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Performative history: parody and rock 'n' roll in David Bowie's The rise and fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars

William R. McPhee

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PERFORMATIVE HISTORY: PARODY AND ROCK 'N' ROLL IN DAVID BOWIE'S
THE RISE AND FALL OF ZIGGY STARDUST AND THE SPIDERS FROM MARS

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William R. McPhee
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THESIS OF WILLIAM R. MCPHEE APPROVED BY

_____ DATE _____

DR. BETH TORGERSON, GRADUATE STUDY COMMITTEE

_____ DATE _____

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_____ DATE _____

PROFESSOR JAMES ROSENZWEIG, GRADUATE STUDY COMMITTEE

Introduction

In 1972, approximately sixteen years after Elvis Presley's swaggering performance of "Hound Dog" on *The Ed Sullivan Show* and Little Richard's energetic crooning of "Long Tall Sally" in *Don't Knock the Rock*, David Bowie released an album about American rock music. In the late-1960s and early-1970s, when Bowie was conceptualizing, writing, and performing the album, the deaths of various youthful rock stars would ring tragically symbolic for the genre of rock. The death of Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison of *The Doors*, and Brian Jones of *The Rolling Stones*, among others, would lead journalists and critics, like those who contributed to the 1971 anthology *No One Waved Good-Bye: A Casualty Report on Rock and Roll* edited by Robert Somma, to suggest a link between the deaths of these stars and the collapse of rock music. The genre, after having revolutionized American culture with its iconoclastic cast of characters and its irresistible energy, had moved far away from the heights of its mid-1950s materialization. Rock had become part of the world, no longer a sacred, ideal, ethereal form but a genre subject to the death that comes from taking up a body and circulating within a culture. By the early 1970s, rock had commenced its inevitable historical trajectory, and David Bowie would use rock's history as inspiration for his magnum opus *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*.¹

David Bowie, before the release of *Ziggy Stardust*, was not achieving anywhere near the kind of success and popularity he would by the end of 1972, when *Ziggy Stardust* would be released to adoring fans. While Bowie had not yet created something as focused as his 1972 effort, he had dabbled in different cultural forms that would shape

¹ For the rest of the thesis, I will be referring to *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* as *Ziggy Stardust*.

the work soon to make him famous. Bowie was a glam rock figure, a mime, and, on his 1967 debut *David Bowie*, something of a comedic theatrical performer. In terms of influence, Bowie was quick to drop the names of, or allude to, artists and literary figures that would enlighten listeners about his work, about his approach to music. Andy Warhol, Bob Dylan, and Friedrich Nietzsche figure into the work that preceded Bowie's *Ziggy Stardust*. Bowie was already aware of a vast range of historical content and how to use it, but he had not yet created an album like *Ziggy Stardust*.

Ziggy Stardust is a work of history with Bowie as the historian and American rock music as the subject. With the album, Bowie chronicles the historical trajectory of American rock through a fictional narrative involving love, the end of the world, and salvific spacemen. Bowie does not directly mention Little Richard or Elvis (although he does indirectly allude to them) or name specific places or detail real events; rather, Bowie wants to represent the rise and fall of rock with a theatrical science fiction narrative. Bowie creates this album, a musical work of fiction, to, on one level, represent the cultural view of how rock rose and fell. However, in addition to creating a representation of rock's history, and, most significantly for purposes of this analysis, Bowie, with the narrative, on a second level, is attempting to parody specific tendencies within historical narratives.

With *Ziggy Stardust*, David Bowie only conforms to the traditional history of rock in order to dismantle it through parody. *Ziggy Stardust* is not a straightforward historical dramatization of American rock and roll. *Ziggy Stardust* is Bowie's parody of specific historical tendencies, especially those that people traditionally associate with historical "truth." When one thinks of history, one imagines an uncovering, a rediscovery of true

meaning that has been lost by time. The historian pieces together the scraps of forgotten reality and creates a non-fictional narrative out of these strings of truths. Bowie, on the other hand, does not use truth in his historical narrative of *Ziggy Stardust*.

Whereas the traditional historian uses truth as a means of chronicling history, David Bowie uses performance. On the first, most literal level of the term performance, Bowie is using the space of the theater, with its costume, makeup, dance numbers, and songs to create a performance; Bowie is a theatrical performer. His album *Ziggy Stardust* is his theatrical expression of American rock's history. On the second and most important level, however, Bowie is a performer in the sense that he uses artificiality instead of authenticity when chronicling history. Bowie's means of telling history relies on an opposition to traditional history and its fidelity to truth. On *Ziggy Stardust*, Bowie abandons the traditional historian's use of "truth" and "reality" in favor of "untruth" and "unreality." Whereas historians traditionally assert a truth, Bowie, with *Ziggy Stardust*, disavows any sense of stable truth.

I have developed the term "performative history" to describe how Bowie uses untruth to parody traditional history. The "performative" aspect of the concept refers to Bowie's use of artificiality instead of truth. Bowie is not making a straightforward argument; instead, he is performing traditional aspects of rock in order to parody rock. Bowie's performance is aimed at the traditional history of rock music, and, therefore, Bowie performs history. Performative history is undertaken at the second, parodic level of meaning in opposition to the first, non-parodic level of meaning, traditional history. Performative history is the disavowal of a factual chronicling of history in favor of one made up of artificiality and parody. Bowie, with *Ziggy Stardust*, chronicles rock and roll

history in a performative way, that is, he performs traditional history in order to parody any form of purported reality or stable essence. Bowie's artificial performance of rock destabilizes the traditional forms of history.

My term "performative history" is influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche's disavowal of reality in his 1882 book *The Gay Science*. Bowie was a reader of Nietzsche and referenced his work in songs like "The Supermen," the title a reference to the "Übermensch" in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, from his 1970 album *The Man Who Sold the World*, as well as songs like "Oh! You Pretty Things" from 1971's *Hunky Dory*, where Bowie croons about "Homo superiors," likely referencing once again *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. On *Ziggy Stardust*, Nietzsche's influence on Bowie moves further than mere lyrical allusion.

Bowie's performance of history is Nietzschean in the sense that it rejects the "realists" that Friedrich Nietzsche refers to, in *The Gay Science*, as "sober" (121). Nietzsche feels these "realists" are still victims to the fact that "There is no reality for us," that the foundation that they build their ideas on, truth, is unfounded (121). Bowie, following Nietzsche, views historians as attempting to represent an unbiased, true reality. Any true reality, however, in Bowie and Nietzsche's estimation, is a fiction, and the work in which they attempt to be faithful to truth is actually just as fictional as a theatrical performance. As his title *The Gay Science* refers to, Nietzsche sought to do away with traditional forms of finding truth in favor of its opposition, a "gay science," where artists are at the helm, producing "divinely artificial art" (Nietzsche 37). This art reinterprets the world, stressing artificiality over truth. Consequently, Bowie's *Ziggy Stardust* needs to be seen as a "divinely artificial art" that celebrates artificiality over truth (37). Nietzsche's

influence on Bowie is significant, and Nietzsche's call to artificiality informs Bowie's approach to American rock history on *Ziggy Stardust*.

Bowie's performative history is a type of postmodern parody. In *Parody*, Simon Dentith gives a broad, provisional definition for the term "parody": "any cultural practice which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice" (17). On *Ziggy Stardust*, Bowie is not only alluding to and imitating rock, he is alluding to and imitating the forms of history that have chronicled rock's cultural development. *Ziggy Stardust* is the rock star at the center of the album, and Bowie uses him to represent rock's historical trajectory. While the album is an imitation of a rock star's trajectory, with his rise and fall, it is simultaneously an allusion to the historical and cultural narrative arc of rock, the genre's rise and fall culturally. Bowie is parodying traditional history's tendencies, specifically the tendencies that appear in the historical chronicles of rock's history. Bowie's representation of rock's history is an imitation in that he performs the exact narratives that he is parodying: 1) *Ziggy* is Bowie's parodic performance of rock music, 2) the album is a parodic performance of how rock has been chronicled, and 3) Bowie himself is a parodic performance of the creative subject, the historian. Bowie is a historian from a performative perspective. Bowie is first and foremost an artist who organizes historical information in a creative way, making him both an artist and a historian.

Bowie's parody is postmodern in the sense that it destabilizes any meaning purported to be "true," "real," or "essential." Dentith describes postmodern parody in relation to "epistemological relativism" and defines it as "the belief that there can be no secure ground to belief" (170). Through his performative history, Bowie destabilizes any

essence or reality that traditional history purports to locate and track. The stable meanings that make up rock music are actually sites of conflicted meaning, where any attributed meaning is arbitrary. Whereas traditional history has viewed rock as a unified, stable genre in order to track it throughout its history, Bowie uses performative history to show rock's lack of essence.

Bowie's performative history relies on a paradox. While Bowie is performing and, thereby, establishing the essence of the genre of rock, its traditional arc, and the subjectivity of the artist/historian, he is simultaneously dismantling any purported essence. By performing essence on the first level, Bowie asserts the essence that he will, on the second level, destabilize. By performing rock, Bowie is both displaying rock's essence and tearing it down, creating a paradoxical movement of creation and destruction.

By applying the concept of performative history to David Bowie's *Ziggy Stardust*, I argue that Bowie, with the album, parodies traditional history in three fundamental ways: by performing and parodying 1) the essence of rock, 2) the inevitability of a normative rise and fall structure, and 3) the stable sight of the authorial subject. Bowie, on the first level of meaning, sets up the traditional history of rock in order to, on the second level, dismantle it through performance and parody. *Ziggy Stardust* is a glam rock album about the instability of the history of American rock.

Bowie uses glam rock to parody rock and oppose traditional history. Consequently, I will analyze the two layers of meaning on Bowie's album. The first layer contains rock and the traditional history associated with the movement: rock's symbols, rock's historical arc, and the creative agent behind a work of rock. Bowie constructs this

section in order to destabilize it on the second layer. The second layer is performative history, and Bowie uses the postmodern medium of glam rock to parody the idea of rock as a stable genre. With glam rock, Bowie can create a space where disparate symbols can appear, subverting the idea of a stable, uniform sight of meaning. Bowie, with glam rock, dictates that any attributed ideal meaning to rock, or its development, or the subjects that contribute to it is a fiction. Genres, “inevitable” historical arcs, and individual subjects are all fictional sites of arbitrary narratives. Bowie uses glam rock to argue that history is made up of unstable sites of meaning, represented on *Ziggy Stardust* with his deployment of performative history.

Critics such as Kath Woodward and Toija Cinque have largely focused on the first level of meaning when it comes to Bowie’s work, often overlooking Bowie’s specific form of parody in relationship to history in favor of his importance as a cultural figure. In “Lived Actualities of Cultural Experience and Social Worlds: Representing David Bowie,” Kath Woodward argues that Bowie is a “cultural product” “with global consumption” and an “embodied... set of meanings, values and feelings, which constituted an internationally consumed cultural product and source of powerful identifications and attachments” (503). Woodward illustrates Bowie as a figure who has a multiplicity of cultural meanings and representations especially as it relates to the market’s expanding currents. Toija Cinque, in her article “The Subversion of an Exquisite Corpus: Against the Grain with David Bowie,” similarly argues that Bowie is a product in an economic and cultural market: “[Bowie] is... a conscious and creative functioning part of a commercial ‘system’” (601). Cinque further argues that “David Bowie is perhaps better viewed as a global cultural star-artefact,” similar to Woodward’s

categorization of Bowie as “product” (604). In their articles, Woodward and Cinque address important features of Bowie’s cultural signification, but they fail to address how Bowie communicates and dismantles signification through his form of parody, specifically the parody that comes from his second parodic level of meaning.

Bowie’s parody is conducted through performance, and, while they do not specifically address his form of historical parody, scholars such as Alexander Carpenter and Nadav Appel discuss Bowie’s type of performance and the parodic, second level underlying his work. With his music, his image, and his stage performances, Bowie stresses artificiality as a means for communicating cultural information. In “‘Give a Man a Mask and He’ll Tell the Truth’: Arnold Schoenberg, David Bowie, and the Mask of Pierrot,” Alexander Carpenter describes Bowie as “theatrical,” arguing “He was tragic and dramatic and everything in his life,” contributing to the position that finding a real Bowie is elusive because of his play with fiction (15). Indeed, Bowie’s performances found many uses, and the ability to call into question authorship is an important part of his work. In his article “Lonely Starmen, Young Americans, and China Girls: David Bowie’s Critical Sexualities,” Nadav Appel discusses Bowie’s performance when it comes to sexuality. He accuses Bowie of “the construction and performance of explicitly faulty sexual assemblages” through his image (208). Appel here addresses Bowie’s various characters, his theatrical creation and performance of various personalities, and he focuses on the specifically sexual aspects of Bowie’s work. Appel’s work is useful in its critique of Bowie’s performance of sexuality and the various characters he used for this endeavor; however, Appel’s focus is primarily on an individual’s sexuality, and my focus, while addressing subjectivity in chapter three, is bigger than sexuality; I want to

understand Bowie's parodic performance of not only the subject but also the genre of rock and the historical formations of rock. The second level of Bowie's work is not meant to conduct a standard form of parody criticizing a certain practice or text. With the second level, Bowie attempts to destabilize meaning entirely, and he uses rock as his example.

Similar to Appel, Woodward and Andy Bennett have emphasized Bowie's commentary on the individual subject. Woodward argues that Bowie "offers an androgynous gaze whereby image is mediated by alternatives to a heterosexual, binary norm, thus establishing alternatives through transforming representations" (506). It cannot be denied that Bowie challenged sexual mores and norms; however, he challenged the concept of the entire subject through parody. Bowie's work, especially *Ziggy Stardust*, poses the question: what can be pointed to as the essence of an individual? Where is the "I" located? Bowie's parodic play with fiction, unaddressed by the article, complicates this inquiry further. In "Wrapped in Stardust: Glam Rock and the Rise of David Bowie as Pop Entrepreneur," Andy Bennett argues that, with Bowie, "we see a pioneering example of a popular music artist creating for *themselves* an alter-ego, rather than having this created for them which was (and continues to be) the more standard trope in the pop industry" (575). Bennett's analysis of Bowie's creation of characters introduces the idea of the performance of subjectivity, but Bennett overlooks how Bowie uses the performance of subjectivity as a parodic device to destabilize locations of meaning. Bowie performs subjectivity, but he also uses his performance as parody, not only to address subjectivity, but to dismantle subjectivity along with the other assumptions of rock's traditional history.

In order to fill in these gaps of scholarship to get at the deeper levels of parody and performance, I apply the work of Michel Foucault, specifically “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” to show how Bowie dismantles the essence of rock as a genre, the traditional historical arc of rock and roll, and the subjectivity of the artist/historian. Bowie, with *Ziggy Stardust*, is destabilizing very specific tendencies in traditional history that Foucault locates. I have identified three tendencies of history that Foucault, in interpreting Nietzsche’s form of genealogy, criticizes: 1) the unifying of a cultural movement through essentializing, 2) the assumption of an inevitable arc, the rise and fall, and 3) the stability of the historian/artist’s subjectivity.

First, one tendency that Foucault locates and Bowie criticizes is the necessity of singling out a cultural movement in order to track its development. In a work of history about a cultural development, a historian first has to establish a solid identity, an essence in order to track it throughout history. If the movement did not have a stable meaning, history could not commit it to its analysis of historical continuity. For example, while a history of jazz music will track jazz’s historical development and transformation, it must first identify, through definition, what jazz music is; it must establish the genre as a stable form that can, despite transforming throughout history, maintain its essence. Foucault rejects the idea that there exists an “inviolable identity” to any cultural form, arguing that “disparity” and not unity make up a cultural movement (79). In Bowie’s case, the cultural movement is rock, and when a historian identifies rock in order to track its development, he must assume that rock has an essence, that when one refers to rock, he is referring to the stable site of meaning that “rock” denotes.

Second, the next tendency of history is to attribute an inevitable rise and fall to a cultural movement. Foucault writes about traditional history's assertion of an ideal "origin," "the moment of [something's] greatest perfection" (79). Traditional history dictates that when something first appears on the historical scene for the first time, it is believed to be at its truest. Foucault then describes "the Fall" which he argues traditional history associates with "the body... the world and time" (79). The traditional form of dualism appears here, as the metaphysical ideal is contrasted with its terrestrial manifestation, the soul versus the body of culture. According to traditional history, rock's essence is comparable to the metaphysical ideal, and, when rock emerged in the mid-1950s with iconoclasts like Little Richard and Elvis, it represented, according to traditional history, the "greatest perfection" of the genre of rock (79). According to the traditional narrative, rock's fall started after this rise, when the ideal cultural form assumed a body and began circulating, when rock expanded and became a product. Rock then became subject to the follies of the world, exemplified by ego and excess. The historical development of rock follows a rise and fall. Bowie, with *Ziggy Stardust*, parodies this rise and fall.

Third, another tendency of history is to assume that there is an author, or, more specifically, that an author is "[objective]" according to Foucault's terms (92). Traditional history, like most academic endeavors, assumes that there is a stable author who organizes historical data and creates a work of history. Bowie, first assuming the role of historian and then chronicling the history of rock, performs the role of the historian to show the lack of a stable identity at its center. David Bowie, paradoxically, shows that the subjectivity he is projecting, "David Bowie," is just as much a historical

product as Ziggy Stardust. Bowie, like Ziggy, is a fiction, an unstable site of disparate narratives. Bowie parodies the idea of a stable subject with his performance of the artist/historian.

Bowie's means of parodying traditional history's assertion of essences are based on the primacy of artificiality, of masks. *Ziggy Stardust* is an album created entirely out of masks, allusions, and fiction. Bowie takes his performance even further, arguing that his own identity is merely a mask, concealing an unstable site of meaning. This disavowal of identity suggests that not only is Bowie's work of art a fiction, but anything purporting to be reality in the world is also merely a profusion of masks. Bowie uses masks to show what Foucault calls our "unreality (94)." What Foucault means is that, by showing the arbitrariness of symbols, by using masks, artificial identities to chronicle history, the ground of meaning we thought we could call stable is actually unstable. With this observation, our sense of reality changes. In his essay, Foucault encourages a form of history that "will push the masquerade to its limit and prepare the great carnival of time where masks are constantly reappearing" (94). Foucault argues further that "taking up these masks" one "[revitalizes] the buffoonery of history," and facilitates our "unrealization" (94). These masks all represent the lack of truth underneath, and, by performing these identities, one shows the lack of stability underlying meaning.

For Bowie's performance of subjectivity, I will apply Foucault's views on subjective agency from his "What is an Author?" In the essay, Foucault argues that authorship is a fiction, created by historical and cultural discourses of meaning (107). The figure of the author cannot be pointed to as a stable subject. Instead, one has to look at history to find out the author's function. Foucault criticizes the view that the author is "a

surging of invention” and offers as an alternative the idea that the subject should not be attributed with agency (119-20). I apply Foucault’s ideas of the creative subject when I analyze the approach Bowie takes to subjectivity, particularly his performance of his own identity’s lack of stability.

My analysis of Bowie’s performative history, his parody of traditional rock begins with his dismantling of rock, and ends with the dismantling of his own creative agency. With the three following chapters, I show how Bowie destabilizes meaning and essence.

In chapter one, I explore how Bowie parodies the unity of rock through disparate symbols. When traditional history tracks a cultural movement, it assumes that, despite transformations, the cultural movement is essentially the same, that is, that it has a stable ideal. For example, a cultural movement like rock is a unity, identified by a variety of symbols (“guitar,” “Elvis,” “Little Richard”) that cultures have come to identify it with. However, with his album’s second layer of meaning, Bowie parodies the stability of rock with glam rock, an unstable genre where disparate, arbitrary symbols can come to represent its purported “essence.” With *Ziggy Stardust*, Bowie uses performative history to destabilize the symbols and essence associated with rock in order to show that rock itself is a destabilized site of meaning.

In chapter two, I analyze how Bowie parodies the traditional narrative arc of history. Bowie makes the trajectory clear, marking his album title with the arc itself (*The Rise and Fall...*), thereby telling the audience what will happen in advance. Bowie, on the first layer of traditional history, represents this arc with his character Ziggy Stardust. Ziggy Stardust represents not only a rock star but rock itself, and Bowie will use him as an example of rock’s ascent and descent. However, on the second layer of meaning,

Bowie parodies the traditional trajectory of history, making it look ridiculous through exaggeration, showing how it is merely a narrative fiction through his performance of its absurdity. Bowie uses glam rock once again to perform and play with the traditional development of rock, introducing exaggerated symbols. David Bowie parodies the narrative arc of history to show the absurdity of any claims to its inevitability.

In chapter three, I examine how Bowie parodies the authorial subject, the creative force behind a chronicling of history. The three figures inspected here, Ziggy Stardust, David Bowie, and David Jones are all associated with the artist behind *Ziggy Stardust*. With the album, and with interviews spanning the 1970s and 1980s, David Bowie will, paradoxically, argue that none of these subjects can be granted creative agency, that all three are merely unstable sites of meaning constructed out of historical narratives. The traditional view of David Bowie's identity is that the creator of Ziggy Stardust is David Bowie, and David Bowie is the performing name of the "real" person, David Jones. There is a hierarchy of reality running from David Jones, Bowie's real name, to Bowie, his performing persona, to Ziggy Stardust; however, all three are fictions created by some sort of creative agent that, for lack of a better placeholder, I will call "David Bowie." Through performing each subjective role, Ziggy, Bowie, and Jones, David Bowie dismantles any concept of an essential subject through, first, his assertion that history should be given creative agency, and, second through his use of the three identities of Ziggy Stardust, Bowie, and Jones, to show the fiction of all subjectivity.

Chapter 1

“The wild mutation”: Bowie’s Parodic Symbols and Foucault’s Empty Synthesis

David Bowie’s 1972 effort *Ziggy Stardust* is a concept album about an alien and his band who come to Earth, bringing with them a new form of music. The form of music is rock, and, when the audience first hears it, they become excited and their excitement spreads. Soon, Ziggy Stardust is the biggest rock star in the world, and his band is at the top of the music business. However, jealousy, ego, and excess lead to Ziggy’s downfall, and the band, and Ziggy’s fans, are happy to see him tumble. Ziggy ultimately becomes what Bowie refers to in the last song as a “Rock ‘n’ Roll Suicide.”

Ziggy Stardust is about rock’s rise to fame in America, its subsequent cheapening, and, chronicled by reporters, its death. David Bowie creates the character Ziggy Stardust to represent both a rock star and the whole movement of rock and roll. His rise represents rock’s rise, and his fall represents rock’s fall. *Ziggy Stardust* is David Bowie’s theatrical production of rock's rise and fall.

David Bowie is not, however, attempting only a straightforward chronicling of rock music’s history. With my concept “performative history,” I show how Bowie parodies traditional history’s declarations of “truth” and “reality.” While traditional history lies on a literal, first level of meaning, Bowie introduces performative history on the second level to parody the first. Performative history is the means whereby David Bowie uses artificiality and untruth to parody traditional history, specifically its chronicling of rock. With *Ziggy Stardust*, on the first level of the album’s meaning, Bowie is representing, through his performance, rock and its traditional history. With *Ziggy Stardust*, Bowie makes it clear, through his use of rock symbols, that he is

chronicling American rock's history. According to Bowie, however, traditional history's chronicling of rock functions according to false essences, out of a need to unify meaning in order to track it throughout the culture. In order to represent this, Bowie on the second level, parodies the idea that there is any essence to rock music. Through his parodical performance of rock, Bowie asserts that rock's stable unity is constructed out of the association of arbitrary symbols and shows how its meaning is upheld by these artificial symbols. Bowie shows that works of traditional history function off of false ideals, out of a need to unify meaning in order to track it throughout the culture. With *Ziggy Stardust*, David Bowie, first, uses the symbols traditionally associated with rock in order to perform its stability, then, second, parodies rock's unity by mixing rock's stable symbols with disparate symbols, creating, through glam rock, a destabilized genre, where any stability is absent.

Bowie's use of parody is essential to dismantling the traditional history associated with rock. By imitating rock in order to show how it functions as an unstable site of meaning, Bowie engages in the parody consistent with what Simon Dentith calls "epistemological relativism" which undermines any foundation of meaning (170). Bowie's performative history becomes the means by which he parodies the traditional history of rock.

Ziggy Stardust, on the first level, is very much a historical work. However, Bowie is not simply following traditional history's path. On the second level of the album, Bowie is parodying history's assertion of truth. With this chapter, I will take Michel Foucault's general ideas of history and apply them to Bowie's critique of rock history. In "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," Foucault criticizes truth and the idea of a stable essence

or identity. When discussing the tendencies of historians, Foucault criticizes the site of the “origin,” which presupposes a movement in its ideal form, in its essence (79).

Foucault writes that a search for the origin is “an attempt to capture the exact essence of things, their purest possibilities, and their carefully protected identities; because this search assumes the existence of immobile forms that precede the external world” (78).

Foucault argues that there is no essence, “not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that they have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms” (78). Foucault’s critique of history in general is similar to how Bowie posits the absurdity of the origin of rock, and Bowie’s mission mimics Foucault’s intent to “[Take] up these masks, revitalizing the buffoonery of history” and “adopt an identity whose unreality surpasses that of God, who started the charade” (94). Bowie only constructs the first level of meaning in order to parody it, and his historical account is consistent with Foucault’s call to parody traditional history.

I isolate Foucault’s use of the term “empty synthesis” to explain how Bowie is constructing meaning in order to show the lack of essence at its center (81). Foucault’s “empty synthesis” refers to the idea that there is no stable site of meaning, that the historical material that makes up a movement is not necessary but in fact arbitrary, that they hold no fidelity to an actual essence. History has constructed them on the misguided assumption of an essence. Bowie’s use of symbols operates similarly, showing how rock is not a site of stable meaning but an “empty synthesis” in that the symbols brought together do not point to a transcendent meaning (81). Rock is not a unity; it is an unstable site of meaning.

Bowie's method of performative history is paradoxical in that it sets up and breaks down the essence of rock at the same time. Bowie resurrects the symbols of rock's past to simultaneously dismantle them. The paradox of Bowie's parody is how he can make these symbols function to show the opposite of their purpose: whereas symbols usually point to the stability of the meaning they refer to, Bowie uses them to show how that meaning is unstable.

Bowie is careful to construct *Ziggy Stardust* with the symbols traditionally associated with the historical process of rock. Ziggy is the lead singer of a band playing loud guitar music to an audience not used to hearing the spectacular sounds of the new genre. Bowie, with his references, is pointing to a specific genre, rock, at a specific time period, the mid-1950s to the fall of rock, the late-1960s. Bowie then parodies these symbols and the genre, showing that rock is merely a fiction, that the associations he had built up and that society had built up around rock, are a construction with no essential basis. Bowie, by parodying rock's truth performs its fiction through his deployment of artificiality and destabilized symbols.

Rock like every genre, contains symbols that give it meaning. Two of the biggest rock icons were Elvis Presley and Little Richard. Their name, images, and their music were, and still are, inexorably tied to rock. Elvis, the singer who would emerge onto the scene in the mid-1950s, would serve as the archetype of the rock star – handsome, edgy, fast-paced, and charming, until he would fade out in the late-1960s and early-1970s before dying in 1977. Little Richard similarly emerged in the mid-1950s and would, after his initial success, perform rock off and on, not generating hit songs but still symbolizing an important cultural form. Little Richard's energetic style, handsome image, and

subversive performances would help create and influence rock music in the succeeding decades.

Rock symbols, like all symbols, function in a vast web of association. For example, the name “Elvis” not only references the performer but is also a symbol of rock and roll in that it is irrevocably tied to the genre. While “Elvis” is associated with the figure that the name indicates, the name also indicates rock music, the genre that Elvis helped create. Not only is Elvis a symbol of rock, but the symbols associated with Elvis are also associated with rock. The guitar, Elvis’s main instrument, is the traditional symbol of the genre. While the term “guitar” refers to the concept of the guitar, it is also associated with a whole system of meaning. Elvis’s stance at the microphone and the movement of his hips, highly influential to later rock stars, are symbols relating to Elvis but also symbols relating to rock. Elvis used symbols that stabilized rock’s meaning, helped associate specific words, movements, and sounds with the genre. While Elvis helped introduce rock symbols, he did not determine that they were rock symbols. Societies, not individuals, make this determination as they chronicle the development of a movement. Rock did not initially carry the symbols of “Elvis,” “guitar,” or “Little Richard;” society’s interpretation of rock’s historical trajectory added these symbols as proper representations of its essence.

Rock’s stability relies on an enclosed boundary of meaning. In order to differentiate itself from other movements, rock must possess a stable group of symbols. This means that rock necessarily excludes symbols not consistent with itself. While the symbols of “Elvis,” “guitar,” and “Little Richard” all contribute to rock’s stable meaning,

symbols like “cotton candy,” “flowerpot,” “Miles Davis,” and “Greta Garbo” lie outside rock’s boundary in that these symbols are not perceived to be tied up with the movement.

In *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock ‘n’ Roll Music*, released in 1974, two years after Bowie’s parodic historical album *Ziggy Stardust*, Greil Marcus, like Bowie on his first level of meaning in *Ziggy Stardust*, uses essentializing statements to categorize rock and track its development in American history. Marcus talks about rock’s “ideal” (42) and its “ideal images” (42), arguing that rock and roll created “a whole new aesthetic” (75). While Marcus is broad about these images and ideals, he is arguing that rock had a definite essence, and that it can be located through representations of this ideal. By placing an essence on the concept of rock, Marcus finds a space to associate other historical “essences” with each other. Marcus finds rock’s essence tied up with America’s essence, arguing that “America takes its energy from the pursuit of happiness,” and, by extension, asserting that this pursuit of happiness can be seen in rock (62). Bowie, initially, deploys symbols associated with Marcus’s essences in order to parody them. Bowie, a British man, is performing an American genre in order to parody it.

Bowie, before identifying rock’s lack of essence, must first perform traditional history’s requirement of a stable collection of symbols. In order to dismantle rock’s ostensibly stable meaning, Bowie must first identify this stable meaning. Bowie does this with his music, which has a traditional rock sound, with his lyrics, which allude to rock stars of the past, and with his stage performances. Through these different means of communication, Bowie is borrowing the establishing symbols that have come to be associated with rock.

Bowie's music on *Ziggy Stardust* might be the most clearly rock-oriented aspect of his work. Bowie's use of acoustic and electric guitar is particularly indicative of the sound of rock at the time. In addition to guitar sounds, he deploys traditional rock sounds: powerful drums, piano, and, consistent with other recent rock developments, orchestral supplementation. Each track can reasonably be considered rock music by its quick pace, its provocative vocals, and its reliance on guitar riffs. To give a few examples, the guitar work on "Moonage Daydream" is clearly rock, with its fast pace and, later, its soaring guitar solo, the piano on "Star" resembles the 1950's rock of Elvis and Little Richard, and the swagger of the vocals on tracks like "Suffragette City" are consistent with the 1950's and the 1960's vocal performances. With *Ziggy Stardust*, Bowie creates an album that sounds like rock.

Moreover, in the songs "Star" and "Rock 'n' Roll Suicide," Bowie makes it explicitly clear that the subject matter of the album is rock. "Star" is a straightforward story told by a narrator who wants to "make it all worthwhile as a rock and roll star." The narrator of the song dreams of making "money," "fall[ing] in love all right," and "play[ing] the wild mutation as a rock and roll star." The song "Rock 'n' Roll Suicide" contains the signifier "Rock 'n' Roll" right in its title. Bowie makes it clear that this is an album about rock. Ironically, he makes this point so fervently because the album is actually a destabilization of rock and its purported essence. Yet in order to dismantle the traditional chronicling of rock, he must first establish the normative symbols at the center of the movement in order to parody not only the genres but also the proclamation of any trackable essence or unity at the center. First, Bowie uses the symbols that have been

established as symbols of rock in order to parody the genre, thereby showing the lack of unity on a deeper level.

Bowie's lyrics, on the first, non-parodic level, connote the movement of rock. In "Moonage Daydream," Bowie sings that he will be 1) "an alligator," 2) "a mama papa comin' for you," 3) and a "rock 'n' rollin' bitch for you." In *The Complete David Bowie*, Nicholas Pegg traces these references back to Bowie's sources. Pegg argues that the alligator is a reference to 1950's rock star Bill Haley, that the "mama papa" is a reference to The Mamas and The Papas, a folk rock band from the 1960s, and that the "rock 'n' rollin' bitch" is a reference to Little Richard (187). With the song, Bowie tracks the range of musical development taking place in America from the 1950s to the 1960s. Bowie alludes to the 1950s rock of Bill Haley and Little Richard and the 1960s folk acoustic music that was popular in America. For listeners picking up on Bowie's references, Bowie is placing rock and its American roots within the lyrics of the album in order to establish what he is parodying.

On the track "Lady Stardust," Bowie references his friend Marc Bolan, the pioneer of glam rock. Pegg supports this reading, writing that Bolan is the "key inspiration" for the figure at the center of "Lady Stardust" and that he "pointed the way for David's reincarnation as Ziggy" (148-49). While Bowie's reference to Bolan is reverential to Bolan's importance in the cultural landscape, Bowie is also referencing the androgynous aspect of performance from the mid-1950s that would influence Bolan. Bolan's flirtations with androgyny were consistent with the glam rock genre that he pioneered, which, as Simon Reynolds argues, "[amplified] the androgynous...currents...present in fifties and sixties pop (4)" Bowie references Bolan's allusive androgyny

with the opening line of “Lady Stardust:” “People stared at the makeup on his face.” Even Little Richard and Elvis were notable for their flamboyant styles, their makeup, and their dance moves, contrasting greatly with the music of the ‘40s. While Bowie is referencing his glam rock contemporary Bolan, he is simultaneously referencing the rock so influential to Bolan and glam rock.

Bowie’s allusions are symbols, and they are key to creating the album’s central figure, Ziggy Stardust. In fact, in *David Bowie: Starman*, Paul Trynka argues that Ziggy’s last name Stardust is meant to reference the idea that Ziggy is made up of the remnants of the stars who came before him: Little Richard, Elvis, Bolan, Iggy Pop etc. Ziggy is merely the result of all the influences that came before him (227). The song “Ziggy Stardust” packs even more references and potential allusions within its three minute runtime. Pegg writes that the lines “he played it left hand” and “jiving us that we were voodoo” are “suggestions” of Jimi Hendrix, the left-handed guitar player who released the songs “Voodoo Chile” and “Voodoo Child (Slight Return)” in 1968. Pegg notes the following other references in “Ziggy Stardust”: Iggy Pop, Lou Reed, Jim Morrison, and Mick Jagger, all rock stars representative of fame, excess, and decline. Out of these figures, Ziggy Stardust is most reminiscent of Iggy Pop, the late-1960s punk rocker who would quickly go from underground hero to washed up former rocker. Bowie, a huge fan of Iggy’s band *The Stooges*, met Iggy Pop at a bar after his career had plummeted and his name had seemingly faded into oblivion. The lyrics from “Rock ‘n’ Roll Suicide” resemble Iggy Pop’s fall, where the main character stumbles aimlessly through the streets in the wake of his own insignificance.

While Iggy Pop served as one of the main influences of Ziggy's image and name, Ziggy is the result of endless amounts of stars achieving fame, peaking, and then declining, the rising and falling rock star seeping into his inevitability.

With the symbols of rock's past, its figures and its formations, Bowie constructs an image of rock and roll in order to dismantle it through parody. With the requisite amount of rock symbols, Bowie can use rock as he pleases, and he uses it in order to undermine rock's symbols and any purportedly stable identity that rock claims.

After constructing an image that upholds rock's stable identity, Bowie uses symbols as his playthings in order to make *Ziggy Stardust* a site of difference instead of unity. In "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," Foucault states that his new form of history "permits the dissociation of the self, its recognition and displacement as an empty synthesis" (81). The identity of cultural movements also presupposes an essence that Bowie seeks to prove is "an empty synthesis" (81). By stressing difference, by combining the traditional symbols of rock with completely unrelated symbols, Bowie disrupts the arbitrary boundaries of essence, proving that essence itself is a construction.

While Bowie follows the traditional construction of rock on the first level of meaning on the album, he is simultaneously using glam rock to parody rock on the second level of meaning, performing traditional rock symbols alongside symbols thoroughly situated outside of the rock boundary. Bowie, with glam rock, introduces his music as a site where there is no stability of meaning, where a rock symbol like the electric guitar can sit next to a Kabuki Theater symbol. Bowie, by adding disparate elements, proves that a genre like glam rock or rock is a construction, that the collection of symbols that contribute to its meaning do not refer to any essence. Bowie dismantles

the essence of rock in the same way that Foucault, in his essay, dismantles traditional history: the essence is not a synthesis, a unity; “It is disparity” (79). Any supposed synthesis of rock music is a falsification, a supposed unity constructed out of disparate elements.

Consequently, Bowie’s *Ziggy Stardust* is simultaneously a rock album and a glam rock album. Glam rock is a postmodern parody of rock. The symbols that Bowie uses for tracks like “Lady Stardust” can be identified as rock symbols, references to Little Richard or Elvis, and glam rock symbols, references to Marc Bolan or Iggy Pop. Glam rock is a movement tied up with postmodernity in that it rejects any essential truth and performs its own lack of stable reality. Bowie’s glam rock, by parodying American rock, shows glam rock’s lack of meaning, asserts the lack of any essence that could be attributed to glam rock. By positing that glam rock is what Foucault calls “an empty synthesis,” Bowie argues that rock, by extension, is also lacking a stable essence (81).

On the album, Bowie challenges the stability of rock by parodically mixing it with disparate forms of art and disparate symbols of culture, upsetting any idea that rock is a synthesis. Whereas the rock Bowie isolates was an American movement, Bowie mixes various cultural elements to show the arbitrariness of rock’s American essence. Rock is tied into a specific artistic expression, and, to destabilize it, Bowie introduces other art forms into his performance of rock to show the arbitrary nature of its expression. If one can wear Elvis’s striped suit on the stage and still exist within the bounds of rock, why can one not wear a Kabuki Theater costume? How is that costume not accepted within the boundary of rock? Bowie collapses these disparate forms to show the lack of essence at the center of the movement, the void that exists in the place of the purported essence.

Whereas traditional history sees rock as a synthesis of all its symbols, a unity, Bowie sees rock as a site of difference, where its symbols, as a result of its lack of essence, cannot form a synthesis.

Bowie's most experimental expression of difference took place on the stage. Bowie's costumes and dance moves took center stage during his performances. With these costumes and various forms of movement, Bowie would blend art forms, subverting the standard signifiers of rock and roll. Bowie's play of different art forms, for example his blending of rock with miming and Kabuki Theater, contributed to his notion of the arbitrariness of necessary rock symbols.

One of the strangest examples of Bowie's merging of art forms is when he would sporadically introduce miming into his performance. When he performed for the last time in 1973, chronicled by D.A. Pennebaker's film *Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*, Bowie set aside a section of the concert to move his hands in the air, miming trying to get through a heavy door in front of himself while performing the 1970 track "The Width of a Circle." Bowie's history of miming, begun before he became a rock star, has been chronicled ever since Bowie became a subject of historical interest. As Paul Trynka writes in *David Bowie: Starman*, Bowie learned miming from the famous performer Lindsay Kemp and created, wrote, and performed many shows as a mime in the late-1960s, before he was famous (121). Now, at center stage, Bowie makes miming a part of the Ziggy Stardust experience, upending any sense of what had been and what will be acceptable on a rock and roll stage.

One of the other most striking art forms that Bowie included in his performance of Ziggy Stardust was Kabuki Theater. Bowie, during his run of Ziggy Stardust

performances from 1972-73, would wear traditional Kabuki Theater garb and makeup.

Bowie, with his association of Eastern forms of dress, seems to be playing on the concept of the alien, or someone foreign to the cultural landscape in which he is performing.

Bowie is playing with cultural signifiers here, upending the relatively closed geographical boundaries of the genre. Bowie, a British man, performing American rock music while wearing traditional Japanese Kabuki Theater clothing is an act of parodic subversion.

The disparate combination of cultures and eras shows the confusion at the center of the character Ziggy Stardust, who does not represent a synthesis here but what Foucault calls “the dissociation of the self,” a rejection of the unity of any essential identity (81). Ziggy Stardust is Bowie’s performance of the lack of stability of rock culture; Ziggy represents how signifiers that denote an essence are arbitrary. Ziggy, a visual combination of Kabuki Theater, miming, and rock, is created out of symbols that would not traditionally be associated together, that do not represent the normative symbols of rock. By mixing these symbols, Bowie creates a character out of difference instead of unity. For example, how, Bowie wonders, is the guitar any more “essential” to rock than Japanese Theater if he creates a character out of Kabuki Theater symbols? Bowie takes the seemingly stable symbols of rock and destabilizes them, and then mobilizes them to show how they are different, how their inclusion is arbitrary, how the seeming synthesis of rock is based on construction. Ziggy Stardust, Bowie’s representation of rock and glam rock, is “an empty synthesis” because he combines traditional symbols and arbitrary symbols to represent the stark contrast, the levels of disparity that make up an individual (81).

Ziggy Stardust, Bowie's version of a rock star, is the most extreme example of a lack of synthesis. Bowie creates Ziggy primarily out of allusions, on the first level, out of former rock stars (Iggy Pop, Marc Bolan, Jimi Hendrix, etc.), and on the second level out of the fashion of Kansai Yamamoto (who Bowie said was responsible for Ziggy's hair), miming, and traditional Kabuki Theater figures. Bowie deploys allusions strategically to upend rock's stable boundary. According to Richard Fitch in "In this Age of Grand Allusion: Bowie, Nihilism, and Meaning" Bowie claims a "mastery of allusions" and uses them to play games with the audience (20). Ziggy Stardust is the best example of Bowie's parodic games. Bowie, with Ziggy Stardust, plays with allusions to destabilize any coherent meaning. Fitch argues that Bowie uses allusions as "semantic toy[s]" (19). When Bowie establishes his rock signifiers through Ziggy Stardust to demonstrate that rock is his subject, he pulls the rug out by showing that the profusion of "semantic toy[s]," his symbols, decenters rock (19). The multiplicity of allusions that construct Ziggy Stardust forces the audience to reconsider the arbitrary boundaries of the character, and, by extension, rock.

Standing at the center of the album, the center of many of Bowie's stage performances, and at the center of glam rock, Ziggy Stardust, the character in Bowie's songs and the character on stage, is a singer with bright red hair, Kabuki Theater makeup, Japanese garb, an androgynous appearance, and a guitar in hand. Ziggy's symbols are intentionally disparate, are made to upend rock's closed boundary of meaning. Ziggy, an alien, while representing the rise and fall of rock music, shows glam rock's insistence on difference. Ziggy is not American, not British, not even an Earthling. Ziggy is an alien, invading rock's musical boundaries, and, through that process, Ziggy becomes glam

rock's symbol of an "empty synthesis" (81). Bowie has created a thoroughly glam rock figure in Ziggy, the artificially created figure at the center of the album, who plays rock music but does not exist within the boundary of any genre. Bowie's hub of rock meaning, the figure that enacts the rise and fall, is completely "alien" to normative rock symbols.

Bowie's performative history ultimately turns every symbol (Bowie's references to rock stars, costumes, historical events) seen to reference something essential, into fiction. Bowie uses symbols to disrupt the traditional terms and ideas used to identify rock. Bowie creates an alien that mixes rock symbols with completely disparate (culturally, temporally, and aesthetically) symbols. Bowie implicitly poses the questions: what symbols truly represent the "essence" of rock? Since the symbols and meaning are constructions, since history is a fiction created by the forms of society one is born into, there are no essences. Rock's existence is a construction, and Bowie performs its construction in order to parody rock's insistence on normative symbols.

Chapter 2

“He took it all too far”: The Fiction of Rock’s Narrative Trajectory

Bowie’s disavowal of any stable essence has implications for his chronicling of rock history. If there is no real unity called rock, then how can it be tracked throughout history? Bowie, as well as destabilizing the essence of rock and showing that it is merely a fiction, also destabilizes traditional history’s view of rock, the normative rise and fall that traditional history dictates every genre, or movement, takes. The rise and fall is traditional history’s normative arc of chronicling a movement. Whereas traditional history sees this movement as inevitable, Bowie sees it as a fiction, a narrative device that he can use as his own performative toy. Through the exaggeration and ridicule of his parody, Bowie shows how any assertion of rock’s inevitable rise and fall is absurd.

With *Ziggy Stardust*, David Bowie uses glam rock to parody the historical and cultural narrative of rock music. Rock music’s stable historical development, chronicled by authors such as Adam Woog and Greil Marcus, entails a rise and a fall. The narrative Bowie creates with *Ziggy Stardust* on the first level uses the framework of rise and fall to chronicle rock, then, on the second level, parodies it, thereby showing the fiction of the historical arc, arguing that it is a constructed narrative deployment. Bowie performs the traditional form of history that rock took, the rise and the fall as seen as inevitable.

Bowie, with his performative history, once again opposes traditional history by parodying the purported “truth” and “inevitability” of the rise and fall arc. Bowie performs the arc on *Ziggy Stardust*, making his parodic historical narrative consistent with Foucault’s ideas which, in his essay, consist of creating a new form of history to oppose traditional history (94). Whereas traditional forms of history chronicled rock as a

movement emerging in America in a new, vibrant form before fading out, the form of history Foucault encourages in “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” challenges any rise and fall that takes place, arguing that it upholds the ideas of essence and continuity, both empty concepts.

Foucault argues that the traditional history he criticizes posits that a cultural movement, like rock, has an “essence” and, because it is a unity, it travels through history and society, adjusting and being corrupted by cultural forms until it “falls” or no longer has the vibrancy necessary to claim a place within the culture. When a movement rises, according to traditional history, it is closest to “the moment of [its] greatest perfection” (79). Foucault attributes traditional history with the argument that a historical form is purest at the moment of its emergence. After the movement, or genre, has arrived in its purest manifestation, it circulates and becomes corrupted by the forms of culture that force it to lose fidelity to its essence. Representations of rock are a textbook example of traditional history, in part being one of America’s biggest musical and cultural explosions in the 1950s before moving into the 1960s and expanding, falling. Radio had been a means of disseminating music, but as the 1950s went on, the television would become an even more common household object, and rock could circulate among an audience quickly in relation to the previous forms of music, all which had to be experienced live. Radio and especially television allowed artists to reach a wider audience and spread their music, whereas, before then, one had to be in the same building as an artist to experience their performance.

On *Ziggy Stardust*, Bowie performs traditional history’s rise and fall and parodies it to show the fact that it is a mere construction. The rise and fall traditionally employed

to track a historical movement is a fictive narrative form, and it is a deployment in the same way that the music, costumes, and narratives of the theater are fictive. Whereas traditional history sees cultural movements taking a route essential to them, a rise and a fall, Bowie sees this arc as merely another theatrical tool to use, and he uses it to track his figure Ziggy Stardust.

Bowie deploys the rise and fall trajectory in a paradoxical manner. Bowie's performance of the rise and fall of rock is parodical, and, as Bowie chronicles rock's rise and fall on the first level, the second level of meaning is operating simultaneously, undermining the trajectory that Bowie is building. Bowie's performance is paradoxical in that it is deconstructing the very narrative it is building, calling into question the very essence it locates.

Ziggy Stardust, the figure at the center of the album and the lead singer of the band Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars, is Bowie's representation of rock music. Ziggy, on Bowie's first level, will take a route similar to other American rock front men of the 1950s and 1960s like Elvis, Little Richard, Jimi Hendrix. Ziggy will also take a route similar to the rock movement as a whole, emerging brightly onto the scene before circulating and ultimately becoming devalued, as chronicled on the last track "Rock 'n' Roll Suicide."

Once again, Bowie uses two levels of meaning here. The first level is about rock and its development from its roots in 1950s America to its circulation and fall. Bowie, on this first level, presents a straightforward account of rock's rise and fall, using the normative historical framework that Foucault criticizes in his essay. The second level is Bowie's parody of rock through glam rock. Once again, Bowie surrounds his first level's

chronicling of the traditional history of rock with his second level's glam rock postmodernism, a tool he uses to play with the construct he has established in order to parody. Bowie uses the genre of glam rock as a site of parody where the traditional arc of rock history is moved from its essential position of truth into the realm of play. To Bowie, the normative narrative trajectory of rock is merely the performance of a fiction. Congruous with the idea that there is no essence of rock is the idea that an essential movement, a rise and fall, is merely a fiction, not an inevitability.

Bowie's form of parody emphasizes the exaggeration and absurdity of the rise and fall trajectory. Bowie, with his deployment of the narrative arc on his album, disconnects the arc from its normative, inevitable position and plays with it, using parody and exaggeration to show how it is not inevitable, how any assertion of its inevitability is absurd. Bowie's narrative arc is embedded with a parody that ultimately allows the arc to, first, be established on the album, and, second, be dismantled on the album. Bowie's postmodern parody functions on these two levels: the building up and the tearing down.

Before Bowie even develops the first layer of meaning, the straightforward history of rock, to then be able to parody this straightforward history with his use of glam rock's postmodernism, he first introduces a song that immediately disrupts the rise and fall trajectory.

On "Five Years," the first track of his opus *Ziggy Stardust*, Bowie presents themes consistent with the rise and fall structure of the album while simultaneously parodying the inevitability of historical trajectory. "Five Years" is a track containing both a straightforward relaying of a rise and fall and the parody of that same rise and fall. In "Five Years," Bowie chronicles the lives of people who have just been informed that

Earth has only five years left. Our narrator, who is on planet Earth while this is happening, takes a sentimental journey through his environment, begrudging the impending death of the planet. With “Five Years,” Bowie subverts expectations, beginning the album, his representation of rock, with an announcement of its impending fall. A beginning that should be the album’s rise instead presents the themes of finitude and the coming end of life, representing, on top of the death of the narrator and his fellow earthlings, the death of rock.

With “Five Years,” Bowie is commenting on the predestined nature of historical developments, the inevitability of a cultural movement falling before it has even risen. Bowie parodies the fact that historical movements will inevitably follow a normative trajectory that determines their existence. *Ziggy Stardust* is an album about rock’s bright emergence and then its fall, and Bowie starts the album with a track already acknowledging the inevitability of demise. In 1999, Adam Woog’s *The History of Rock and Roll* was published, and, despite the twenty-seven-year gap in time between his book and Bowie’s 1972 album *Ziggy Stardust*, Woog perpetuates the tendency that Bowie parodies. Woog describes American rock as emerging and then “inevitably...grow[ing] dull” as if rock was predestined to follow historical forms, as if this trajectory was innate to it (9). Before rock even existed, the normative trajectory of a genre had been long established, waiting for rock to emerge so that it could determine rock’s course. The rise and fall of genre is predestined by the way traditional history functions.

With the second and third tracks, “Soul Love” and “Moonage Daydream,” Bowie, on the first level, defines rock’s essence. With “Soul Love,” Bowie offers a definition by portraying what rock is not, what it is reacting to, and, second, with “Moonage

Daydream,” Bowie defines what rock is, its essence. When rock arrived on the cultural scene, it was provided normative cultural interpretations, mission statements that could be absorbed and circulated across the culture. The two tracks here communicate these normative interpretations through Bowie’s dramatization.

On both tracks, Bowie, on the first level, in a straightforward manner, comments on the movement of the genre and shows a progression from the past to the future. The song “Soul Love” is a ballad about staying true to an ideal, the ideal in the song identified as “love.” Throughout the track, the main characters of the song are at a distance from the object of their love: a woman who has lost her lover, a priest who is only “told of love.” According to the singer, someone with the normative view of rock, the traditions of the past dictate that one engage with love at a distance, that one inflexibly devote oneself to love. The singer defines this as “idiot love:” rigid, unmoving, and at a distance from the object of affection. At the end of the song, the singer repeats the theme of the track: “All I have is my love of love/And love is not loving.” While the cultural forms of the past that rock is responding to are merely engaging with “idiot love,” the real expression of love is in the act of loving, in the performance of love. This view of performance is consistent with rock’s 1950s explosion onto the scene with its glamorous sense of performance. The 1950s rock stars saw their ideal form not in the devotion to traditions of the past, like what the narrator of “Soul Love” calls “idiot love.” The 1950s rock stars saw their ideal communicated through its performance, through their ability to shake off the forms of the past and create new forms. Little Richard screaming on top of a piano and Elvis moving his hips in front of a roaring audience are images of the type of performance found lacking in the forms of the past, in “idiot love.” Elvis and Little Richard are not bound by

a devotion to forms of the past; they are performing a new culture into the future of American life.

If “Soul Love” is a mission statement of what rock is not, that is, an expression of fidelity to the past instead of an intent to move into the future, then “Moonage Daydream” presents rock’s essence, the force behind the movement. With “Moonage Daydream,” Bowie presents the normative essence of the genre, the height of performance and action. The singer of the track is Ziggy Stardust, the Martian rock star about to transmit the new musical genre to Earth. At the beginning of the song, Ziggy eschews the rigid forms of “idiot love” by highlighting rock’s sense of performance and mutability. On the track, Bowie croons, “I’m an alligator/I’m a mama papa comin’ for you/I’m a space invader/I’ll be a rock ‘n’ rollin’ bitch for you.” If Ziggy wants, he can turn himself into “an alligator,” “a mama papa,” an alien, or “a rock ‘n’ rollin’ bitch.” Ziggy’s lyrics conform to the disposition of history’s most famous rockers: Little Richard, Elvis, Jimi Hendrix, who all represent performance, the theater, and the outrageousness of provocation. Ziggy’s approach echoes the tendencies of rock that sought, and seek, to do away with the fidelity to the past presented in “Soul Love.” The singer Elvis Presley was not a real person, in the sense that he was a character created by a group of people, who wanted the figure to become famous and entertain audiences. We can presume the figures behind “Elvis,” for the time being, to be the “real” Elvis and those marketing him, among others, in order to shock the public and excite those looking to move away from past forms of culture. Little Richard, similarly, was, and is, a character, a performance, made up by those seeking to disseminate his image. Little Richard was a spectacular performer, putting on a show every night and subverting the

public's prior notions of what music could do – these ideas of performance and mutability are the 1950s rock representations of what “Moonage Daydream” is chronicling.

The chorus of “Moonage Daydream” is a collection of commands, telling the audience what they should do, what acts they should perform. All of these are marked by the use of a string of verbs: “*Keep* your ‘lectric eye on me, babe, *Put* your ray gun to my head/*Press* your space face close to mine, love/*Freak* out in a moonage daydream, oh yeah (emphasis mine).” Bowie presents rock as an energetic spectacle as opposed to the previous forms of culture. The genre is seeking to escape from the tired expectations of the past, from the musty forms of tradition. Overall, “Moonage Daydream” purports to be something new and original, emerging out of the wake of the past, a past now seen to be outdated and unfulfilling. Still on his first level of meaning, Bowie presents Ziggy and rock as the means that will make culture exciting, that will send it into the future with passion and expectation.

On the other hand, with these songs, on the second level of meaning, Bowie is parodying rock's essence. Bowie uses artificiality and exaggeration to represent the ideal of rock music, thereby showing how any declaration of rock's essential development is absurd. Bowie uses glam rock to deploy the artificial means of parody onto rock. The straightforward meaning of “Moonage Daydream,” that rock was responding to and moving away from the traditions of the past in order to move into a spectacular future, is surrounded by glam rock's parodic artificiality. On “Moonage Daydream,” Bowie rejects traditional meaning by performing it in such a ridiculous manner that the inevitability of rock's essence moving into the future becomes absurd. After crooning that he is an

“alligator” and a “space invader,” Bowie parodically remarks: “lay the real thing on me,” in the middle of a song about the prevalence of artificiality. Any proclamation of a “truth” or of anything “real” is undermined by Bowie’s calculated, glam rock assertion that reality is absurd, that performance can undo any sense of reality.

While “Moonage Daydream,” on the first level, represents the essence of the genre, the untouched perfection of rock, Bowie, on his song “Starman,” seeks to show rock’s emergence into the cultural landscape. The straightforward narrative that Bowie parodies with glam rock is the excitement that spread throughout the country when rock music first circulated in the 1950s. With the help of television and the radio, the controversial new genre of rock excited the young and scared the old, who felt that rock could corrupt the youth by losing respect for the past.

Bowie creates “Starman” to represent the public’s impression of rock when it first emerged in its purest form. This song performs the myth of the “origin” that Foucault describes in his essay, parodying the nearly supernatural importance attributed to it (79). Bowie depicts the movement of a genre from its original appearance to its cultural domination in a short sequence of events. In the song, the narrator, an excited young person, relays his experience listening to the radio and being transformed by the song playing. He listens to a new “rock ‘n’ roll” track and is so impressed by what he calls “hazy cosmic jive,” performed by the extraterrestrial Ziggy Stardust, that he has to phone a friend to discuss it. The narrator wonders if he “may pick him up on channel two,” showing the circulation of music that takes place in mid-1950s culture with new forms of music. Circulation is an important point we will return to since the first appearance of the genre represents, to traditional history, its purest form before it is subsumed by culture

and history, which ultimately contribute to its fall. Nevertheless, the audience listening to Ziggy is so excited that they circulate his work.

Throughout “Starman,” Bowie uses extraterrestrial imagery to parody how new and original the movement of rock was, how foreign to traditional cultural forms the new music appeared. The revolutionary sounds are produced by a “Starman,” who is “waiting in the sky, who “would like to come and meet us/ but he thinks he’d blow our mind.” The avid fan, our narrator, who had first listened to the track says that he “can see his light” from the “window,” provides further imagery to suggest the otherworldliness and purity of the extraterrestrial. Bowie parodies traditional history’s fixation on origin, making the emergence of rock a supernatural experience, an emergence that cannot be understood in terms of previous cultural developments. The movement literally comes from outer space.

The Starman’s new musical form is so threatening to tradition and so provocative, that our narrator tells his friend not to inform his father, or “he’ll get us locked up in fright,” a line representing the fear of how a cultural movement can destroy the security of the past. Rock, and, specifically the rock front man, are given supreme importance and originality in Bowie’s dramatization of this new form. Bowie’s depiction of the reaction to rock is a parody through exaggeration of how rock was presented to American audiences. When Elvis came out, people were outraged, and the song’s scene of a father “lock[ing]” his children “up in fright” is not much different from the mid-century parents refusing to let their kids see Elvis for fear of the influence of his provocative image, lyrics, and dance moves. In “Starman,” the dangerous, culture-shifting genre has emerged.

The “Starman,” Ziggy Stardust, communicates values consistent with “Moonage Daydream.” Ziggy Stardust tells the narrator to “Let the children lose it/Let the children use it/Let all the children boogie.” The genre is about action, movement, and the casting off of tradition. The movement requires “los[ing] it,” “freak[ing] out in a moonage daydream,” and dancing into the future, where Starman and dreams dictate what is to come. While “Soul Love” is maddeningly stuck in terrestrial forms, “Moonage Daydream” and “Starman” suggest the movement away from the ground that holds us toward new, unexplored terrains. Bowie uses the narrative form of science fiction to parody how these genres seemingly offered audiences the unknown. The terrestrial form of rock, introducing more provocative examples of expression becomes a movement from outer space, led by a red-headed alien named Ziggy Stardust.

Bowie establishes a rise on the first half of the album. However, the originality and force of rock is ultimately undercut by the inevitable fall in the second half of the album. While “Moonage Daydream” and “Starman” represent the purest form of the genre, the tracks on the second half of the album, on the first level of meaning, show the effects of circulation and absorption by the culture that corrupts the genre. As the rock depicted in Bowie’s music takes form, from radio play to television, to the mass circulation of the band Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars, the cultural movement will lose value and decline. Ziggy will become a figure representative of the rock stars, specifically Jimi Hendrix and Jim Morrison, who died in the early 1970s and whose deaths were purported to mark the end of rock.

The first instance of the fall of rock is in the track “Hang on to Yourself,” where Bowie foreshadows the idea of Ziggy’s rock band potentially slipping away from its

purported essence. After declaring that “we’re the Spiders from Mars,” the narrator attempts to stay true to the movement: “Well come on, well come on/We’ve really got a good thing going/Well come on, well come on/If you think we’re going to make it/You better hang on to yourself.” The narrator echoes the sentiment of traditional history, the straightforward first level of Bowie’s narrative, that is: in order for a movement to rise, it has to stay true to its essence because the fall is always determined by the distance from that essence created by the corruption of culture and its forms of circulation. The narrator is idealistic in that he believes that they can continue performing at their peak; according to the forms of history, no movement can stay true to itself, can properly represent its essence, its ideal. As soon as it makes its way into the world and circulates, it necessarily falls, moves away from its “truth.” The narrator, despite being idealistic, foresees a fall and pleads with the band to stay true to their essence.

Bowie’s song “Ziggy Stardust,” chronicles the fall of the origin. The figure of Ziggy Stardust, the alien lead singer purporting to save the world, cannot fulfill his promises, and he falls because of his own excess. In the song, Ziggy is depicted as falling prey to excess, thereby fulfilling a normative arc of not only the rock star but also of rock itself. According to the song, Ziggy “made it too far/Became the special man,” “[made] love with his ego,” and “sucked up into his mind.” Ego and excess, always common themes in the history of rock music, take control of Ziggy, and Ziggy’s fall is determined by “the body,” “the world,” which contrasts with the ideal, the essence of the movement (Foucault 79). Bowie “took it all too far” and fell because of the terrestrial shortcomings of ego and excess. The fall is inevitable, and Ziggy’s fall is reminiscent of the rock stars of the past who fell.

In the song, Ziggy's audience reacts as they usually do when a movement has lost touch with its initial meaning: they reject Ziggy. Bowie croons "the kids had killed the man," suggesting that the youth who were so interested in Ziggy at the beginning, the fans presumably containing the narrator from "Starman" who could not wait to tell their friends about the spaceman, have turned their backs Ziggy.

Ziggy Stardust's fall is reminiscent of earlier American rock stars like Jimi Hendrix who died of a drug overdose in 1970. When Bowie says Ziggy "played [guitar] left hand," Nicholas Pegg, in *The Complete David Bowie*, argues that Bowie is referencing Hendrix, who famously played a left hand guitar. In *No One Waved Good-bye: A Casualty Report on Rock and Roll*, Robert Somma addresses the normative interpretation of rock's rise and fall, asserting that the American audience is "well trained to comprehend and even anticipate the velocities of success, decline and mortality" (12). While Somma says that the book is not one about "rock's decline," he nevertheless connects the idea of rock stars' deaths with the death of the genre (14). In the next chapter of the book, "Jimi in New York," Al Aronowitz writes about Hendrix's death by "downs-barbiturates," further contributing to the narrative of rock's symbolic death by excess (25). Jimi Hendrix represented the continuation of the American rock movement into the late-1960s with its spectacle and excess. Hendrix serves as a perfect example for Bowie, who seeks to parody the downfall of rock with a character, mimicking the press's response to Hendrix's death in 1970.

The character of Ziggy Stardust is a performative exaggeration of the death of rock, Bowie's parody of how a genre can take such a predictable route, rising and falling with no variation. Bowie creates Ziggy's trajectory from Jimi Hendrix and various other

artists, like Jim Morrison, who died and were subsumed under the narrative arc of rock's rise and fall. Ziggy's adherence to the rise and fall structure is an exaggerated performance of the purported cultural occurrence of rock's demise, taking place at the end of the 1960s, a few years before Bowie's album came out. Bowie, instead of straightforwardly chronicling the rise and fall of rock like traditional history, offers, with Ziggy, a parodic performance of the normative rise and fall of the movement. Ziggy is a parody of the rock star brought into the spotlight before falling out of favor because of excess. Ziggy is a comic rehashing of the rock narratives saturating the culture at the end of the 1960s. By using Ziggy as an obvious metaphor for rock's decline, Bowie parodies the rock world's use of individual stars like Jimi Hendrix or Jim Morrison to represent rock's fall.

The theme of excess that Bowie introduces on "Ziggy Stardust" continues with "Suffragette City." "Suffragette City" stands in direct contrast to "Starman," where the essence and emergence of the Starman is seen as almost sacred, from the perspective of children, who seek the movement with a sense of purity and amazement. The track "Starman," with its themes of unique intimacy finds its contrast with "Suffragette City," where the characters are not interested in an intimate consummation but are interested instead in quick, continuous gratification. Whatever the ideal is in "Suffragette City," love, liberation, etc., Bowie contrasts it with its absurd and non-ideal expression.

The ideal, rock (represented by Ziggy Stardust), after emerging, circulates and loses fidelity to the ideal and becomes unrecognizable, fulfilling traditional history's normative trajectory. The "fall" that Foucault claims always occurs after the origin in traditional history finds its means through circulation, through the devalued profusion of

an ideal turned commodity (79). “Suffragette City” similarly, and broadly, echoes the theme of a fallen ideal now circulated into oblivion. On the track, our main character is not interested in any ideal, unlike the idealistic narrator in “Starman.” Whereas the narrator in “Starman,” sought meaning in an almost sacred connection, the narrator of “Suffragette City” directly contrasts these themes by seeking meaning in quick gratification. At the end of the song, our narrator yells the lines “Ah, wham, bam, thank you, ma’am,” a reference to the quick sex that he craves throughout the song. The theatrical importance of Bowie’s presentation of intimate interaction in “Moonage Daydream” and the sacred nature of its emergence in “Starman” are reduced to a quick sexual encounter, repeated *ad infinitum*. The first few tracks on the album stress the importance of an ideal (“Moonage Daydream”) and an intimate interaction (“Starman”), contrasting with the theme of “Suffragette City” which is getting sex and getting it fast. “Suffragette City” is about growing up, being corrupted, and being disillusioned. The idealistic tracks at the beginning of the album have been usurped by a track chronicling quick exchange and endless circulation, the manifestation of the fall.

In addition to Bowie’s use of “Suffragette City” to communicate traditional history’s point that an ideal loses its importance through circulation, Bowie uses “Suffragette City” to parody representations of the fall. Bowie’s likening of quick sex to the devaluation of an essence or an ideal is consistent with Foucault’s point that traditional history always views the fall as related to “the body” as opposed to an ideal (79). Bowie’s fall explicitly involves the ideal, and his line “Ah, wham, bam, thank you, ma’am” is a comical parody of the fall’s manifestation, meant to contrast with the

perception-shifting encounter of “Starman.” Bowie associates the theme of the fall on *Ziggy Stardust* with an exaggerated performance of quick sex.

On the final track of the album, “Rock ‘n’ Roll Suicide,” Bowie makes the fall of the movement apparent. The narrator chronicles, and then directly addresses, someone he calls a “rock ‘n’ roll suicide.” Presumably, this is Ziggy Stardust washed out with “a cigarette...in [his] mouth” who is “too old to lose it” and “too young to choose it.” This figure, like rock music, has now finished the inevitable cycle of any movement, that is: a rise and a fall. The singer, having finished his narrative arc, now sits alone in the wake of his past successes. Bowie’s association of a rock star’s cultural insignificance is compared to death, or, more specifically, suicide. The genre of rock, after having emerged bright on the scene, and then having died of its own excesses, now sits in a strange purgatory. The implication of the phrase “rock ‘n’ roll suicide,” on the first level of meaning, is that rock killed itself through its own tendencies, that rock was inevitably going to die. Something within rock music, something essential to it, caused its downfall.

The fall of rock was predestined by the cultural forms that created it and chronicled it. There is no rock to locate, no cultural movement to reference without the historical forms that interpret them; the interpretation creates the movement. The essence is found lacking. Rock’s trajectory is contingent on the rise and fall that comes with society’s forms of producing meaning.

Ziggy’s final fall, however, will not take place on the album. In his article “The Day Ziggy Died: How David Bowie Killed his Greatest creation,” Joe Taysom chronicles how, in 1973, at a performance at the Hammersmith Odeon in London, Bowie announced that the show was the last one that they (Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars)

would perform. Ziggy Stardust would never reappear, marking the end of his rise and fall. While the album suggested a figure who had risen and fallen, the touring version of Ziggy performed by Bowie was at the height of his popularity. When this publically announced “death” occurred, the public referred to the incident in tragic terms, completing Bowie’s parodic-tragic intent: they declared that Bowie had “killed” Ziggy Stardust (Taysom). Bowie’s use of Ziggy had outlasted the album, and the performance of Ziggy was just as much a part of the musical narrative as the album. In order for the fall to make itself final, Bowie had to announce it on the stage. Bowie’s performative history, on the second level of meaning, fittingly ended on the stage in front of an audience. The mask of Ziggy was drawn back to reveal another mask, that of David Bowie, a Bowie that would continue making music throughout the ‘70s and well into the 21st century.

Chapter 3

Man of Stardust: Parodic Subjectivity, Masks, and Authorial Agency

When Bowie announced that he would no longer be performing as Ziggy Stardust in 1973 on stage, he ended the parodic historical narrative of rock that he began with the album *Ziggy Stardust*. Bowie, on stage, made a clear statement with this decision: *Ziggy Stardust is a character I play, and I, David Bowie, will no longer be playing him*. Ziggy had served Bowie as a fictional character to represent, parody, and fulfill rock's destiny. Bowie used Ziggy as a fictional device, a mere narrative deployment. However, the author-character relationship between Bowie and Ziggy proves to be more complicated. David Bowie is the author of Ziggy: Bowie's name is on the album where the artist's name usually is, Bowie performs on stage as Ziggy Stardust, and Bowie talks about how he created Ziggy in interviews, so it would seem clear that Bowie created Ziggy. However, Bowie's authorship of Ziggy is less stable than it appears.

Other than Ziggy, Bowie created many characters in the 1970s. Here are a few among the dozens Bowie presented to his audience in his career: "Major Tom" on his song "Space Oddity," "Halloween Jack" on his song "Diamond Dogs," and "The Thin White Duke" on his song "Station to Station." Bowie would perform as these characters on stage as well, bringing them from the sonic to the visual realm. Bowie's reputation for spawning imaginary characters supports the traditional view that there is a real subject named "David Bowie" who is creating these characters. Bowie is separated from his characters by the split between fictional character and reality. Bowie's real name is David Jones, so, according to a traditional view of identity, the name David Bowie is a fake name denoting the real person who is David Jones. David Bowie is just a pseudonym,

referencing a very real person. The traditional view is that David Bowie and David Jones are the same person, and this artistic personae creates fictional characters through his music and performance.

In this chapter, I argue that David Bowie and David Jones are as fictional as Ziggy Stardust. David Bowie's Ziggy Stardust is a blueprint for how fictional characters are created. With Ziggy Stardust, Bowie shows how fictional characters are formations of historical content, amalgamations of historical influences. Ziggy Stardust is an amalgamation of the rock stars and art forms that came before; he is a fiction constructed out of the past. Similarly, David Bowie, as well as Ziggy Stardust, is an amalgamation of the past. Bowie's influences are apparent in his work and two of the most evident influences are Anthony Newley and Mick Jagger; these figures did more than provide Bowie with just a sound or an image -- they contributed to the formation of David Bowie's identity. The historical figures of Newley and Jagger, as well as the historical forms of rock and theater, among innumerable influences, created the character of Bowie.

David Jones is the third fictional character tied up with David Bowie. While David Jones is seen to be the "real" person behind Bowie and Ziggy, David Jones, ironically, is another character made up of competing historical narratives, these narratives often provided by Bowie in interviews. While it would seem that Jones created Bowie, Bowie, in interviews, seems to be creating Jones in order to serve Bowie's artistic narrative. With contradictory stories and outright lies, Bowie, a fictional character, seems to somehow be creating his "real" identity anew.

My argument here relies on something of a paradox. I am arguing that Bowie performs subjectivity in order to prove that subjectivity is unstable, that granting a subject

agency is misleading. Following this line of thought dictates that I grant Bowie agency while arguing that he does not have agency. Overall, my argument is that Bowie performs subjectivity to prove that the stable ground of agential authority that he rests on is a fiction, and that subjective agency cannot be granted to him. While I do assume that there is some sort of creative organization taking place, I do not grant it stability. When I say “David Bowie,” I am referring to an unstable site of meaning that oftentimes rejects any sort of stability attributed to it, and when I say “David Bowie performs subjectivity,” I mean that, paradoxically, whatever agential force is acting is rejecting and parodying stable subjectivity. Bowie’s use of historical influence, and his subjection by historical influences, strips away the stability of his identity and agency.

By calling into question who the “real” David Bowie is, Bowie is performing subjectivity. Bowie is once again engaging in performative history, his technique of opposing traditional history with the means of untruth. Whereas in the first two chapters I analyzed how Bowie parodies the genre of rock and its historical arc, here I analyze how he parodies the subjectivity of the author/historian. Bowie uses untruth and the blueprint of Ziggy Stardust’s fictionality to destabilize the subjectivity of Bowie and Jones who are also fictional characters. Each character, Ziggy, Bowie, and Jones, is an unstable site of historical information, where purported truth becomes artificiality.

Bowie once again offers two levels of meaning. The first level is that of traditional history, and, in this case, the normative view of authorial agency. The first level finds Bowie performing the idea that Ziggy Stardust is a character created by a figure referred to, pseudonymously, as David Bowie, whose real name is David Jones. The second level of meaning, the level of performative history, shows Bowie disrupting

the traditional sense of a subject's agency. On this parodic level, Bowie shows how Ziggy Stardust, David Bowie, and David Jones are equally fictions, all liable to be used for various, sometimes conflicting, narratives.

Bowie uses parody to counter subjectivity in what might be his most challenging parodic stance. Bowie, in the last two chapters, is shown to parody genre and traditional history, but, here, he challenges the limits of his own identity. Bowie's disavowal of his own subjectivity is his ultimate parody in that he is parodying himself and the sense of agency attributed by his audience to him. Bowie's postmodern parody of subjectivity reflects the "epistemological relativism" that Dentith mentions in *Parody* by calling into question not only the subject being parodied but the agent parodying the subject (170). David Bowie and David Jones are as foundationless as Ziggy Stardust.

While Bowie uses the album *Ziggy Stardust* and the stage to create his character Ziggy Stardust, Bowie primarily uses interviews to create and perform both the characters of David Bowie and David Jones. The interviews were mostly conducted in the 1970s and early 1980s for popular magazines like *Melody Maker*, *Rolling Stone*, and *Playboy*, and they show Bowie playing with the idea of identity. Any time an interviewer thinks they understand who Bowie is, Bowie says something to elude him.

With *Ziggy Stardust* and the various interviews he would sit for during this time span, Bowie destabilizes the subjectivity of his author/historian figures in three ways: 1) creating Ziggy to show how a character is created by historical content, 2) using historical influences to perform through the figure David Bowie, and 3) employing the past identity of David Jones to create a figure consistent with his current interests.

Bowie's performance of the subject echoes themes similar to Michel Foucault's ideas in "What is an Author?" Foucault argues that there is no stable subject and criticizes the view of the author as a "surging of invention" (119). To Foucault, the author should not be looked at as "the creator of a work"; instead, the author should be interpreted as a historical construction (118). Foucault argues instead that there are other non-subjective forces that contribute to the creation of meaning. For Foucault and Bowie, these forces are historical and cultural. Bowie's content, including Ziggy, Bowie, and Jones, is created by the forms of history that precede it; Bowie is merely an amalgamation of the content, mostly artistic, that came before him.

Foucault's view of history also encourages the type of play with masks that Bowie can be seen to perform with his characters. In "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," Foucault promotes the disturbance of identity, of subjectivity, and he foresees a history that will "push the masquerade to its limit and prepare the great carnival of time where masks are constantly reappearing" (94). To Foucault, masks are means of contributing to "our 'unrealization' through the excessive choice of identities" which "[revitalizes] the buffoonery of history" and proves the "unreality" of "identity" (94). Bowie, through his profusion of various identities, through the masks he uses to project an authorial subject, dismantles subjectivity through his performance of identity.

Bowie's most famous character, Ziggy Stardust, can on no grounds be considered real. The traditional view of Ziggy Stardust is that he was created by a figure named David Bowie. Bowie created Ziggy out of historical and fictional material. However, I argue that with Ziggy Stardust, Bowie is providing a blueprint for how to analyze all of his subjectivities, including David Bowie and David Jones, as fictional characters. In

David Bowie: Starman, Paul Trynka argues that the name Ziggy Stardust references the fact that Ziggy is merely an amalgamation of the residue of the rock “stars” that came before him (227). These historical figures find themselves once again performing through Ziggy Stardust. Ziggy Stardust is made up of the past; history is performing through him, and, as Bowie will show us, history is performing through Bowie and Jones as well.

Instead of looking at the authorial subject as the primary agent, I argue that we should look at historical content as agential. The forces of the historical past have shaped Ziggy. He is made entirely out of previous cultural forms, previous historical movements and performances. Ziggy is Iggy Pop, Marc Bolan, Jimi Hendrix, a character one can find in science fiction, a Kabuki theater character, etc. The formations, the content that performs can, on some level, be assigned a creative role; history’s past unfolding can be found to perform again in the figure of Ziggy Stardust. Whereas one would usually attribute the creation of a character to a subject, Bowie, similar to Foucault, argues that history should be seen as a creative force. Consequently, the idea that a figure like Ziggy is constructed by historical material means that Bowie’s agency is called into question.

Moreover, Bowie performs the role of creation and author while providing no stable site of creation. Bowie, through his performance of subjectivity, reveals that he can also be analyzed as a fictional subject comparable to the Ziggy Stardust blueprint. David Bowie, like Ziggy Stardust, is a historical formation, created out of the figures and modes of the past. If Bowie attributes the creation of Ziggy Stardust to himself, then he is suggesting that Ziggy Stardust was created by a figure equally as fictional as Ziggy. While Bowie seems like a unique creation, by analyzing figures like Anthony Newley and Mick Jagger, I locate the influences that contribute to facets of Bowie’s work like his

voice and sound as well as his unique image. Bowie's influences are bigger than any individual figure; nevertheless, these figures are examples of how Bowie uses historical identities and historical data, or, maybe more appropriately, how this historical data uses him. While my analysis of Bowie's identity is not exhaustive, I am merely showing how the character of David Bowie is indivisible from the narratives chronicling his persona as a rock star.

First, however, I will provide background on the identity "David Bowie."

Traditional history tells us that David Bowie is the name David Jones assumed in 1966 in order to avoid being confused with Davy Jones, the lead singer of The Monkees. "David Bowie" is a performance tag, a fake name referencing an individual with a real name, David Jones. "David Bowie" is, purportedly, David Jones's creation, his idea of an image of a performer. I am not arguing that new names cannot properly denote an individual, that names chosen after birth are in any sense less real than the original names. I am arguing that the name "David Bowie" arose out of artistic necessity and was identified as a performer name.

One of the most distinct features of Bowie's performance is his voice. His theatrical British crooning has a unique sound that one does not find in other contemporary rock stars. However, one finds his voice coming out of Broadway star Anthony Newley's mouth when the singer performs one of his mid-1960s tracks like "Who Can I Turn To (When Nobody Needs Me)" or "The Joker?" The resemblance between the two voices is uncanny, and one is unsurprised to learn that Bowie was immersed in the performer's work throughout his life. According to Paul Morley, in his *The Age of Bowie*, Bowie used Newley as an influence even though he was always

ashamed to admit it (14, 178). One of Bowie's most distinct features comes straight from, at the time of Bowie's fame, a relatively recognizable performer.

Bowie's image as a performer has many facets, and we can see the influence of Newley on Bowie's participation in different forms of performance. From the whimsical, parodic, theatrical rock star to the edgy, boundary-pushing front man who was not afraid to challenge society's mores, Bowie tries as many different forms and styles as he can, from singing to acting to painting. Bowie wanted to be more than a singer, and the stamp of his identity runs through many disciplines. In his *Shock and Awe: Glam Rock and its Legacy, from the Seventies to the Twenty-First Century*, Simon Reynolds argues that Bowie's image as a performer is highly influenced by Newley, who would offer Bowie what Reynolds calls "a model and ideal" of "the shape and range" of a prospective career "which spanned singing and recording, songwriting for other performers, composing musicals and acting in the theater, television and film" (78). Bowie's history as a songwriter, not only of his own songs but also songs like "All the Young Dudes" by Mott the Hoople, stands next to his career as an actor.

Bowie's self-reflexive style is evident on all of his artistic output, and it was greatly influenced by Anthony Newley. Newley's TV career was especially useful for Bowie, and the show *The Strange World of Gurney Slade*, which Newley starred in as the title role, informed the "self-reflexive tendencies" of his work, and Reynolds argues that "The seeds of 1972's *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* are visible in the 1960s TV series" (80, 81). The work of Anthony Newley performs in the work of David Bowie.

Bowie's image and music can be traced to innumerable sources, but The Rolling Stones and, more specifically, their lead singer Mick Jagger have especially made indelible marks in the creation of Bowie's persona. The appearance of Jagger and The Rolling Stones' work on Bowie's own material was so apparent that Mick Jagger would comment on it even after the singer's death in 2016. In a *Rolling Stone* article by Jagger about Bowie, Jagger writes, "He used to copy me sometimes, but he'd be very honest about it" (Jagger). Bowie himself acknowledges the appearance of Jagger's work in his own in an article with *Playboy* in 1976: "'Mick Jagger, for example, is scared to walk into the same room as me even *thinking* any new idea. He knows I'll snatch it'" (Crowe). The name Mick Jagger, here, can also connote The Rolling Stones, whose work Bowie would emulate on songs like "Rebel Rebel," its riff resembling Keith Richards' guitar sound. Bowie had even covered The Rolling Stones earlier with the track "Let's Spend the Night Together" off of Bowie's 1973 album *Aladdin Sane*. Jagger and The Rolling Stones' influence on Bowie would be apparent to those listening to Bowie's work in the early 1970s.

Bowie suggests, however, that Mick Jagger was something bigger than a mere subject, something more like a cultural force or an archetypal figure. In an interview with William Burroughs for Craig Copetas's *Rolling Stone* article in 1974, Bowie said that "For the West, Jagger is most certainly a mother figure and he's a mother hen to the whole thing. He's not a cockadoodledoo; he's much more like a brothel keeper or a madame" (Copetas). Bowie's comment on Jagger is consistent with his overall approach to authorship, with his skepticism of stable subjectivity. Bowie, in a way, is arguing that one should look at Jagger as a cultural force instead of a stable subject. For example,

what do we mean when we mention Mick Jagger? Do we mean the self at the center of the individual Mick Jagger? Do we mean the image at the front of The Rolling Stones? Bowie, in the interview, at least offers a different perspective not entirely consistent with the normative view of the self, that view being that there is a stable individual who is making choices. Bowie understands Jagger's influence on him as something more cultural, more historical than, say, a traditional view of history would attribute to him. Bowie's classification of the name Mick Jagger is destabilized from its normative position. The Mick Jagger that stands for an individual, an actual person, makes way for a Mick Jagger that is a complicated site of influence and influences. Like Bowie, Jagger is a site made up of influences, of cultural forms that came before him. Jagger's influence is not done on a subjective, individual basis; it is done on a complex, historical basis.

While individual names contribute to the influence of David Bowie, various practices not tied up with a specific individual's name also influence and create David Bowie. Bowie, or any artist, could not exist without the artistic forms and the discussions around these forms that came before him. The name "David Bowie" is irrevocably tied up with his identity as a performer, so – what is he performing, what artistic mediums allow Bowie to exist? As mentioned previously, Bowie's work is rife with parodies of rock tendencies and theatrical flourishes. Art or creative cultural formations have a wider sway than an individual, and we can see, through his work on *Ziggy Stardust* among his other works, how the conventions of rock and roll and theater determine Bowie, how he lets them perform through his music and stage act.

Most of the narratives making up Bowie's image can, in some way, be traced to the images and narratives associated with rock. Mick Jagger and The Rolling Stones

influenced Bowie, but the whole narrative of rock influenced Bowie, as seen in his work *Ziggy Stardust*. The excess, the excitement, and the performance that inundated 1950s and 1960s rock, the narratives that would become standard in rock could be seen in David Bowie's image throughout the 1970s. The figure of David Bowie is a role determined by the genre he is partaking in. His identity is tied up in the rock narratives out of which he springs. For example, Paul Trynka treats Bowie's drug use like a rock inevitability: "David found the perfect psychological crutch, one that had contributed to the air of glamour and decadence that surrounded the Rolling Stones: cocaine" (305). Trynka does not address Bowie's addiction as that of a complicated problem inflicting an individual; he places it within the context of Bowie's rock star narrative, one closely related to The Rolling Stones. Even Bowie's personal problems become rock narratives contributing to the genre's themes. Bowie is a character constructed by rock's continuing history.

While the traditional narratives of rock help construct the persona of Bowie, the theater, as I developed in chapter 1 with Kabuki Theater, is also a major influence. David Bowie's early-1970s *Ziggy Stardust* tour is a grand display of theater, where Bowie, for the first time, creates a complete theatrical performance. While it could be argued that any music or rock concert is reminiscent of the theater, Bowie's concerts had a storyline, changing costumes, different hairstyles, and different characters. Throughout his career, starting with his debut album *David Bowie* in 1967, which displayed a readiness to accept different theatrical narrators, and ending with his final album *Blackstar* in 2016, Bowie would often use the performance aspect of theater, of creating characters, of using spectacle to create, or dismantle, meaning. Bowie uses an expanded concept of the theater, and the whole Shakespearean "All the world's a stage" aspect and its

performative nature also lent Bowie the masks that he needed to assemble his image of artificiality (Shakespeare L. 139). More than a rock star, Bowie was a character played by a character underneath an endless array of masks.

My goal is not to list all of the historical influences on Bowie; I merely wanted to list a few of the most obvious. Bowie, like everyone, everything, is a cite of an irreducible amount of historical influences, of masks. Influences as big as rock music and as small as a particularly self-reflexive episode of *The Strange World of Gurney Haley* determine Bowie by providing him a performative blueprint. The influences of the past amalgamate and produce Bowie, just like the stardust from the stars of the past assemble to create Ziggy Stardust. David Bowie is just as fictional as Ziggy Stardust.

David Jones, purportedly the creator of David Bowie and Ziggy Stardust, is also a fiction constructed out of narratives. In an interview with Michael Watts of *Melody Maker* in January of 1972, a few months before he released *Ziggy Stardust*, David Bowie made his most startling admission to date: “I’m gay and always have been, even when I was David Jones” (Watts). First, David Bowie is married with a child, so his announcement of homosexuality was a surprise, scandalous to the mores of traditional society. Whether Bowie was serious or not posed a question to the interviewer, who suggests that Bowie is merely trying to get attention: “He knows that in these times it’s permissible to act like a male tart, and that to shock and outrage, which pop has always striven to do throughout its history, is a ball-breaking process. And if he’s not an outrage, he is, at the least, an amusement” (Watts). Bowie, before he even releases the album that will make him famous, *Ziggy Stardust*, is already gaining a reputation for stretching the truth.

When Bowie says “I’m gay and always have been, even when I was David Jones,” he separates his identity into two chronological parts: the present, David Bowie, and the past, David Jones (Watts). Bowie has to modify his statement that he “always [has] been” gay, the implication being that, if he would just have said “I always have been gay,” it might be thought that he was merely referring to his present identity, and not the identity he detaches from himself, David Jones (Watts). Bowie, with this line, splits himself in two, making David Jones a footnote to his present identity. It is not that he merely went by David Jones then and now goes by David Bowie; he implies that there was a whole different identity shift taking place between the two. Bowie treats David Jones like a different lifetime, like a past, alien personality. By making Jones a different identity, Bowie appears to create David Jones as a narrative of the past, not a present reality.

In an interview with Kurt Loder of *Rolling Stone* in 1983, Bowie retracts his earlier statement, saying he was wrong. He tells Loder that ““The biggest mistake I ever made was telling the *Melody Maker* writer that I was bisexual” (Loder). He then explains: ““Christ, I was so *young* then. I was *experimenting*”” (Loder). Bowie has modified both his answer and the narrative. Bowie constantly adds new narrative layers to his persona, adding a trait and then retracting it based on his career position. In 1983, *Rolling Stone* even notices his purported genuineness, calling him “a man with-out masks” and even titling the article “David Bowie: Straight Time” (Loder). Bowie seems to be trying to unload the masks, the performances of the past, and this process includes the masks he create in 1972, at the time of *Ziggy Stardust* and his title character’s androgynous persona.

In addition to Bowie's retraction, recall that Bowie said he was gay, not bisexual. Bowie is not only changing the public's perception of him at the time, he is altering a matter of public record. Bowie, like he has done before, is attempting to change his past self in order to conform to the image he is projecting at that moment in time. David Bowie not only plays this game with the David Bowie of his present moment, he plays it with David Jones.

When David Bowie says he was gay "even when [he] was David Jones," he is using the identity of David Jones as a site of fiction, where he can create the character's reality to suit whatever he feels is needed (Loder). Whether or not his claims are true or false, Bowie is using the subjective site of David Jones as a space of competing narratives. Paradoxically, the David Jones that supposedly invented Bowie actually appears to be a site created by David Bowie. In 1972, David Jones is gay, and in 1983, David Jones is straight. To continue to assert not even that David Jones is an existing force informing the performer Bowie's decisions but that he is an actual individual becomes absurd. David Bowie, by using David Jones as a fiction, performs the illusion of subjectivity.

Bowie, most of the time, uses the figure of David Jones to contribute to the image of a developing star. For example, Bowie claimed that the author William S. Burroughs was a major influence on him as a teen, when he was still David Jones (Trynka 293). Burroughs was a very influential author out of the beatnik, counterculture movement whose fandom spanned from counterculture anti-establishment readers to Andy Warhol and Jean Michel Basquiat. During his interview with William S. Burroughs for *Rolling Stone*, however, it was clear that Bowie, until Bowie at the time was given some of

Burrough's books, had never read the author before. Bowie was twenty-seven at the time. Bowie even admits to Burroughs that he had not been a reader of his work: "I must confess that up until now I haven't been an avid reader of William's work. I really did not get past Kerouac to be honest" (Copetas). A teenager reading Burroughs is an image conducive to the precocious development that an artist like Bowie would find beneficial. Bowie wants his audience to imagine himself as a teen developing into David Bowie through the work of Burroughs and authors' whose names will associate him with a certain image. By offering the narrative that he read Burroughs as a teen, Bowie is altering the image of David Jones, the prototype of Bowie, using him to further the image of Bowie who is also a fiction.

Bowie almost sneaks another conflicting narrative past Burroughs when he says he has never read T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," a poem that will end up on a list of Bowie's 100 favorite works of literature (curated for a museum exhibition called *David Bowie is...*). Burroughs calls him out on it, saying an eight line poem of his was reminiscent of the work. Burroughs quickly moves on, but Bowie, throughout the interview, is constantly calling into question not only the sources that contributed to his image, but also to the idea of a stable personality. Bowie even suggests he is a destabilized site: "I change my mind a lot. I usually don't agree with what I say very much. I'm an awful liar" (Copetas). He also says "You can't stand still on one point for your entire life," possibly referencing his inability to stand on any point for a long amount of time, let alone one called "David Jones" (Copetas).

The goal here is not to establish a "truth" about David Jones or David Bowie. The argument here is that these names, these performers are merely sites of conflicting

interpretations that can change from one day to the next. David Jones is a site of narrative flourish, a figure who can be gay when Bowie is interviewed in 1972 but straight when Bowie is interviewed in 1983. Both David Jones and David Bowie are narratives, collections of stories produced, never stable sites of meaning.

Through the creation of Ziggy Stardust, David Bowie, and David Jones, Bowie offers a profusion of masks. Bowie shows that everything is constructed out of masks; a figure undoubtedly “real” like David Jones can be used in a similar way to Ziggy Stardust, a figure undoubtedly fake, in order to store performative narratives. Nowhere can we locate these figures and say “There is the agent, the creative force.” Subjectivity is an unstable site, a space for fiction, liable to the types of identity shifts that occur throughout all of David Bowie’s work. Of course work here also connotes the outside of what one considers work, that is artistic output. The barrier between fiction and reality tumbles, and every subject can be seen to be a site of an “empty synthesis,” of a collection of masks ultimately covering nothingness (81). When we try to find the creative force behind Ziggy Stardust, David Bowie, and David Jones, we ultimately play a futile game of tag.

Conclusion

After *Ziggy Stardust*, Bowie would release two albums, 1973's *Aladdin Sane* and 1974's *Diamond Dogs*, that would sound somewhat similar to his glam rock debut. After these efforts, however, he would begin to play with different genres. The artificial soul sounds on his 1975 album *Young Americans* to the German, avant-garde stylings of 1976's *Station to Station* and his Berlin trilogy (*Low*, *Heroes*, and *Lodger*) in the late-1970s showed Bowie's shifting interests. The profusion of characters that marked Bowie's early-1970s work would fade away and he would primarily stick to the performer/character identity of David Bowie. The postmodern glam rock that would be a major part of *Ziggy Stardust* would make way for less popular sounding music more consistent with the experimental scene taking place at the time. The release of D.A. Pennebaker's 1979 concert film *Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* was the last trace of Ziggy Stardust before he would fade away into the 1980s.

Bowie and his ever-changing aesthetic could not allow Ziggy to live long. *Ziggy Stardust* was, indeed, an album of the moment in that it reflected on commentary surrounding the death of rock that took place in the late-1960s and early-1970s. Once Bowie had made his definitive mark on this conversation, he would look to other conversations, trying out different styles all the way until his death in early 2016. One of the reasons *Ziggy Stardust* lives on is its incisive commentary on the dialogues surrounding American rock and the historical structures that defined it.

While other glam rockers like Marc Bolan used characters as temporary masks in order to serve a primarily aesthetic purpose, Bowie used the character of Ziggy Stardust, and the album *Ziggy Stardust*, to critique very specific tendencies within the chronicling

of the history of rock. I apply Michel Foucault's work, specifically his "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," to locate and analyze the historical trends Bowie is critiquing. By using performative history, that is, a history that is chronicled through untruth and is a postmodern form of parody, Bowie critiques three tendencies of traditional history as outlined by Foucault: 1) the tendency of history to attribute to its subject (rock, for example) an essence, 2) the tendency of history to track the essence of the movement along a pre-given, purportedly inevitable historical arc (the rise and fall), and 3) the tendency of history to assume that there is a stable authorial agent behind works of history. Bowie uses the example of rock, performing the genre in order to critique these three tendencies. First, Bowie uses glam rock's postmodern form of parody to critique the idea that rock has a stable essence. Second, Bowie performs and exaggerates the rise and fall of rock to critique the idea that rock's development was inevitable. Third, Bowie constantly calls into question the reality of the creative agent behind his identities – Ziggy Stardust, David Bowie, David Jones – in order to critique the idea that there is a stable subject with agency behind historical works. Bowie aims to show how the history of rock relies on premises that are fiction. Rock, the history of rock, and the authors of rock history are all fictions, without any essence to be found.

Bowie's performative history is radical in its specifically postmodern form of parody. Bowie provides a means to perform while simultaneously dismantling the subject being performed. The paradox of creating and destroying performance comes from the extent of Bowie's parody. On *Ziggy Stardust*, whatever Bowie performs, whatever cultural construction he takes up is liable to be dismantled through parody. Bowie uses performance and parody to present established norms and then upend them, leaving no

assertion of essence left unchallenged. Bowie's rock history is also the destabilization of rock history.

Bowie's parodic analysis of rock's history can be applied to future works of history. While Bowie is critiquing the forms of history that predate his album, he is also critiquing works of rock history in the future that conform to traditional history's tendencies. Bowie, with *Ziggy Stardust*, is critiquing works like Adam Woog's *The History of Rock* and Robert Somma's *No One Waved Good-Bye: A Casualty Report on Rock and Roll* as well as any future works about rock or the genres associated with it that succumb to the same tendencies. Therefore, Bowie, as much as he is critiquing an author like Woog, is also critiquing an author like Simon Reynolds, who, with his book *Shock and Awe*, identifies glam rock as a stable genre and tracks it throughout its history. Bowie's form of chronicling history disavows forms consistent with Reynolds; Reynolds does not deploy the means of performance that Bowie does when chronicling history; he does not have the postmodern reflexivity to be able to critique history's normative tendencies. With *Ziggy Stardust*, Bowie sets forth a critique that can have lasting effects on the discipline of rock history.

Bowie's critique of the traditional forms of history applied to rock has broader implications. While Bowie focuses on the instability of rock and glam rock as genres, his method of critiquing traditional history can be applied to other genres of music as well. I apply Foucault's general critique of history to Bowie's work to show how *Ziggy Stardust* is an example of an artist picking a form of history, rock, and applying the same critique that Foucault argues for in his essay. Theoretically, Bowie's critique of rock's history can be applied to every genre because these genres have all been communicated through the

forms of traditional history. Jazz, punk, rap, electronic music can all be subjects of a similar type of performative, parodic history in the sense that their history is mediated by fictional historical narratives that purport to be objective. Foucault and Bowie's critique is leveled at history's tendency to essentialize identities. History declares rock has a stable identity that can be tracked, and it declares that an author has a stable identity. By criticizing history's tendency to essentialize, Bowie and Foucault critique essentializing in general. To both Foucault and Bowie, any declaration of truth is liable to be subject to their form of destabilization. *Ziggy Stardust* is an album made up of untruth in order to combat history's declarations of truth. Bowie performs a construct purported to be an essence (American rock music), and, by proclaiming its unreality, Bowie proclaims the unreality of all forms of essentializing.

Bowie's play with identity itself is the most startling example of his reflexivity. I wanted to begin the thesis with Bowie's critique of rock's essence and end by examining how Bowie calls into question his own identity, the foundation of all his work. Bowie's most powerful critique, then, is not his disavowal of rock as a unity, but his disavowal of himself as a unity. Bowie starts by making an album about the unreality of rock and ends by demonstrating the unreality of David Bowie. Just like there is no "real" rock, there is no "real" David Bowie. Bowie's magic trick is in removing the masks that construct meaning in order to show the lack of truth underneath. David Bowie is not gone; he was never here.

Bowie's parody of subjectivity can be applied to his audience as well. By demonstrating that he is a site of unstable meaning, Bowie provides his listeners the means to question their own identity. Bowie performs his various identities, showing that

the identities thought to be the most stable, David Jones especially, are merely locations where variable narratives can be applied. Teenage David Jones can be one person in the 1970s and another in the 1980s. Likewise, the listeners can apply this view of identity to themselves, asking the questions: am I merely a collection of stories that I tell myself? Is my perceived essence, selfhood real, or merely a performance?

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VITA

Author: William R. McPhee

Place of Birth: Spokane, Washington

Undergraduate Schools Attended: Pacific Lutheran University
Eastern Washington University

Degrees Awarded: Bachelor of English Studies, 2019, Eastern Washington University

Honors and Awards: Graduated Magna Cum Laude, Eastern Washington University