned above take a briefly sour left turn (Handy 2016)." Whatever the merits of Handy's "disco strings" take on the song, it is clear that in writing "Baltimore," Prince follows in the tradition of writing songs (from time to time) that speak to some social issue. Prince also pulled from his well-used writers' tool-box and employed a few proverbs in order to complete the song.

The song begins with the lines "nobody got in nobody's way, so eye guess u could say, it was a good day," then adding that at least the day was marginally better and preferable to recent days in Baltimore, which faced violent unrest following Freddie Gray's death. The statement fits the apparently guardedly optimistic tone of the song itself. The Purple Yoda also wondered if people heard him and others crying over the deaths of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014 and that of Freddie Gray in Baltimore in 2015. At the Grammy Awards earlier in 2015, Prince had already drawn attention to the Black Lives Matter movement, saying "like books and black lives, albums still matter," so it was clear that it had been on his mind for some time (Moyer 2015). The song articulated what Prince wanted to say from his own version of the "bully pulpit." While Prince wasn't known for speaking many words in casual conversation or doing interviews, his release of the song was designed to draw attention.

Prince wondered lyrically if the violence could end. After asking if anyone heard the prayers for Michael Brown and Freddie Gray, Prince called for peace through the use of the proverb "*peace is more than the absence of war*" to bolster his argument. In the literal or grammatical reading of meaning, the proverb indicates that he wanted to identify that war is war and peace is peace, but that more than a lack of war is necessary to achieve peace. At the situational level of meaning, it seems that Prince is leaving us to wonder what needs to be there in order for peace to transpire. It seems that he means prayer (faith in a higher power) is necessary as is enough love to have the strength to remove all the guns. Without guns, then, it is clear that Michael Brown couldn't have been shot to death (police action notwithstanding).

Prince also wonders if we have had enough. Had we seen enough death? Had we grieved more often for more people than we should have? Apparently, he was, as the old folks say, sick and tired of this kind of killing. Arguing for a certain segment of the U.S. populace, he argued that "we" were tired of crying and tired of people dying. He then used the proverb "*enuff is enuff*," employing his own unique spelling to cite the proverb. *Enuff is enuff* speaks, at the situational level of meaning, to the idea that it was time for this to be over. It was time for the end of Black

deaths at the hands of or while in the custody of the police. He thus mirrored the sentiments of the Black Lives Matter movement. How can it be ended?

Prince's last proverb on the first single to emerge from his last album in 2015 indicated that for America to live up to the promises and ideals laid out in the Declaration of Independence, the United States Constitution and the Bill of Rights, America needed to commit itself to eradicating injustice. As far as the lyrics of The Purple Yoda were concerned and stated, justice would be the ultimate solution via the proverb: "*if there ain't no justice then there ain't no peace*." At the situational level of meaning, it appears that this proverb attaches lasting peace to justice in America for Black people. From the perspective of some African Americans, justice is all too elusive. One wonders if even an unrepentant thief receives justice by being shot dead in the street for what is not normally a capital crime. A court of law, following arrest, could be used to prove guilt. Why not protest, then, if these killings continue, some would argue. Peace is an active process, so the active pursuit of equal justice appears to be Prince's goal. In using the final proverb in the song, the Purple Yoda employs a different technique. He pushes the song further than simply singing the proverb after his understated guitar solo; instead of just using the proverb, a chorus of voices chant the proverb repeatedly (four times). At this point, it becomes almost like a chant one would hear at a street protest or march. Perhaps Prince borrowed artistically from the chant that can be heard at some protest marches: No justice, no peace. Perhaps he wanted to create a rallying cry in the form of a proverb.

5. Conclusion

Prince used a substantial number of proverbs in his writing. Some appear in major proverb collections and some don't. Having heard some of them outside Prince's songs, I take these statements to be proverbial and err on the side of inclusion here. As a collector of proverbs for the last quarter of a century, I have previously collected many statements that also do not yet appear in standard proverb collections. Nevertheless, it appears that Prince employed proverbs or proverb-like statements from his first sin-

gle from his first album ("Soft and Wet") to his first single from his last album ("Baltimore"). In between, he used more or fewer proverbs per release. Having surveyed the first 12 years of his output, I can state that he used proverbs on every album. At the low end of his proverbial output, 22% of the songs on an album contained proverbs (*For You*). At the high end of his proverbial output, 67% of the songs contained proverbs (*Around the World in a Day*). *Purple Rain*, his most popular release, came in nearer the lower end, at 33%. In total, Prince employed 66 proverbial texts in his songs during the first dozen years of his career. At some point in the future, I plan to identify all of the proverbs in all the songs in his catalog. Once that task is complete, I imagine I will have another scholarly project in mind.

While the texts of the songs on an album are far shorter than novels, Prince's proverbial output seems fare well compared to that of folklorist and novelist Zora Neale Hurston. In turn, Hurston's work compares favorably to that of other writers in Black Atlantic writing traditions.[6] Earlier research shows that the late Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe employed an average of 57 proverbs per novel (Williams 1997: 229). Achebe's frequency of proverbial usage provides the basis for Adéẹ̀kọ́'s assertion that "Achebe's use of proverb [sic] is itself proverbial in the criticism of African literature. These sayings are so conspicuous in his novels that they constitute the most studied singular feature of his craft" (Adéẹ̀kọ́ 1991: 141). A study of Hurston's use of proverbial material shows that her novels contain an average of approximately 55 proverbs per text (Williams 1997: 230). Alice Walker's best-known work, *The Color Purple,* contains 68 proverbial texts, including well-known items like *every Tom, Dick and Harry* (30) and *the Lord don't like ugly* (Williams 1997: 238). Prince's frequency of proverb use stands up to some of the best writers of the Black Atlantic.

As this article has shown, Prince used proverbs in many song lyrics. He joins writers Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker as one of the most prolific purveyors of African American prov-

[6] I borrow the term "Black Atlantic" from Paul Gilroy's book of the same title. He uses the term to refer to "intercultural" and "transnational" linkages between people of African descent on the African continent, the Caribbean, Europe, and the Americas.

erbs. Those proverbs connect him to folk wisdom (motherwit) and a tradition of using proverbs to pack a great deal of meaning into a few words. Proverbs didn't make the songs, but they helped Prince make the songs. Like some other prolific songwriters mentioned in this article, he used proverbs frequently. Those proverbs also infused his songs with additional poetic language. Prince used proverbs to spice up memorable love songs. In the best traditions of his African and African American ancestors' proverb use, Prince also used proverbs to teach, inform, and challenge.

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The Princely Proverbs

“Baltimore”

Peace is more than the absence of war

Enuff is Enuff

If there ain’t no justice, then there ain’t no peace!

“Black M.F. in the House” (as NPG)

Best place for a coon’s in a tree

“Dead on It” (*Black Album*)

The only good rapper is one that’s dead

“In a Large Room with No Light” (ca. 2009)

Danny dropped the dime on his girlfriend (to drop a dime)
Seeds are sown (to sow a seed)
A fire don't burn unless it's started

"Kiss" (1986)
Act your age, Mama, not your shoe size

"The Line"
The water's so much better on the other side

"Scandalous"
Good things come to those who wait
I've got so much on the menu (to have on the menu)

"Sign O' The Times"
Some say man ain't happy truly until the man truly dies

"Soft and Wet" (*For You*)
You're just as soft as a lion tamed
You're just as wet as the evening rain

"Sometimes it Snows in April" (*Parade*, 1986)
All good things, they say, never last

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