

Meeting Time: Th 1:00 - 3:30 p.m.

Location: TBD

Instructor: Crystal Wise, PhD at cwise@umn.edu

Instructor Office: Zoom/Peik Hall 360 by appt.

Prince, Lyrics, and This Thing Called Life
CI1903 Fall 2025 (3 Credits)

*****Please note this is a draft syllabus. However, it includes weekly topics and a reading list.*****

Overview

Short Description

This course explores the lyrics and life of the musician Prince Rogers Nelson (and others) to better understand our journey in becoming, and how local and global sociopolitical contexts shape our identities.

Course Description

Lyrics are poetry and like poetry, lyrics have a way of reaching the core of us. They are everywhere and they help us find community amongst our peers and across generations. They help us on our journey of becoming. Becoming our future selves, a higher self, our true selves. This requires using what we learn from the past and what we know in the now to a renewed version of ourselves. Lyrics can help on this journey.

Audre Lorde, the great American writer, poet and civil rights activist tells us that through poetry we create a “language that does not yet exist.” For people who move through this world holding and tooling the multiple truths of their identities, they witness and are shaped by oppressive forces that seek to project, reject, and subject as well as liberating inspirations that blend, blossom, and build. Poetry, lyrics give names to and insight into these experiences, these truths. Whether it is the simple joy of basking in the tranquility of silence or the simultaneous resonance and dissonance within social issues, lyrics in music have the power to enchant, expand and transform our lives, if we’re open.

This course focuses on the lyrics of the prolific American musician, songwriter, singer, and multi-instrumentalist, Prince Rogers Nelson. Prince was born and raised in the late 1950s in Minneapolis, Minnesota during the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. He recorded his first album at the age of 19 and released a total of 39 albums over the course of his career. It is alleged that his music vault contains as many as 8,000 songs, which were once stored in his music compound, Paisley Park, located in Chanhassan, Minnesota. Across these songs, you’ll find there are very few if any aspects of life that Prince did not express or connect to in his lyrics. In one of his most popular songs, “Let’s Go Crazy” Prince recites,

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Dearly Beloved

We are gathered here today

To get through this thing called life

In this course, we will do just that, gather to read, breathe and analyze lyrics, Prince's in particular, as a guide to navigate our lives, our personal, public, and professional lives, our real and imagined lives, life as an American citizen, life as a global citizen. We will study Prince's life alongside his lyrics to gain deeper insight into his artistry and issues of race, class, and gender in Minnesota and American history. We will also explore the lyrics of other artists across the span of popular music and other genres to deepen our understanding of the ways lyrics transform aspects of our daily lives and have played a role in social and political movements. We will use multiple theoretical lenses, including multiculturalism, critical race theory and Black feminism to grapple with and reflect on how lyrics give meaning to and shape individual, cultural, social, and historical experiences. We will consider how race, gender, class, sexuality, religion, other social identities and their intersections play a role in songwriters' perspectives. We will explore how time and sociopolitical contexts shape what lyricists write and what we hear in real time and years later. Our readings will include a range of texts, including songs and their lyrics, podcasts, newspaper articles, interviews, biographical texts, conceptual, theoretical, and methodology chapters articles, and other book chapters. You'll work individually and collaboratively on written and multimodal assignments to demonstrate your growing understanding of lyrics as poetry, lyrics as storytelling, lyrics as social justice, lyrics as historical documents,, lyrics as liberatory praxis and pleasure in the past and in the present, lyrics as self-care, solidarity, and sites of joy.

Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs)

Critical Thinking: Can locate and critically evaluate information: Students will have opportunities to identify and evaluate different theories, background readings (e.g., newspaper articles, reviews, interviews, biographies) to contextualize songs and their lyrics to evaluate the meanings in relation to the artist's identities and the socio-political context of the time and at present. To assess this outcome, students will write a 2-page paper or create a 5 - 7 minute visual presentation that analyzes and interprets the lyrics of a song for its theme, message, and poetic devices using evidence from the lyrics, and 3 - 5 sources that provide theoretical and contextual grounding.

Required Materials

Prince. (2019). *The beautiful ones*. Random House. Other readings and recordings will be available through our Canvas website. The reading and listening list includes:

- BaileyShea, M. (2021). *Lines and lyrics: An introduction to poetry and song*. Yale University Press.
- Baldwin, J. (1962). *The creative process*. Creative America, 1, 1962.
- Baraka, A./ Jones, L. (1991). *The "Blues Aesthetic" and the "Black Aesthetic": Aesthetics as the Continuing Political History of a Culture*. Black Music Research Journal, 101-109.

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- Baraka, A./Jones, L. (1999). *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*. Harper Perennial.
- Brown, Jayna. *Black Utopias: Speculative Life and the Music of Other Worlds*, New York, USA: Duke University Press, 2021.
<https://doi-org.ezp2.lib.umn.edu/10.1515/9781478021230>
- Clerc, B. (2022). Prince: All the songs: The story behind every track. Mitchell Beazley.
- Collins, P. H., & Bilge, S. (2020). *Intersectionality*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Combs, M. (2017, December 19). 'Sights, sounds, soul': A look back at Twin Cities black culture of the '70s and '80s.
<https://www.mprnews.org/story/2017/12/19/sights-sounds-soul-a-look-at-twin-cities-black-culture-in-the-70s-80s>
- Hankin-Redmon, E. *How Near North came to be one of Minneapolis' largest black communities*.
<https://www.nareb.com/how-near-north-came-to-be-one-of-minneapolis-largest-black-communities/>
- hooks, B. (2000). *All about love*. New visions.
- Kay, R. (2022). Minneapolis, Prince, and the Minneapolis Sound. *Boundary 2*, 49(2), 213–241. <https://doi.org/10.1215/01903659-9644576>
- Keller, M. (1997). *Portrait of the artist as a native son*. Minnesota Monthly.
<https://sites.google.com/site/prninterviews/home/minnesota-monthly-march-1997>
- King, M. L. (2019). *Strength to love*. Beacon Press.
- King, M. L. (2010). *Where do we go from here: Chaos or community?* (Vol. 2). Beacon Press.
- Lorde, A. (2012). *Sister outsider: Essays and speeches*. Crossing Press.
- Lorde, A. (1985). *Poetry is not a luxury*. The Broadview anthology of expository prose, 217-220.
- McInnis, C.L. (2009). *The Lyrics Of Prince Rogers Nelson/: A Literary Look At A Creative, Musical Poet, Philosopher, And Storyteller*.
- Moore, A. F. (2009). *Analyzing Popular Music*. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
- Perry, I. (2025). *Black in blues: How a color tells the story of my people*. Ecco.
- Robertson, A. (2024). *The Black Utopians: Searching for Paradise and the Promised Land in America*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Swensson, A. & Papineau, L. (2017, April 21). *A guide to Prince's musical inspiration*. The Current.
<https://www.thecurrent.org/feature/2017/04/20/a-guide-to-princes-musical-inspiration>
- [Prince's First Interview - Central High School \(1976\)](#)
- Twin Cities PBS. *Minnesota in the 70s*. <https://www.tpt.org/minnesota-in-the-70s/>

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Course Assignments

Attendance and Engagement

Song Journaling/Lyric Response

Contextual Song Analysis/Interpretation Paper

Peer Feedback

Annotated Playlist

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Course Schedule
Themes and Weekly Topics

Theme I: Pride and Joy Prince's Early Life and Inspirations	
Key Questions and Topics:	• Who is the artist known as Prince? • What is the meaning of song lyrics in our lives? • Why study song lyrics? • What are different types of songs? • Close reading of lyrics
1	Topics: • Introduction to Prince • Prince Early Years • Introduction to Lyrics as Poetry • Song Types Songs: • For You (Prince, 1978) • Sacrifice of Victor (Prince, 1992) Readings: To be determined from reading list above Assignments Due:
2	Topics: • Prince's Early Influences • Civil Rights Movement/Black Power Movement/Funk • Close Reading Songs: • What's Going On (Gaye, 1971) • Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud (Brown, 1968) • I Wanna Be Your Lover (Prince, 1979) • I Feel For You (Prince, 1979) Readings: To be determined from reading list above Assignments Due:
3	Topics: • Prince as a Minnesota Native • Minneapolis Sound • Prince's Bandmates and Collaborators • Close Reading Songs: • Uptown (Prince, 1980)

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	● 777-9311 (Prince for The Time, 1982) ● The Glamorous Life (Prince, 1984) ● The Dance Electric (André Cymone, 1985) ● Control (Janet Jackson, 1986) Readings: To be determined from reading list above Assignments Due:
4	Topics: ● The Mystique and Mythology of Prince ● Symbolic Meanings ● Close Reading Songs: ● 1999 (Prince, 1982) ● Little Red Corvette (Prince, 1982) ● I Would Die 4 U (Prince, 1985) ● Paisley Park (Prince, 1985) ● 7 - (Prince, 1992) Readings: To be determined from reading list above Assignments Due:
Theme II: Joy Inside My Tears: Identity, Intersectionality, and American Popular Culture	
Key Questions and Topics:	● How does Prince's identities and their intersections influence his songwriting? ● How does Prince address social and political issues in his lyrics? ● What is the history of American Popular Culture? ● What is the responsibility of the artist? ● Content Analysis of Lyrics/Songs
5	Topics: ● Identity ● Duality ● Intersectionality ● The Responsibility of the Artist Songs: ● Controversy (Prince, 1981) ● Sexuality (Prince, 1981) ● I Would Die 4 U (Prince, 1984) ● LoveSexy (Prince, 1987) Readings: To be determined from reading list above Assignments Due:

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6	Topics: • Race • History of American Popular Music • White Gaze • Multiculturalism • Critical Race Theory Songs: • Race (Prince, 1994) • We March (Prince, 1995) • Avalanche (Prince, 2002) • Dreamer (Prince, 2009) Readings: To be determined from reading list above Assignments Due:
7	Topics: • Gender and Sexuality • Black Feminist Theory • 1980's Androgyny • Metaphor Songs: • Uptown (Prince, 1980) • Lady Cab Driver (Prince, 1982) • Darling Nikki (Prince, 1984) • If I Was Your Girlfriend (Prince, 1987) Readings: To be determined from reading list above Assignments Due:
8	Topics: • Religion and Spirituality • Repetition/Insistency Songs: • Purple Rain (Prince, 1984) • The Cross (Prince, 1987) • God (Prince, 1984) • The Word (Prince, 2006) • Anna Stesia (Prince, 1987) • Positivity (Prince, 1987) Readings: To be determined from reading list above Assignments Due:
9	Topics: • Socioeconomic Class

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	● Capitalism/Racial Capitalism ● Form analysis Songs: ● Pop Life (Prince, 1985) ● America (Prince, 1985) ● Sign O' the Times (Prince, 1987) ● Money Don't Matter 2nite (Prince, 1991) ● Dear Mr. Man (Prince, 2004) Readings: Assignments Due:
Theme III: Rave Un2 The Joy Fantastic: Prince and Other Artists' Resistance	
Key Questions and Topics:	● How does Prince use lyrics to counter narratives of his private and public image? ● How does Prince use lyrics to resist oppressive social and political ideologies and events? ● What is the history of protest songs? ● How do or to what extent do songs affect social movements? ● Speculative Life ● Afrofuturism ● Lyric Analysis
10	Topics: ● Resistance ● Mainstream and Counter Narratives ● History of protest songs ● Blues, Funk, Jazz - history ● Values, Participants, Agency Songs: ● Keep on Pushing (Mayfield, 1964) ● Colonized Mind (Prince, 2009) ● Welcome 2 America (2010) ● Baltimore (Prince, 2015) Readings: To be determined from reading list above Assignments Due:
11	Topics: ● Black WorldMaking as Liberation ● Utopia ● Afrofuturism Songs:

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	● Paisley Park (Prince, 1985) ● Rave Un2 The Joy Fantastic (Prince, 1999) ● Black Muse/1000 Light Years From Here (Prince, 2015) ● Future Soul Song (Prince, 2010) ● Values, Participants, Agency Readings: To be determined from reading list above Assignments Due:
Theme IV: Joy in Repetition: Transformation in Songwriting	
Key Questions and Topics:	● What is the connection between love and grief, joy and suffering? ● How can authenticity be analyzed within song lyrics? ● How can lyrics serve as a form of therapy for artists and audiences? ● What is Prince's legacy in Minnesota and as a pop culture icon? ● How can lyrics transform lives? ● Social Justice ● Becoming
12	Topics: ● Love ● Authenticity ● Social Justice ● Healing ● Self-Care Songs: ● When U Were Mine (Prince, 1980) ● The Beautiful Ones (Prince, 1984) ● Strange Relationship (Prince, 1987) ● Love (Prince, 2006) ● Call My Name (Prince, 2004) ● Stare (Prince, 2015) ● Breakdown (Prince, 2014) Readings: To be determined from reading list above Assignments Due:
13	Thanksgiving Break
14	Topics: ● Course Wrap Up ● Prince's Legacy in Minnesota ● Prince's Global Legacy ● The Role of Lyrics in Life

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	• Becoming Songs: • Rock 'n' Roll is Alive (And It Lives in Minneapolis) (Prince, 1995) • Reflection (Prince, 2004) • While My Guitar Gently Weeps (Rock N' Roll Hall of Fame Performance, Prince, 2004) • Prince Half-Time Show Performance (2007) Readings: To be determined from reading list above Assignments Due:
15	Final Assignment

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University Policies

Education & Student Life Policies

The University's Education & Student life policies are available in the [online Policy Library](#).

Student Conduct Code

The University seeks an environment that promotes academic achievement and integrity, that is protective of free inquiry, and that serves the educational mission of the University. To support this environment, the University seeks a community that is free from violence, threats, and intimidation; that is respectful of the rights, opportunities, and welfare of students, faculty, staff, and guests of the University; and that does not threaten the physical or mental health or safety of members of the University community.

As a student at the University, you are expected to adhere to Board of Regents Policy: [Student Conduct Code](#). Note that the conduct code specifically addresses disruptive classroom conduct, which means "engaging in behavior that substantially or repeatedly interrupts either the instructor's ability to teach and/or a student's ability to learn." The classroom extends to any setting where a student is engaged in work toward academic credit or satisfaction of program-based requirements or related activities.

Use of Personal Electronic Devices in the Classroom

Using personal electronic devices in the classroom setting can hinder instruction and learning, not only for the student using the device but also for other students in the class. To this end, the University establishes the right of each instructor to determine if and how personal electronic devices are allowed to be used in the classroom. For complete information, please review the Administrative Policy: [Teaching and Learning: Student Responsibilities](#).

Scholastic Dishonesty

As students in a university community, you are expected to do your own academic work, and to cite sources of knowledge that you draw on in completing your assignments and other academic work. Failing to do so is scholastic dishonesty, which includes: plagiarism; cheating on assignments or examinations, including the unauthorized use of online learning support and testing platforms; engaging in unauthorized collaboration on

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academic work, including the posting of student-generated coursework on online learning support and testing platforms not approved for the specific course in question; taking, acquiring, or using course materials without faculty permission, including the posting of faculty-provided course materials on online learning support and testing platforms; submitting false or incomplete records of academic achievement; acting alone or in cooperation with another to falsify records or to obtain dishonestly grades, honors, awards, or professional endorsement; altering, forging, misrepresenting, or misusing a University academic record; or fabricating or falsifying data, research procedures, or data analysis. When it is determined that a student has cheated, the student may be given an "F" or an "N" for the course, and may face additional sanctions from the University. For additional information, please see: [Teaching and Learning: Instructor and Unit Responsibilities](#).

Additional resources pertaining to academic integrity can be found through the [Office for Community Standards](#) and the [Center for Educational Innovation](#).

Beware of websites that advertise themselves as being "tutoring websites." It is not permissible to upload any instructor materials to these sites without their permission or copy material for your own homework assignments from these various sites. When you have additional questions and concerns, please speak with or email your instructor to clarify practices expected for the course. Your instructor can respond to your specific questions regarding what would constitute scholastic dishonesty in the context of a particular class, for example, when and whether collaboration on assignments is permitted, when citing sources is required and what citation method to use, or when and which electronic aids are permitted or prohibited during an exam.

Excused Absences and Makeup Work

Students will not be penalized for absence during the semester due to excused circumstances. Such circumstances include verified illness, participation in intercollegiate athletic events, subpoenas, jury duty, military service, bereavement, and religious observances. Such circumstances do not include voting in local, state, or national elections. For complete information, please see Administrative Policy: [Excused Absences and Makeup Work](#).

Appropriate Student Use of Class Notes and Course Materials

Taking notes is a means of recording information and more importantly of personally recording, integrating, and connecting information as part of your educational experience. However, broadly disseminating class notes beyond the current classroom

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community or accepting compensation for taking and distributing classroom notes undermines instructor interests in their intellectual work product while not substantially furthering instructor and student interests in effective learning. Such actions violate shared norms and standards of the academic community. For additional information, please see: Administrative Policy: *Teaching and Learning: Student Responsibilities*.

University Grading Scales

The University has two distinct grading scales: A-F and S-N.

A-F grading scale. The A-F grading scale allows the following grades and corresponding GPA points:

Grade	Percentage	GPA	Definitions for undergraduate credit
A	100-94%	4.000	Represents achievement that significantly exceeds expectations in the course.
A-	94-90%	3.667	
B+	90-87%	3.333	
B	87-84%	3.000	Represents achievement that is above the minimum expectations in the course.
B-	84-80%	2.667	
C+	80-77%	2.333	
C	77-74%	2.000	Represents achievement that meets the minimum expectations in the course.
C-	74-70%	1.667	
D+	70-67%	1.333	
D	67-64%	1.000 -	Represents achievement that partially meets the minimum expectations in the course. Credit is earned but it may not fulfill major or program requirements.

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F	64-61%	0.000	Represents failure in the course and no credit is earned.
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S-N grading scale. The S-N grading scale allows for the following grades and corresponding GPA points:

Grade	GPA Points	Definition for undergraduate credit:
S	0.00	Satisfactory (equivalent to a C- or better)
N	0.00	Not Satisfactory

For additional information, please refer to: Administrative Policy: [Grading and Transcripts](#).

Sexual Harassment, Sexual Assault, Stalking and Relationship Violence

The University prohibits sexual misconduct, and encourages anyone experiencing sexual misconduct to access resources for personal support and reporting. If you want to speak confidentially with someone about an experience of sexual misconduct, please contact a confidential resource on your campus. If you want to report sexual misconduct, or have questions about the University's policies and procedures related to sexual misconduct, please contact your campus [Title IX office or relevant policy contacts](#).

Instructors are required to share information they learn about possible sexual misconduct with the campus Title IX office that addresses these concerns. This allows a Title IX staff member to reach out to those who have experienced sexual misconduct to provide information about personal support resources and options for investigation. You may talk to instructors about concerns related to sexual misconduct, and they will provide support and keep the information you share private to the extent possible given their University role.

For more information, please see Administrative Policy: [Sexual Harassment, Sexual Assault, Stalking and Relationship Violence](#).

Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Equal Opportunity

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The University provides equal access to and opportunity in its programs and facilities, without regard to race, color, creed, religion, national origin, gender, age, marital status, familial status, disability, public assistance status, membership or activity in a local commission created for the purpose of dealing with discrimination, veteran status, sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. For more information, please consult Board of Regents Policy: [Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Equal Opportunity](#).

Disability Accommodations

The University of Minnesota values disability as an aspect of diversity and is committed to access and inclusion in our courses. Your syllabus is an important place to convey information about accessibility and inclusive teaching practices, as well as information about seeking and using disability accommodations. The following three syllabus statements are available for you to select from to incorporate and customize in your syllabus, depending on what best fits for you. If you are interested in further enhancing accessibility and inclusion in your course, this resource on [Teaching with Access & Inclusion](#) may be a valuable starting place.

The University of Minnesota is committed to creating learning environments that are inclusive and accessible to all students. If you are experiencing disability-related barriers to learning in your courses, the Disability Resource Center (DRC) is the office that collaborates with students to explore reasonable accommodations, tools, and resources.

- If you are registered with the DRC and have a current accommodation letter please share your letter with me as soon as possible so that we can discuss how your accommodations will be implemented in this course. The sooner I know about your disability access-needs, the more equipped I can be to facilitate accommodations. You may reach out to me or your (access consultant/disability specialist) if you have any questions or concerns about your accommodations.
- If you are not registered with the DRC and are experiencing or think you may be experiencing disability related to a mental health, attention, learning, chronic health, sensory, or physical condition, and would like to discuss accommodations and/or resources, please contact the DRC on our campus (e.g., Twin Cities campus - 612.626.1333).
- If you have a short-term medical condition, such as a broken arm, I may be able to assist in minimizing classroom barriers. In situations where additional assistance is needed, you should contact the DRC as noted above.

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Mental Health and Stress Management

As a student you may experience a range of issues that can cause barriers to learning, such as strained relationships, increased anxiety, alcohol/drug problems, feeling down, difficulty concentrating and/or lack of motivation. These mental health concerns or stressful events may lead to diminished academic performance and may reduce your ability to participate in daily activities. University services are available to assist you. You can learn more about the broad range of confidential mental health services available on campus via the [Student Mental Health Website](#). As an instructor/University community member, we care about the wellbeing of students. If health, safety, or mental health concerns are conveyed, we may consult with campus support offices to provide support and resources to a student.

Academic Freedom and Responsibility

Academic freedom is a cornerstone of the University. Within the scope and content of the course as defined by the instructor, it includes the freedom to discuss relevant matters in the classroom. Along with this freedom comes responsibility. Students are encouraged to develop the capacity for critical judgment and to engage in a sustained and independent search for truth. Students are free to take reasoned exception to the views offered in any course of study and to reserve judgment about matters of opinion, but they are responsible for learning the content of any course of study for which they are enrolled.*

Reports of concerns about academic freedom are taken seriously, and there are individuals and offices available for help. Contact the instructor, the Department Chair, your adviser, the associate dean of the college, or the Vice Provost for Faculty and Academic Affairs in the Office of the Provost.

* Language adapted from the American Association of University Professors "Joint Statement on Rights and Freedoms of Students."

For complete information, see the [University Policy Page](#)