

Uptown: An Exegesis

By David Jamison

“Utopias’ positive qualities [include] their illumination of the non-utopian societies from which all utopias spring. The potentiality rather than reality of America as a utopia must be emphasized.”

—Howard Segal

*Utopias: A Brief History from Ancient Writings to Virtual Communities*ⁱ

My first memory of Prince changed my life. I was nine years old, visiting my stepdad’s wife’s house. In my sort-of half-stepbrother’s room I heard this music coming out that was exciting. He had just left the house, but he had left his stereo on. All I remember about the next moments were me going into his room and beginning to jump on the bed. Like, *hard*. Frantically, rhythmically, with the beat. Not dancing, per se, but not *not* dancing either. For the entire song I danced-through-jumping to the frenetic beat of “Uptown” from 1980’s *Dirty Mind*. When it was over, I played it again. And I dance-jumped again for the entire song. *Hard*. To understand the impact Prince’s death had on me, you have to picture this little kid jumping on a bed, hearing “Uptown” for the first time. Because while the infectious groove caught me, the spirit of the song *changed* me. I played the song three or four more times before someone in the house yelled, “Stop playing that damn song!”

***She saw me walking down the streets of your fine city
It kinda turned me on when she looked at me and said, “Come here”
Now I don't usually talk to strangers, but she looked so pretty
What can I lose if I just give her a little ear?***

At this, I was intrigued. I was also of the generation that had been taught not to talk to strangers. And that idea was new enough that I could imagine that there was a time in America when you *could* talk to strangers. Prince had written this song when he was only about ten years older than I was at the time, but I did not know that then. Neither did I know that the “strangers” children were told they could not talk to would soon be me.

Beginning in 1979, the National Crime Prevention Council and the Ad Council coproduced a series of public-service announcements (PSAs) featuring a trenchcoat-wearing crimefighting bloodhound named McGruff who advised people to “take a bite out of crime.”ⁱⁱ These ads gained traction in the early days of a Ronald Reagan Administration that had been voted in on a promise to “get tough on street crime.” Since so many suburban housing developments of the early 20th Century had been created with racist covenant restrictions, fear of “blackness” was a fairly easy sell.ⁱⁱⁱ In a few years when my body would mature and begin to make grown white men uncomfortable, I would become the “other” that the McGruff ads were warning against, creating the need for whites to flee the suburbs and create a narrative of a lost America “where you could trust strangers.” But it wasn’t so much that America was lost, it was that it had been abandoned and then reconstructed and walled away. This was when planned communities with guards and high hedges became the rage. But I didn’t know any of that then. And Prince mediates his wariness of strangers by the rationalization that a pretty girl was a good excuse to break the rule. The rest of the song proves that Prince is in fact wildly opposed to this idea of avoiding the “other.” “Uptown” is, in fact, a raucous embrace *of* the other.

***What's up little girl?
I ain't got time to play***

Prince was a bad man. Even at 19. He knew the street lingo. He knew how to deploy his urban-hustler identity. But we know that this is not *really* Prince. By his allowance of us into his inner monologue—the first lines of the song—we already know that Prince is somewhat cautious, not dangerous. So here he is allowing us to see the adoption of his “tough-guy” identity by telling us exactly what he said to our street muse. I deduced this even when I was nine, jumping on the bed. *“He’s acting all bad, but he’s just as scared of her as she is of him, probably,”* I remember thinking, vaguely. My mom had recently imparted this piece of wisdom to me in regard to bees, all of whom I was convinced were out to get me. But now I had begun applying this new premise to analogous and not-so-analogous situations. Most of the time when you were scared, the other person was just as scared as you were. Winning was all about attitude.

Prince was already at that moment far more complex than most artists I had been exposed to, betraying a conflict with the identity forced upon all men of color in the urban context—we were all the intimidating “other” in the eyes of mainstream society. If we did not act like thugs, then the opposite end of the binary must apply: that we were soft; book-smart; a *mark*. Neither Prince nor I knew it then, but we were both hyperaware of the identities we would only feel comfortable exposing in what Shane Vogel calls the “Harlem cabaret.” New Negro Movement scholars had been arguing that for black people to seem “civilized,” they would have to conform to Victorian standards of morality. But countercultural critics of Victorian standards like Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and Lena Horne resided in the Harlem

cabaret. It was only at certain times and only in certain spaces that *these* blacks felt free to express themselves: after hours, after any decent hours, mostly after mainstream clubs closed; in Harlem, a segregated suburb of Manhattan just outside the limits of municipal oversight, a subliminal expression of Manhattan's cultural progressivism, just outside the limits of social acceptability. It was here (and when) that you found normalizing of queerness, what was called "sexual deviancy" back then; people who had sex with people, in numbers, or in contexts contrary to accepted Victorian mores.

And in the same way Harlem cabaret artists challenged Victorian morality, Prince's oppositional aesthetic was the new urban folk hero who was thriving in the industrial milieu. Once offering the promise of a better life, "industrialization" by the mid-20th Century had come to mean "blight" and "despair" amongst the many disaffected travelers of the Great Migration. During the migration's many waves, the utopian life-is-better-here rhetoric of the time referred to economic opportunity and freedom from explicit racial discrimination, but it seldom referenced the "dollar drain" that often accompanied the white flight. But here the remarkable capacity of New World blacks to adapt to their environment was made evident. Here in the urban-industrial milieu to which blacks had been getting accustomed since the end of the Civil War, black culture created a new kind of archetype that people like Prince and I could utilize.

Cue the urban-hustler identity.

By the 1960s, the most predominant African American folk hero was not the urban collaborator who studied hard and got good grades, but was instead an urban hustler—someone who could use their wits, sexuality, or fighting prowess to "get over" on the oppressor. The urban hustler made himself known in movies such as *Shaft* and *Superfly*, and in

books such as Iceberg Slim's *Pimp: The Story of Life* and Donald Goines' *Daddy Cool*. Central to the urban hustler's mystique is his willingness to use heterosexual prowess in order to achieve his objectives. His gendered masculinity was never in doubt. I was getting that idea, even at nine. I knew I had to deploy a street-smart, hypermasculine sensibility whether I felt one or not. Black boys come in both sensitive *and* insensitive forms, but society imposes an "insensitive" identity on black urban boys, so half of them have to act like tough guys or get labeled "marks." So, as far as Prince was concerned, he did not have time for any B.S. He had hustling he had to get back to.

But she had a trick for *him*.

***Baby didn't say too much
She said, "Are you gay?"
Kinda took me by surprise, I didn't know what to do***

Wait? What? I believed I might have actually stopped jump-dancing for a moment when I first heard that line. *Did he say, "gay?" Like, when two guys do it?* That was my elementary knowledge of homosexuality at nine. But I knew manifestly that it was not a term, not even a topic, that one brought up in mainstream culture. It was playground talk; street talk. The fact that Prince talked about gayness in a song *by definition* categorized him in my mind as something "alternative" to the mainstream, where he maintains a space to this day. That is why it took *me* by such surprise when Prince reached mainstream success three years later with 1983's *1999*, and especially the next year with *Purple Rain*. *Moms are not going to know what do with Prince when they start listening to what he's saying. He is not like them* I remember

thinking, vaguely. This prophecy came to hilarious fruition once Tipper Gore heard her daughter playing “Darling Nikki” in 1984. This was the genesis of the Parent Music Resource Center (PMRC) and parental-advisory labels. *Prince’s* freaky butt started that mess.

So, had our urban muse caught on to Prince’s charade? Had she seen that his “hustler” façade was only a coping strategy? This was the secret dread of sensitive inner city youth. It would have taken me by surprise too! And Prince’s inner monologue shares with us his indecisiveness. That is what I loved about the guy. He was not afraid to show us his vulnerability. This was an existential crisis for Prince. But he plays it off like a boss.

***I just looked her in her eyes and I said, “No, are you?”
She's just a crazy, crazy, crazy little mixed-up dame
She's just a victim of society and all its games***

***Now where I come from
We don't let society tell us how it's supposed to be
Our clothes, our hair, we don't care
It's all about being there***

Wh—Where do you come from, Prince? Minneapolis? Like most American cities, Minneapolis saw a rise in its black population during WWII. While postwar housing programs did build extra houses for the poor, those homes were all built in the inner cities. Many Minnesotans had been fleeing to the racially restricted suburbs for years, leaving Minneapolis that same bleak landscape that every urban space undergoes once the jobs and businesses leave, then social services decline. Is that what Prince means? That in Minneapolis they don’t let society tell them how it’s supposed to be? A place where they wear what they want, they wear their hair how they want, and they pay no mind to the severe looks and turned-up noses?

***Everybody's going Uptown
That's where I want to be
Uptown
Set your mind free
Uptown
Got my body hot
Get down
I don't want to stop, no***

Uptown Minneapolis? Is that where I was supposed to go? Uptown of any major city? I knew somehow that adulthood held the answer.

***As soon as we got there
Good times were rolling
White, Black, Puerto Rican, everybody just a-freakin'
Good times were rolling***

I got it now. Adults had gotten over race. *Finally*. And it made sense to me. I had read about the problems of race in the past, but it did not make a lot of sense to me in 1980. It made more sense to think that when I grew up, I would be able to find places where people were not worrying about race, but were just going around dancing to good music. Unbeknownst to Prince, he had given a clue as to where Uptown was: it had to be in the borderlands; just outside the reach of municipal oversight, just outside the scope of upper-class mores. In the colonization of the New World, borderlands and frontier towns served as the first, and often the most dangerous, outposts of the Western civilizational project. These spaces were populated mostly by lumpen class rejects, the outcasts, the deplorables, the second and third

sons looking for claims of their own, people looking for a second chance, and women who had not managed to secure the path to economic security that a husband provided. These border spaces were true meritocracies—few had family connections to buffet their failures—and so often did not have space for elitist social divisions like race, sex, class, and lifestyle. In the Mexicali, California, of the 1910's, a study of the sex workers at a brothel called the Owl showed that the prostitutes ran the gamut from *blanca*, to *morena*, to *mulata*, to *triguena* to *negra*, which author Eric Schantz says is reflective of the “equally varied phenotypic and national background of the Owl’s clientele.” For many women, they might be listed as *negra* by immigration inspectors in one year and *mulata* by another years later, or some might even receive hyphenated racial designations, such as *blanca-mulata*. These things were simply not of great concern there. In 1930s New York City, entrepreneurs of the late nineteenth-century consciously created spaces where races could get together free from scrutiny. These “black and tan” saloons were expressly created as spaces where blacks and whites could commingle and dance, and spoke to a desperate need people had for a place like Uptown.

Uptown is the space realized by Paul Gilroy’s “politics of transfiguration”: the “new desires, social relations, and modes of association within the racial community . . . and between that group and its erstwhile oppressors.” When you went Uptown, they were already living the way the Western world had promised would be attainable for all people black or white, but which had been betrayed by the horrors of slavery, genocide, and capitalist accumulation. That is why if you were Uptown, you would not care as much about the unfilled potential found downtown, you would be much more concerned about being *there*. And you would be much more concerned about *being*, there.

Most of the good borderland spaces are gone, now. When borderlands submit to municipal oversight, the government's tendency to legislate how people used and where they put their bodies comes with them. *Except in this place*, my nine-year-old self countered. *Prince has found a place where they've been able to let it all go. Makes sense. Adulthood is going to be a cinch*, I thought. It was good to have thoughts like this about adulthood from time to time because, as I was finding, there were many things about it that were becoming more troublesome the more I learned about them. Like sex.

***She started dancing in the streets
Girl, she's just gone mad
You know, she even made love to me?
Best night I ever had***

I was not sure, but . . . was this a thing? Was it the case that, when you grew up, if you met someone who you really connected with, and who was really great, that you would cap the night by . . . having sex? Because that was not how I understood sex to work at nine. I was fairly certain that before you could even get close to sex, there would be a large amount of flowers, candy, and dates—with dinner. I already knew then that you did not have to be married to have sex, but I definitely knew that women would not let you have sex with them—if that indeed was your intention, for some reason—unless you had done extensive amounts of . . . um . . . courting, or whatever. So I was not sure what this lady was doing. But Prince injected a little gender switch here that thrilled me then and still does to this day. This was the first time I had ever heard of a *woman* making love to a *man*. Oh sure, I knew how everything worked and where everything went, but for the first time I understood that the woman could be the total sexual aggressor. And Prince did not treat this as an affront to his masculinity; he sang about it

like it was a special cherry on top of a freaky dance-party sundae. That is what was so cool about the guy. Even at nineteen, he was thrilled with the idea of a woman rejecting the traditional masculine role and seizing the initiative in their lovemaking. Prince queered “sexual deviancy” into something free and sexually expressive and not at all harmful to anybody—before most of society even knew that that was a thing that needed to be done.

Because, make no mistake about it, the vast majority of the rules in Western society regarding sexual identity *are designed to control women*. They have been since the days of the transatlantic slave trade and long before. Indeed, in many places in colonial America, the predominant white male perspective of that time was that, while frowned upon, sex with slaves was accepted, even expected. White women did not have that same sort of societal laxity, however. White women who were found to have had relations with blacks could get arrested, or even banished. A black man found to have relations with a white woman could be hanged, castrated, or castrated and then hanged. Even if he was just accused. The “purity of conduct” and “purity of manners” expected of women was proof that the white male power structure was designed as much to control them as it was to control blackness.

Prince must have been influenced by the rejection of sexual mores that accompanied the Countercultural Movement of the late 1960s. Prince was twelve years old during the Summer of Love. Let me repeat that: Prince was hitting puberty at a time when what must have been the most beautiful demographic in the world to him, young college females, were collectively pushing the bounds of their sexual identities. The Countercultural Movement used the nonviolent protest model of the Civil Rights Movement to reject a number of America’s state-sponsored narratives, including those addressing the Vietnam War, women,

homosexuality, Native Americans, Latinos, and many more. French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard used this landmark era in the history of Western civilization to mark what he called “the postmodern condition.” According to Lyotard, American students in the 1960s realized that their culture’s obsession with the knowledge traditions of science and technology were not as benign as they had been led to believe, and so campus protests were actually protesting the institutions that normalized war and racism—state-sponsored schools and the social and moral narratives they endorsed. I am surprised more artists born in the late 1950s were not preoccupied with sex.

***I don't usually talk to strangers but this time it's all right
She got me hot, I couldn't stop,
Good times were rolling all night
All night, yeah!***

***But where I come from, we don't give a damn
We do whatever we please
Ain't 'bout no downtown, nowhere-bound, narrow-minded drag
S'all about being free***

This time, Prince is more urgent about how it is Uptown. Before, he had made it clear that the people there “didn’t let” society control their actions—but we really have to credit that to the braggadocio allowed with poetic license, do we not? No one was going to stop society from telling young people how to act—that was why they went Uptown in the first place! In fact, in the world of the song, society has no role *but* to try and tell people what clothes to wear and how to wear their hair. But now, in the second chorus, the declaration is more abrasive. They don’t give a damn. You can talk and talk, but they just do not care. They are going to do

what they want. Downtown, members of society shuffle along, thinking that they are getting ahead, but they are really getting nowhere. Why? Because they are slaves; slaves to their own narrow-minded ideas of what happiness could look like; to what freedom really is.

Here, Prince conveys the sum aesthetic and ideological engine of the Countercultural Movement. Social critique was what they were *doing*. Although music is Prince's protest model, he might as well be carrying a sign at Berkeley for all the difference between him and the hippie ethos. And while the vast majority of *Dirty Mind* has to do with sex—hence the title—this indictment of society's hypocrisy is only a sign of things to come. On his next album, *Controversy*, songs like "Controversy," "Annie Christian," and "Ronnie Talk to Russia," offered full-throated critiques of social discrimination, religion, and global politics. He continued to tackle social issues on later albums, but seldom as explicitly. He spent the rest of his career addressing the greater societal issues that would lead to things like discrimination, or religious extremism, or thermonuclear war.

British social commentator Thomas More wrote the novel, *Utopia*, in order to express his vision of a "perfect" society. Since *Utopia's* publication in 1516, many other Western authors have attempted to articulate their vision of what this society might look like. The early nineteenth century saw an explosion in semiautonomous communities that retreated from "civilization's" technology, social control, and moral lassitude. Groups like the Shakers, the Amana Movement, and the Oneida Community were intentionally founded to counteract the gender- and labor-role narratives presented by Western governments. You see . . . "Uptown" is not really about any place called "Uptown" at all. Look at the song. Prince does not give many details about this place. Instead, "Uptown" is an illumination not of the real uptown

Minneapolis, but of the society from which all uptowns spring—the narrow-minded downtown. And this critique of the confines of Western civilization is bound up in Uptown’s status as a borderlands space—Uptown is a place not just full of rejects, but one that is consciously created by people trying to be free.

And this is nothing new in the history of the “opening” of the New World. Ever since the West was won, the artists of the landscape have thrown up objections to civilizational creep and the reduced attention to basic human values it usually brings along. While Western civilization is indeed regimented and efficient, it causes a great deal of stress among people who have difficulty conforming to the regimentation; those on the margins. And in the New World, Western civilization replaced many cultures that had a much more relaxed dedication to life and producing goods. And so Uptown is the lament of the societies lost.

***Everybody's going Uptown
It's where I want to be
Uptown
You can set your mind free, yeah***

Here is what can happen here: You can let it *all* go. All those rules? All that anxiety about how you are supposed to act and how many people you would disappoint if you did not? It is all B.S. It always has been. We have constructed a society in which people can educate themselves, and love each other, and rid themselves of the prejudices and pettiness of the past. If we are not allowed to do those things without prejudice, then what did all those young boys die in Vietnam for? The freedom to live how we want.

Uptown
Keep your body hot

So, let go of the story you have been telling yourself. Let go of the fiction that you are not a sensual creature. Look around you, right now. How many things around you are organic materials, that need sex to survive? And yet look at how often we de-sexualize ourselves! How many times do we tell ourselves that “being civilized” means acting like you are not a sexual creature? Prince was here to tell us. We are sexual creatures. That is how we all got here. So why so many rules about who we can have sex with and how often we can do it? Why do we erect institutions to shame people for their sexuality? What would a world look like where we did not have anxiety about it? Where a woman could just grab a man and—if that indeed was her intention, for some reason—make love to him without crippling whore-shaming bound up in narrow-minded patriarchy? Prince was here to tell us.

Get down
I don't want to stop, no

But wait . . . no . . . none of this makes sense. How can there be a place where they do not let “society” do something? Are we not all part of society? This has to be a bifurcated populace. It has to be a place with one group of people (“we”) who are formed in opposition to another group of people (“society”). So, it is not as if Uptown is only comprised of the marginalized—it is just that the marginalized in Uptown do not suffer the masquerade. And this place that Prince is going is not just a place, it is a place *and* a time. It cannot be one without the other. Like the Harlem cabaret, its queerness comes from its “reorganization of respectable

time” and its critique of “normative temporal orders.” Run-of-the-mill uptowns only really become Uptown late at night, after “respectable” hours. And the conflation of time and space situates Uptown as more of a perspective than anything else. So, “where I come from” is not “where” he comes from, but how he sees things from his perspective; where he’s *comin’* from, *ya dig?*

My first memory of Prince changed my life. This was the beginning of my authentic countercultural consciousness. My jump-dancing was also a birthing ritual. I was shaking the B.S. out of my little premodern self. Prince gave me the confidence to believe that even if everyone in “society” felt a certain way, *they could still all be wrong*. Like, I could be a moral constituency of one, if my cause was just. And that changed everything. It had never occurred to me before; everyone else in my family was fine with conformity so I had never been taught anything different. But “Uptown” gave me the confidence to speak out in ways I could not have imagined were possible before then. “Uptown” is about finding your true voice; your most authentic self, and then letting that spirit fly free. It is about dreams; ambitions; hope. This could be *your* future. This could be *your life*; the perfect place and time to drop all that downtown, nowhere-bound, narrow-minded drag.

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