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To cite this article: Kamilah Cummings (2019) Sisters in the Shadows: an Examination of Prince's "Strange Relationship" with Black Women, *Howard Journal of Communications*, 30:2, 144-163, DOI: [10.1080/10646175.2018.1541768](https://doi.org/10.1080/10646175.2018.1541768)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10646175.2018.1541768>



Published online: 25 Dec 2018.



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Sisters in the Shadows: an Examination of Prince’s “Strange Relationship” with Black Women

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ABSTRACT

Many have been obsessed with the women in Prince’s life since his purple reign began in the early 1980s. Following his shocking passing, special tribute publication and countless websites featured articles on the women in Prince’s life. However, mainstream media presentations of “Prince’s women” have focused heavily on White, Latina, and mixed-race women. Black women, who are an undeniable part of Prince’s legacy, have been almost nonexistent in these publications. The exclusion of these women from Prince discourse has served to perpetuate hegemonic notions of feminine beauty while also contributing to a persistent misconception that Prince practiced colorism. However, to accept this belief, one must ignore the numerous Black women of all hues with whom Prince associated. Therefore, this article seeks to add these women to ongoing Prince discourse. In doing so, it seeks to challenge assumptions regarding his relationship with Black women and to interrogate why these assumptions are so readily accepted. Finally, in dismantling the narrative of colorism that has dogged Prince’s life and work, this article intends to situate Prince’s support of Black women as an indisputable example of his love of not only Black women but of his own Blackness and the Black community.

KEYWORDS

Prince; colorism; media; race; Black women

Introduction

The public has had a near obsession with the women in Prince’s life since his purple reign began in the early 1980s. Following his shocking passing, nearly every special tribute publication that hit the newsstands and countless websites featured articles on the women in Prince’s life. These mainstream media presentations of “Prince’s women” often included such women as Wendy & Lisa, Apollonia, Kim Basinger, Susannah Melvoin, Sheena Easton, Mayte Garcia, Carmen Electra, and even Madonna. Denise Matthews, who was known as Vanity, and Sheila E., both mixed-race Black women who were introduced to the world via their storied relationships with Prince, have surprisingly only received honorable mentions in some publications. However, almost completely absent from these publications have been women such as Catherine “Cat” Glover, Shelby J., Nona Gaye, Cora Coleman-Dunham, Tamar Davis, and Damaris Lewis. The latter represent some of Prince’s professional and personal relationships with

women who are neither White nor mixed-race. The exclusion of these women from the discourse on Prince's legacy has served to perpetuate hegemonic notions of feminine beauty while also contributing to the misconception that Prince practiced colorism in selecting the women with whom he associated. This narrative of colorism dogged Prince for most of his life and has persisted since his passing. For example, the esthetics of Prince's women was a topic of discussion during tribute panels presented by both The Green Space and New York University (Billboard, 2016; The Greene Space at WNYC & WQXR, 2016). At The Green Space panel, writer and image activist Michaela Angela Davis remarked, "[h]e had a type. We all saw it. If a Black girl was in the room, it was that type generally. Their proximity to whiteness made them safer" (The Greene Space at WNYC & WQXR, 2016). Her observation was shared by writer and musician Greg Tate who described Prince as a "Pop music tactician and strategist" who "had to play shade games" to appear on MTV and crossover to a mainstream audience during the 1980s (The Greene Space at WNYC & WQXR, 2016). It is important to note that all the panelists agreed that as his career progressed, Prince "got blacker and blacker" (The Greene Space at WNYC & WQXR, 2016).

Viewed through the narrow lens of his most publicized relationships, Prince's relationship with Black women appears precarious. However, when the lens is widened to provide a more complete view of Prince's relationships with Black women over the course of a career that spanned nearly 40 years, it reveals that Prince was ultimately a champion who loved and supported women of all hues, including Black women. Because most media have opted to eschew these women however, rendering them nameless and faceless, this article seeks to add them to the ongoing discourse on Prince's legacy. In doing so, it seeks to challenge widely held assumptions regarding his relationship with Black women as well as to interrogate why these assumptions are so readily accepted. Finally, in dismantling the narrative of colorism that has plagued Prince's life and work, I intend to situate Prince's support of Black women as an indisputable example of his love of not only Black women but of his own Blackness and the Black community as a whole.

Context: Time, space, and race

Emerging as a mainstream superstar in what historian Donald Bogle deemed the "tan" decade of the 1980s, Prince's presentation of himself and the women with whom he publicly associated reflected this "colorless" period where Black entertainers intentionally sought to blend into the American landscape without disturbing its post-Civil Rights-era fantasy of racial equality (Bogle, 2016, p. 242). As Prince made his bid to conquer popular culture, he was aided by the birth of music videos and MTV, which presented artists unprecedented opportunities to increase exposure and sales via the new medium. However, at its inception, Black artists were nonexistent on the network. Caving to mounting pressure, the network eventually selected Prince and Michael Jackson to cross the color line. Beyond being arguably the two greatest entertainers of all time, at the time Jackson and Prince presented "safe" images of Blackness for MTV's mostly White audience—albeit in different ways. Whereas Jackson's safety was

strategically presented in a perceived asexuality, Prince's was communicated via perceived racial ambiguity.

To widen his crossover appeal to MTV's domestic and international audiences, Prince used a marketing strategy that exploited his own visual esthetic and the esthetic of the women he positioned around him. Singer Jill Jones who is of mixed Black and Italian heritage and was prominently featured with platinum blond hair in Prince's video "1999," which became an MTV staple, confirms this observation. "It appealed to [put] blonde hair on me ... to appeal to the MTV generation" (as cited in Terrell, 2016). In assessing his experiences as one of few Blacks "allowed" in certain spaces, tennis great Arthur Ashe once stated, "[w]e African Americans are perceived as acceptable in a token amount—toxic beyond it. This is a devastating commentary on the majority's perception of our nature" (Ashe, 1993, p. 154). Further, Hughes and Hertel (1990) found no significant evidence of change in the effects of skin color on the socioeconomic status of Blacks between 1950 and 1980, reporting that light-skinned Blacks continued to benefit from colorism. It appears that Prince exploited these realities. Perry (2017) has argued that Prince made "strategic and conscious" decisions about representations of race throughout his career, particularly during his ascent to superstardom, citing the way he coyly presented himself as multiracial and publicly associated himself with a seemingly endless supply of non-Black and mixed-race women to complete the narrative. In fact, Prince's public association with women who physically reflected a mixed-race or "exotic" esthetic led some to actually identify this esthetic as the "Prince type." It also led some to outwardly question his attitude toward discernably Black women, accusing him of practicing colorism. However, Prince's alleged practice of colorism in his videos and films is not isolated. As Harvard psychiatrist Alvin Poussaint has noted, "the preference for light skin, long straight hair, and keen features comes through most strongly in music videos where dark-skinned Black men frequently choose light-skinned Black women with White features as love interests" (as cited in Russell-Cole, Wilson, & Hall, 2013, p. 241).

Colorism, or the practice of discriminating against others based on the lightness or darkness of their skin tone, has long plagued communities of color around the world. Hunter (2007) has put forth "[t]he cultural messages that give meaning and value to different skin tones are both deeply historical and actively contemporary" (p. 250). Most theories about the genesis of colorism in the United States situate it as a direct descendent of racism and slavery. Researchers have demonstrated that like racism, colorism affects Black people across the spectrum of life experiences, including areas such as employment, education, marriage, and self-esteem (Frisby, 2004; Hunter, 2005; Russell-Cole, Wilson, & Hall, 2013; Wade, 1996). As Hunter (2007) has argued, colorism is rooted in a system of "white domination that rewarded those who emulated whiteness culturally, ideologically, economically, and even aesthetically" (p. 239). Because the system yields rewards based on this ethos, it has established hierarchies based on skin hue that govern inter- and intra-group interactions. A consequence of this is that "the internalization and perpetuation of colorism in contemporary society brings with it psychological and socio-economic implications that negatively affect darker skinned people, with Black women being most affected" (Hunter M., 2007, p. 239).

Because of the intersectionality of race and gender, Black women experience what is known as “gendered colorism” (Russell-Cole, Wilson, & Hall, 2013, p. 155). Spellers (2010) has explained, “the ascription of beauty, gender, ethnicity, and race continue to shape the life experiences of Black women ... in particular ways” (p. 281). Given the conflation of beauty and women’s value in our society, colorism results in darker skinned Black women being most adversely affected by this reality. Hunter (2005) developed the concept of the “beauty queue” to explain “how sexism and racism interact to create a queue of women from the lightest to the darkest, where the lightest get the most resources and the darkest get the least” (p. 71).

As a result, colorism has had a particularly damaging effect on how Black people view themselves and define beauty. In addition, it has resulted in both Whites and Blacks treating Black people differently based on skin tone, with lighter skinned Blacks often receiving preferential treatment. These personal, professional, and political practices have perpetuated colorism, thus upholding the racist belief that one’s value is determined by proximity to Whiteness. This has resulted in stereotypes that negatively impact the Black community as a whole, but that are particularly problematic for light-skinned and dark-skinned blacks because of widely held beliefs associated with their positions on the furthest ends of the color spectrum (Russell-Cole, Wilson, & Hall, 2013).

Although Prince’s apparent practice of colorism might have appealed to the MTV generation, thereby advancing his career, it had negative consequences for the darker-skinned young Black girls in his fanbase. For some it seemed odd that so many Black women would hold onto what appeared to be a strange relationship of unrequited adoration. It forced some of Prince’s Black female fans to defend and/or question their affection for him. In her thoughtful essay that explores Prince and colorism through her reflection on her experience growing up as a dark-skinned Black girl who loved Prince, Allison (2017, p. 383) stated, “For colored girls who love Prince, the road has been long and lovely and winding and passionate, yet disappointing and painful at the same time” . She explained, “I was clearly affected by the fact that the artist I loved most seemed to reflect a preference for women whose complexion was lighter, hair was straighter and lips were thinner than mine. It was disheartening, defeating, and deflating for my self-esteem” (Allison, 2017, p. 382). Allison’s assertion is supported by Michaela Angela Davis who reasoned,

To be invisible and not ever see someone who looks like your sister or best friend be loved in the open by someone the world loves hurts a lot ... there was this idea that if you were brown and regular and did not look like Vanity 6, there was a distance between Prince and ... Black women. Even though you loved him, you never saw him love a Black-from-a-distance woman. (The Greene Space at WNYC & WQXR, 2016)

One cannot deny the damaging effect that constantly seeing images of one of the most celebrated Black men of all time publicly consorting with women who looked nothing like them had on countless young Black girls who loved Prince as they were coming of age and developing ideas about their own beauty and desirability. For them it was a reinforcement of the negative messages communicated to Black girls throughout the “tan 1980s” (Bogle, 2016, pp. 241–242) and that continue today as darker-skinned Black women remain virtually absent from most mediated images in film, television, and print. Patton (2006) asserted that society’s overall lack of “appreciation and

positive reification for African American beauty ... can have a devastating effect on self-esteem” (pp. 38-39). Therefore, if Prince’s Black female fans do not see themselves among the beautiful women associated with him, it is understandable that this might affect their self-esteem. In addition, Craig-Henderson (2006) has observed that although most Black women are keenly aware that mainstream representations of beauty do not include them, they are often “unable or perhaps reluctant to articulate the way these standards of beauty have influenced their own behaviors, affected their self-esteem, and encouraged feelings of insecurity” (p. 83). Had Prince chosen to cast a discernably Black woman as a love interest in any of his films or videos during the height of his mainstream commercial success in the 1980s there might not even be a need to examine his relationship with Black women within the context of colorism. However, he did not; it is a fact of his legacy that cannot be changed. As such, the perception of him as color struck persists.

His intentional decisions to obfuscate notions of race and to conform to hegemonic beauty ideals to play it safe to secure the superstardom he coveted at that time brought into question his beliefs about his own Blackness as well as his beliefs about darker-skinned Black women. Those questions plagued him for the rest of his life, and they threaten to impact his legacy despite his working in earnest for the second half of his career to right the wrongs of his earlier days. For example, many still erroneously believe that Prince is mixed race despite the fact that it has been proven that both of his parents were light-skinned Blacks. In addition, others still question his Blackness despite the countless ways he proclaimed his love of his Blackness and Black people with increasing volume throughout his post-1980s career. In a 1997 interview with filmmaker Spike Lee during what Prince declared his “emancipation” from his record company, Lee revealed he had once written Prince a letter essentially accusing him of colorism. Lee conceded that in response, Prince had “set [him] straight!” When asked by Lee to share his response, Prince said, “I probably said one had to look at everything I have done, not just the most successful pieces ... We met under different circumstances back then, and I have grown and so have you” (Prince as cited in Lee, 2014).

This statement by Prince himself about his body of work as well as his personal growth was buttressed by comments made by Jill Jones who stated, “He had a public side that he wanted to show but once he left the white record system, he was free to be, ‘This is who I really am.’ He was a brotha” (Terrell, 2016). Drawing from the work of social location theorists, Poran (2006) has asserted that “personal identities are situated in context, and contexts are related with one another.” Further, “[e]thnic identity in context needs to be conceived as a process rather than as a fixed entity” (p. 751). Expanding one’s analysis of Prince’s career beyond the 1980s supports this assertion. As Prince’s career progressed, and he continued his evolution as a Black man, artist, and activist, he more outwardly demonstrated his Blackness, which included becoming an outspoken advocate for Black life in his art and work. It also included supporting and publicly associating with Black women of various complexions and phenotypes.

“The beautiful ones:” Prince’s women

Perhaps the one area of Prince’s life that is the most debated with regard to colorism is his love life. From the time he released his breakout hit single , “I Wanna Be Your