Party On, Derrida!: A Queer, Deconstructionist Look at Wayne's World, Glam, and the Losers of Rock and Roll

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PARTY ON, DERRIDA!: A QUEER, DECONSTRUCTIONIST LOOK AT WAYNE'S
WORLD, GLAM, AND THE LOSERS OF ROCK AND ROLL

by

Michelle Ann Arp

A master’s thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial
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by

Michelle Ann Arp

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

Party on, Derrida!: A Queer, Deconstructionist Look at Wayne’s World, Glam, and the Losers of Rock and Roll

by

Michelle Ann Arp

Advisor: Mark McBeth

What do you get when you mix a girl from Long Island, critical theory, a movie based on a Saturday Night Live sketch, David Bowie, and alternative rock of the early 2000s? A lot of losers, a lot of queerness, and plenty of room for deconstruction.

Part performance studies, part queer studies, and part memoir, this study is a cross-genre and experimental analysis of postmodern ideologies, rock and roll, and comedy. More specifically, I use Jacques Derrida’s notion of “the slash” (Of Grammatology, 1967) in relation to high and low culture via comedies, such that of Wayne’s World, and music such that of David Bowie.

I locate these pop cultural outlets “on the slash” in two specific ways; I analyze Wayne’s World, drawing inspiration from Judith Halberstam’s analysis of Dude, Where’s My Car? in her book The Queer Art of Failure (2011) as living on the “high culture/low culture slash,” and I analyze rock music in much of the same way, but instead of locating its place on the high/low slash, I locate it on the feminine/masculine slash instead. In both of these inquiries, I put the queer elements center-stage in order to deconstruct seemingly male/masculine/dude/bro pop cultural forms.

The overall purpose of this thesis is to create bridges and explore them. That is, the bridge between high and low theory, written in a form that then bridges between
academic and autobiographical writing. For myself, I never understood ‘high’
culture/theory until I began the MALS program (and even then I was still a ‘low’
culture/theory advocate), nor did I think academic writing would be useful for creative
writing. However, by exploring and thinking, I have come to realize that the binary
perspectives about high/low theory represent false dichotomies, and that bridges exist
between these not-so-opposite poles: the high and the low, the academic and the
autobiographical, and the academic and the creative.

In the words of Wayne Campbell and Garth Algar of Aurora, Illinois: "excellent!"

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I would also like to thank Professor Donald Mengay and Professor Elizabeth Wollman, of CUNY Baruch College, who sparked my intellectual curiosity when I was an undergrad.

This thesis is dedicated to:
Bradley, my best friend, my parents, Lisa and Douglas, for their support throughout my graduate school career, and my grandfather Angelo, who walks with me down the streets of Manhattan, and watches over me wherever I go.

In the words of the Grateful Dead:
“Sometimes the light’s all shining on me,
other times I can barely see.
Lately it occurs to me:
what a long, strange trip it’s been.”

Party on.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Part I: A Girl From Long Island, a French Philosopher, and Wayne Campbell Walk into a Bar

Part II: Wayne’s (Queer) World

Part III: Glitter Rock, Glam Rock, and Guys That Look Like Girls

Part IV: The Losers of Rock and Roll

Part V: And They All Lived Happily Ever After…NOT!

Works Cited
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: “(Post)Modernism in 2014.” Photo: Michelle Arp, © 2018.........................12

Figure 2: “Wayne’s/World.” Photo: Michelle Arp, © 2018.................................19

Figure 3: “Wayne Speaking Cantonese, With Subtitles.”
   Photo: Michelle Arp, © 2018.................................................................21

Figure 4: “Fancy Drinks and Bad Deals.” Photo: Michelle Arp, © 2018................27

Figure 5: “Eat Me.” Photo: Michelle Arp, © 2018........................................29

Figure 6: “A Lad, Insane.” Photo: Michelle Arp, © 2018.................................47
Part I: A Girl From Long Island, a French Philosopher, and Wayne Campbell

Walk Into a Bar…

...theory in postmodern times entails skepticism toward systems, institutions, and norms; readiness to take critical stands and to engage in resistance; interest in blind spots, contradictions, and distortions; and a habit of linking local and personal practices to the larger economic, political, historical, and ethical forces of culture.
–Vincent B. Leitch, “Disorganization and Death of Theory American Style”

Low theory is a model of thinking that I extract from Stuart Hall’s famous notion that theory is not an end unto itself but ‘a detour en route to something else.’
–Judith Halberstam, The Queer Art of Failure

Way!...No Way! – Wayne & Garth, Wayne’s World

We sit down at the Joe's Bar at 6th Street and Avenue A. Derrida stares at the dark red tin ceiling. Wayne and I order a pitcher of Bud, and Derrida orders black coffee (to which Wayne and I look at each other and say “This guy’s gone mental! Coffee in a bar?!”) and then in 2018 in New York, he lights up a cigarette. Wayne makes nothing of it, but I point to the “No Smoking” sign behind the bartender. Derrida takes a long, nearly historical drag on his Gauloise.

“So Jacques,” Wayne begins, “tell me about this amazing, excellent, totally awesome idea you have.”

“Ah oui,” Derrida begins, “je pense…”

“Get a load of this guy!” Wayne whispers to me, and gestures to Derrida.

“Derrida! English s’il vous plaît!” I say, thankful for my four years of high school French.
In broken English, Derrida begins, “‘For me there has never been an intermediacy between everything and nothing.’”¹

“The intermediacy is the mid-point and the mediation, the middle term between the total absence and the absolute plentitude of presence,”² I add, talking a sip of Bud.

“Ah, OK. Let me see if I understand,” Wayne begins, “so this is the slash: the intermediary point, the middle point, the thing in-between one side and the other.”

“Exactly,” Derrida and I say as we clink our glasses together and finish off our drinks.

* 

“Man, I gotta tell Garth about this, he’ll go absolutely mad. He loves postmodernist French philosophy,” Wayne says on our walk back to the subway.

“Really? Garth doesn’t seem too, uh, intellectual,” I respond, looking away.

“Garth is a real nut about all things philosophical.”

* 

While completely ridiculous, I meet with various ‘characters’ throughout this piece. Wayne acts as my Virgil, guiding me throughout my journey on the slash, Garth appears at random, and Derrida is always lurking somewhere in the shadows. This serves to underscore the importance of Wayne and Garth (and others), and also for them to be able to be in dialog with each other. How else would Wayne and Garth be able to speak to Jacques Derrida? By placing them in the same universe, I am not privileging one over the other. As J. Jack Halberstam writes in Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and

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the End of Normal (2012): “If postmodern theory has taught us anything, it should have impressed upon us the idea that time is not linear and therefore that generational differences are more loopy and complex than we imagine when we plot them out along the straight lines of chronological age” (xxii). Or, as a gang of Transylvanian freaks say in The Rocky Horror Picture Show (1975): “let’s do the time warp, again!”

Party on, Derrida

I have come to think of Derrida’s slash as such: there are two sides to everything in a straight, binaristic relationship. There are men and there are women, there is black and there is white, there is comedy and there is drama. What about the middle ground? What about transgender people, or gender fluid people? What about grey? What about dark comedies, or funny moments in “serious” films? With anything, there is a middle ground, an intermediary plane, a slash.

“Yeah, and monkey’s might fly out of my butt!” Wayne laughs.

According to many theorists, academics, and scholarly thinkers, the slash can be imagined as various concrete formulations—

“Although both noun and verb, to slash is the predicate with which the scapegoat enters culture and unleashes a devastating mechanism upon humanity,” Cynthia Haynes, professor of rhetoric at Clemson University interrupts Wayne and I, as we are walking through Union Square.

“OK, we’ll get to that,” I start as I’m interrupted, again, now by Ian Stronach of Manchester University.

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“If we don’t draw the line, we won’t need to defend it.”

“Guys, I’ll get to everyone!”

“The opening of the question, the departure from the closure of a self-evidence, the putting into doubt of a system of oppositions, all these movements necessarily have the form of empiricism and of errancy…”

“Derrida! My man! How’ve you been?” Wayne says to Derrida, who has just joined our group walking uptown, towards Madison Square Park.

“GUYS! Let me handle this!” I yell. The party stops and gets quiet.

*

First, we will look at the slash as separation, the easiest to visualize. Cynthia Haynes, in her article entitled “Rhetoric/Slash/Composition” writes about – you guessed it! – the slash between the subfield of rhetoric/composition. It is a brief article in which she examines Derrida’s slash in terms of a separation of two entities. The slash as separation is simple: it is an either/or formulation. It is either a man or a woman. It is either this or that. The slash lies only on the surface because it does not find any connections or bridges between one side and the other. In this case, the elements on either side are separate, and they will remain separate.

“Yeah OK, that makes sense. You wanna go to Stan Mikita’s Donuts?” Wayne asks.

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“Wayne, there are more ways to look at the slash. Derrida gave us the definition, but we have to see things from all angles.” I reply. “But we could talk theory and eat donuts, I guess,” I add.

“Guys, are you in?” I ask Haynes, Stronach, and Derrida.

Next, the slash is a border or boundary. Haynes writes, “It [the slash] is a border not unlike that between and/or, which Derrida describes as ‘The mobile slash between and/or, and/and, or/and, or/or…a singular border, simultaneously conjunctive, disjunctive, and undecidable’ (Aporias, 23).” She describes the slash as “conjunctive,” in coordination with either side, “disjunctive,” lacking any sort of connection between either side, and “undecidable,” unable to pick a side. So which is it? Does the slash connect, disconnect, or neither? Or both? If we look at the slash as a type of border, it does all three at the same time: it connects both sides, but also shows its difference in a murky ambiguous way. In other words, borders — slashes — connect, and show difference, but remain relatively similar on either side; the length of a border or slash is not enough to show measurable, distinctive differences.

Also, the slash can be seen as a scar. Ian Stronach’s essay “Fashioning Post-Modernism, Finishing Modernism: Tales from the Fitting Room” is about possible modes of separating and joining together modernism and postmodernism, one of them being the use of the slash. Stronach writes towards the end of the essay: “…when ‘modernism/postmodernism’ is considered there is still the need to characterize more specifically the meaning of that obscure slash or scar that (it is now argued) both separates and joins them” (368). Stronach here turns this border-like marker from an innocent slash, or a more violent scar. If we look at the slash as a scar, a violent symbol
of difference, we are able to imagine the smooth, untainted skin (one side of the slash) and the bloody, gory flesh (the other side of the slash), with the scar, altered from the smooth original, but not bloody anymore, healing, in the middle. In this case, the slash combines either side with elements of both still visible. It both explicitly separates and diplomatically heals the discourse.

A definition of “slash” that I am offering is that of a “cut.” The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines slash (in one of many definitions of the word) as “cut with a wide, sweeping movement, typically using a knife or a sword.” Related to the slash as a scar, the slash as a cut infers a violent act. If we are to look at the slash as a cut, we are looking at something similar, yet different, from the slash as a scar. While the slash as a scar offers a healing quality, the slash as a cut contains itself in the violent act of separation. A cut implies that there was something whole and then an outside force has come in to distort it; both sides of the “slash” were once the same, but the violence of separation has placed them on either side of the binaristic relationship.

* I have fallen in love with quite a few men in my twenties. I first met Derrida in college. He appeared dark, mysterious, and inherently French. I fell in love with him harder than I fell in love with Maurice, a Puerto Rican Jew from the Lower East Side a year before. Maurice only held my hand for a short time as we strolled Alphabet City. I walked around with *Of Grammatology* in my hands for weeks; it has remained in my head for years; it made me feel like an artist. I felt more like Robert Mapplethorpe than I ever had before. Even though, I don’t know if Robert Mapplethorpe ever read Derrida.

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Derrida’s slash gave me a sense of hope during an especially turbulent time in my life. I realized I didn’t have to be on one side of things, but I could be on both, or none, and sit comfortably on that intermediary point. I didn’t have to fit-in on either side of the East River. The idea of the slash, of that in-between area of any dichotomy, just proves that binaristic relationships are problematic, even worse unproductive, and that there is something (a presence rather than an absence, to use Derrida’s words) represented by the slash.

“Beautiful.” Wayne grabs another jelly donut off of the plate on our table. I take a sip of my coffee.

“Now we need to talk about low theory and queer theory and how this relates.”

“Me? A queer? C’yeah! As if!”

**Low Theory and Why it Matters**

In *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), Judith Halberstam justifies her interests in “low” theory and culture, and then uses that attention to the “low” to make “high church” analyses. In her introductory rationale of her investigation into failure and high/low culture, she explains:

This book uses ‘low theory’...and popular knowledge to explore alternatives and to look for a way out of the usual traps and impasses if binary formulations. Low theory tries to locate all the in-between spaces that save us from being snared by the hooks of hegemony and speared by the seductions of the gift shop. But it also makes its peace with the possibility that alternatives dwell in the murky waters of a counterintuitive, often impossibly dark and negative realm of critique and refusal (2).

Halberstam points out the fact that “low theory tries to locate all the in-between spaces.” Does this mean that low theory tries to (re)locate the slash? Or, that we are better able to understand an “intermediary” point via low theory? These alternatives not only represent
different paths to getting to the same point, but they are able to generate more, new, information as we take the less-travelled paths.

In college, I had a professor who assigned us a final paper which had to use a book, any book of our choice, and the philosophical theories we learned over the semester. He said, forebodingly, “do not choose Moby Dick; everyone in the entire world has written a paper about Moby Dick. You will learn nothing new.” There were five of us in the class—unusual for a large, public, urban university. I had just turned 20, and was completely scared to sit in a small class with four seniors. I wrote my paper about John Steinbeck’s Of Mice and Men, specifically how it is a proto-postmodern novel. I studied the concepts over and over. Especially Derrida’s slash.

* 

Throughout The Queer Art of Failure, Halberstam employs low theory, using pop cultural artifacts to engage with critical theory as well as to make theory and its implications more accessible to a broader audience. For example, she uses Pixar’s 2003 Finding Nemo as a device to explain the connections between forgetfulness, queerness, and posthumanism. Halberstam's entertaining yet incisive line of critical engagement lies on the slash because it combines concepts on both sides of the high/low dichotomy in order to make a singular, complete ontological statement. By combining the high and the low, she bridges them together, perhaps not only sitting there comfortably on that bridge but inviting others to do so as well. Like Derrida’s slash, this concept has opened doors for me. By being able to bring together high and low ideas, I feel I am able to join two inherently different sides of my life together; I can combine the “high” theories I’ve learned by going to college in Manhattan, and the “low” ideas I’ve picked up from living
in the suburbs all my life. By consciously combining these two sides, I am able to feel more whole.

How does anybody know the difference between high and low? Who decides these things? For me, I know something is “high” if my family doesn’t know it, and something is “low” if my academic friends look puzzled (example: I was once asked if *Dude, Where’s My Car?* is an avant garde film, to which I couldn’t help but laugh). Still, why does this matter? Theory, ideas, artifacts, etc. matter, whether they are high or low, because they make up the cultural fabric of our lives. I wrote once:

> For aren’t the words of Johnny Cash more beautiful 
> than the words of Derrida, Butler and Habermas?
> What about Social Distortion covering “Ring of Fire?”
> Does that not bring back more memories
> than any sort of critical theory ever could?

I am all about low culture. It is the air I breathe. I rely on emotions rather than logic. I find simple music more beautiful than complicated orchestras. I know I like something if it evokes a primal reaction inside of my soul. Only now can I equate the words of Derrida to those of Johnny Cash, for they both move me, understand me, and reside in my innermost self.

**But, I’m Not Queer!**

I define ‘queer’ as such: not straight. Yes, that could be in reference to sexual orientation or preference as defined by heteronormative distinctions or the counter-discourses that resist them, but it also expands much further than that. Brian M. Peters, in “Emo Gay Boys and Subculture: Postpunk Queer Youth and (Re)thinking Images of
Masculinity,” writes: “How does the emo boy [in alternative rock music] thus find his place within the gay world? Furthermore, does he really need to? Possibly he doesn't, and he rejects the gay world by creating an association to a far less particularized queer world” (138). The un-particularized queer world that Peters writes about is more fluid and less pinned down; it is more ambiguous and less exact. Queerness, as loosely defined by Peters, resides on the slash in that it is doesn’t sit comfortably on either side of the gay/straight binary. I’ll have to change my definition: I define queer as not straight, and not gay, but rather somewhere in the middle, sharing characteristics of both.

The slash is a queer philosophical term; as aforementioned, the slash is the middle point between two straight, binaristic elements. If the slash is not one of the “straight” binaristic elements (‘straight’ referring to concrete and easily identifiable entities), then wouldn’t it be a “queer” intermediary item? resting in the middle of the two “straight” sides, not belonging to either exclusively? Queer, as used here, refers to something twisted, distorted, or slightly bent from an originary, heteronormative, mainstream resource.

Halberstam writes in The Queer Art of Failure that, “queer culture enacts rupture as substitution as the queer child steps out of the assembly line of heterosexual production and turns toward a new project” (73). From Halberstam’s loose definition here, we are able to understand “queerness” as something skewing from “heterosexual production,” as the queer child (or adult, or idea, or theory) steps away from the normative assembly line, and delves into something new, uncharted.

Similarly, Jose Esteban Munoz in his “Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts” (1996) writes that “instead of being clearly available as visible evidence,
queerness has instead existed as innuendo, gossip, fleeting moments, and performances that are meant to be interacted with by those within its epistemological sphere” (6). Munoz explains queerness as short spans of time, fleeting moments, things, perhaps, you’ll only understand if you’re in-the-know. In his *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009), he also writes “…the work of queer critique is often to read outside official documentation” (148). This fleeting, outlier, peripherally “queer” body is an act of othering, similar to the act of distinguishing “high” theory and culture from “low” theory and culture.

**But, I’m Not Deconstructed!**

Deconstruction, an idea that comes from Derri –

“Derrida again?!”

“Wayne, he’s a really important guy, and has shaped my life as much as you and Garth have,” I reply.

“Yeah, but that guy sucks! Who drinks coffee in a bar?”

Deconstruction, an idea that comes from Derrida, implies a reduction to essential elements. You keep tearing back the layers in order to find the bare essentials that cannot be torn (think on an atomic scale), only to realize that there more and more layers to open up (even and atom can be reduced to smaller particles). If we are reducing things infinitely, we are no longer left with one solid idea/object/theory, but rather many constituent parts of a whole. By reducing, you are looking at each mechanism in an entire system, and then breaking down each individual mechanism in order to look at the parts

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that make up the whole. Which is a part of the whole, which in turn is a part of the whole. And so on.

The act and idea of deconstruction(ism) is both on the slash and queer. It is on the slash because you are reducing these elements and making connections between them, therefore mapping out bridges between different parts; the very act of making bridges and connections between two supposedly binaristic entities shows that there is some sort of commonality between them. Deconstruction is also queer because you are taking these elements and removing them from their original contexts, and perhaps looking at them through different views.

Figure 1: “(Post)Modernism in 2014.” Photo: Michelle Arp, © 2018.

But, I’m Not a Loser!

A sad, but true story, from an essay I wrote about the Doors front man Jim Morrison, for my college applications in 2011:

While everyone was buying the latest Lady Gaga CD, watching Jersey Shore [sic] or straightening their hair, I was sitting at home with my turntable on full blast listening to “LA Woman” and reading the latest Rolling Stone. I would imagine myself in a different world, somewhere long ago and far away. Somewhere where no one cared what you wore or what music you listened to. But then I’d log onto Facebook and reality would come crashing down. Pictures of basements parties, status updates of Kesha lyrics, wall posts about “best friends forever” – all of which I seemed to be nothing apart of. I realized that I was the Jim Morrison amongst an army of Barbie dolls…
I’ve always aligned with losers. Perhaps it’s from growing up as an only child who preferred reading and listening to music to playing outside and being social, but I’ve always felt on the outskirts of things, somewhere off to the side. I feel, and have always felt, like my husky, Bradley. He’s able to be a perfectly normal, functioning, social dog when we visit Gardiner Manor Park in Bay Shore, but he can’t wait – leash pulling, running towards my car, tongue sticking out – when we are about to go home. Bradley will sniff the other dogs in the park, maybe kiss one or two, but he is always disinterested, moving along to his own pace, getting lost in the sand and surf at the end of the trail by himself. And he’s perfectly happy.

True losers are on the slash: they belong nowhere on either side of the schoolyard. Of course they are not the cool, popular cheerleaders or football players, but they’re also not the lame *Dungeons & Dragons* nerds who at least *have friends* (or the nonchalantly cool hipsters with nerdy interests of the Village). They lie somewhere in the middle of what’s cool and what’s not.

Halberstam writes in *The Queer Art of Failure*: “these alternative cultural and academic realms, the areas beside academia rather than within it, the intellectual worlds conjured by losers, failures, dropouts, and refuseniks, often serve as the launching pad for alternatives precisely when the university cannot” (7). So, losers, failures, dropouts, refuseniks: join me – us – on a journey of alternative modes, where we will explore the ghost towns of academic thinking.
Part II: Wayne’s (Queer) World

Did you ever find Bugs Bunny attractive when he put on a dress and played a girl bunny?
—Garth to Wayne, Wayne’s World

“Wayne,” I begin, “I’m not sure you’re going to like this analysis.”

“And why’s that? I like all your work. I’m a huge fan.”

“I’m pretty harsh and make some grand assumptions about your life.”

“I think I can handle it.” He turns to Garth, who is also seated at my mother’s dining room table and says, “Garth, you’ll be ok?”

“Yeah. I’ll be fine. Just don’t mention Jacques again.”

“But this is just as much about Derrida as it is about you two.”

“Well, can you at least make me not live in my parents house? It’s so lame, man!”

“No.”

Live From New York: The Birth of Wayne and Garth

“Ok guys, this is where it starts to get weird.”

“Garth,” Wayne begins, “don’t have an existential crisis on me again. Remember what happened the last time…”

“Wait, you guys have been written about like this before?”

“Uh no. Garth is afraid of heights and we went on a Ferris wheel at the carnival—”

“Man I saw all of Aurora,” Garth says, “and I realized I was this little, tiny, itty bitty speck of dust in this massive interplanetary universe. It made me feel a little funny.”

* 

Wayne’s World began as a sketch on Saturday Night Live, airing for the first time on 18 February 1989. Mike Myers, Wayne, describes the first Wayne’s World sketch:
“…as it happens, the first thing I did that went over big with the studio audience was on my fourth show, when I did do ‘Wayne’s World.’ It was what they call the ten-to-one spot, the last sketch of the night. And it went really great” (Shales, 349). In a nutshell, Wayne’s World, the original SNL sketch and the major blockbuster film, is about two ambiguously-aged head banging heavy metal dudes who produce a low-budget cable access show from Wayne’s mother’s basement in Aurora, Illinois, which is a suburb of Chicago. Their catchphrases, personalities, and ever-present bromance are what really bring these characters from uninteresting losers to unforgettable cultural figures, which add to the complexity of them; they can be deconstructed as they are ‘dynamic,’ as opposed to ‘flat,’ characters.

I first encountered Wayne and Garth when I was a sixth grade student at East Islip Middle School. East Islip is a small town on Long Island’s south shore, the last exit on the Southern State Parkway, and home to the horrifically named East Islip Redmen. It’s a suburb isolated from all signs of diversity; it is bordered by Sunrise Highway to the north, Route 111 to the west, Hecksher State Park to the east, and the Great South Bay to the south. I first heard of Wayne’s World when a friend told me her brother was all about it – a wannabe stoner/skateboarder/musician whom I had a massive crush on. We watched the film 14 years after the world did, but to us, it was new, fresh, and utterly hilarious.

For years afterward, I would find myself quoting the movie without realizing it, attempting a Garth Halloween costume when my hair was long and I was shopping in the men’s section of stores, and dreaming of what my cable access show would be about, if I were to have one. To me, Wayne’s World will always be one of the movies in my personal cache of adolescence, right alongside Employee of the Month (2006), Juno
(2007), and *Superbad* (2007): movies made during my *actual* adolescence. Something about this movie struck, and continues to strike, a chord in my mind. No matter how many times I’ve watched it (about 50 by now), and no matter where I’ve watched it (various friends’ and boyfriends’ houses, my basement, and on a road trip to Florida with my grandparents), it just never gets old. As I’ve learned about Foucault’s ideas on power relations, de Beauvior’s feminist theories on ‘the other,’ and Ricoeur’s thoughts on interpretations (albeit in a biblical sense) in graduate school, I have now been able to view *Wayne’s World* through a new, more sophisticated lens. I am able to identify the power-driven relationship between Wayne and Garth; I can see how Cassandra is ‘the other;’ I can and find the ‘true’ nature of Wayne and Garth by interpreting this ‘text’ beyond the surface. Plus, my sense of humor hasn’t changed since I’m 12.

“Guys, do you want to tell your stories? Or should I?”

“Like, how Mike and Dana created us?” Garth asks. “We can manage.”

“’[Mike Myers] came up with Wayne Campbell growing up in Scarborough, Ontario, Canada. [He] used to do the character at parties when [he] was 11, 12, through [his] formative years,’”9 Wayne explains.

“Ah, yes Wayne. And ‘Mike…asked [Dana Carvey] to be his sidekick Garth. And [Dana] had been toying around with the character based on [his] brother Brad, which [he had] done a few times on *Saturday Night Live* in different incarnations’”10 Garth adds.

“My life and Mike’s are so closely intertwined. I remember him saying that our world, you know, in Aurora, is ‘the suburban, adolescent, North American, heavy metal

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experience as [he] knew it in the mid 70s growing up in Scarborough, Ontario, which is a suburb of Toronto, Canada.’ Much like Aurora is a suburb of Chicago, filled with heavy metal head bangers. Just go to Gasworks on any Friday or Saturday, and you’ll see.”

“Guys, what’s Gasworks again?” I ask.

“The best heavy metal bar in Aurora,” Wayne says.

“And they got a pool table too!” Garth adds.

*

During the height of the success of the sketch, Lorne Michaels, SNL producer and creator, turned everyone’s favorite heavy metal duo into a film (which is the basis of the following analyses). Tom Shales and James Andrew Miller, in their comprehensive history of the sketch comedy show, *Live From New York: An Uncensored History of Saturday Night Live* (2002), write about the 1992 film:

[Lorne] Michaels always looked for SNL characters to be spun off into movies that he would produce and that would be box-office blockbusters. He’d seen how the Blues Brothers movie struck it rich and longed to make a movie that hit as big. The right character never seemed to come along – but that would finally change with *Wayne’s World*, costarring Mike Myers as Wayne and Dana Carvey as his friend Garth, two cute goofs who ran a no-budget cable-access show in Aurora, Illinois. A gigantic successful movie (followed by a gigantic anticlimactic sequel), it would be the only film from an SNL sketch to gross over $100 million (376).

The success of *Wayne’s World* introduced Wayne and Garth into more people’s lives, and streamlined itself from late-night TV to a majorly iconic cultural entity.

On 15 February 2015, Lorne Michaels and the *SNL* crew produced a 40th anniversary special for the show, demarking their four decades in sketch comedy.

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were many comedians of *SNL* past: from Steve Martin to Jimmy Fallon, Dan Aykroyd to Will Ferrell, and Kristin Wiig to Bill Murray. There was a *Wayne’s World* revival during the show. Wayne and Garth began the sketch seated on Wayne’s mother’s couch as usual, and sang the *Wayne’s World* opening song “Wayne’s World! Wayne’s World! Party time! Excellent!”

“It’s Friday, it’s 10:30, it’s time to party,” Wayne, Mike Myers, began.

He continued: “Because it is *SNL 40*, tonight’s Top 10 List is the top 10 things about *SNL*. Alright.”

This is a version of a popular *Wayne’s World* (the sketch) gag: Wayne and Garth would often do a “top 10 countdown,” filled with puns, jokes, and “way! No way!” The *SNL 40* sketch played out with numerous Kanye West jokes, Myers and Carvey impersonating Lorne Michaels, and a genuine “thank you” to the crew. However, the most memorable one the list was “number nine: satire.”

*Mike Myers: You know, SNL has always utilized Saturnalian and Juvenalian satire. Armed only with wit, the mot just, and an ear for the zeitgeist. Right, Garth?*

*Dana Carvey: Yeah, and monkey’s might fly out of my butt!*

*Mike Myers: Haha, excellent. ‘Cause it’s the high and then the low! Dana Carvey: They never saw it coming!*

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I was watching this sketch on YouTube one snowy day in December when it hit me: *Wayne’s World*, the movie that has stuck with me through years of growing up and coming into my adult life brilliantly illustrates the high/low cultural slash that has motivated my work in graduate school. It is parodic in its portrayal of the loser guy, which Halberstam writes about in *Gaga Feminism* as well as the *Queer Art of Failure*. And it’s extremely funny. In my pajamas, I frantically wrote: Wayne’s World to rep. the slash between the high/low cultural dichotomy. Using both application + theory of Halberstam. Is the slash between h/l cult. Dichotomy found in comedy like SNL?

![Image of a handwritten note with the words: Wayne's World, the movie that has stuck with me through years of growing up and coming into my adult life brilliantly illustrates the high/low cultural slash that has motivated my work in graduate school. It is parodic in its portrayal of the loser guy, which Halberstam writes about in *Gaga Feminism* as well as the *Queer Art of Failure*. And it’s extremely funny. In my pajamas, I frantically wrote: Wayne’s World to rep. the slash between the high/low cultural dichotomy. Using both application + theory of Halberstam. Is the slash between h/l cult. Dichotomy found in comedy like SNL?](image)

*Figure 2: “Wayne’s/World.” Photo: Michelle Arp, © 2018.*

“*It’s pronounced Mili-wah-kay*”* and Other On-the-Slash Moments*

By now, I hope you know what the slash means.

“Ch’yeah! It’s the intermediary point,” Wayne says.

“The thing in-between two sides of a dichotomy,” Garth continues.

“The grey area!”

“The middle!”

“It’s like a slash mark! Wait a second…” Wayne trails off.

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Wayne’s World (1992) is filled with moments like that of the SNL 40 sketch. You see the guys, typical-looking heavy metal dudes, and they say typical things: butt jokes, oogling remarks over movie stars, “way! No way!” But then they articulate something brilliant and well thought out. We think: how does Wayne know words like “saturnalian,” and not just that, but how does he know them well enough to locate them in a relevant joke?

One of my favorite scenes is when Wayne and Garth meet Alice Cooper backstage after his concert in Milwaukee. Wayne and Garth enter the backstage dressing room, unsure of what to ask Alice, and Wayne says “do you come to Milwaukee often?” To which Alice replies, “I’m a regular visitor here, but Milwaukee has had its fair share of visitors…” Alice Cooper, clad in black leather, chains, and heavy makeup gives our characters, two loveable morons from Aurora—

“Hey! That’s not cool, man!” Garth says to me.

“Let me finish, guys!” I hiss back.

-- a history lesson about the Native American influence on Milwaukee. He even tells us the Algonquin etymology of the word “Milwaukee.” An unlikely scenario, but highly believable and well fit-in. This scene represents the “low” mixing with the “high.” We have Wayne and Garth, excited to meet Alice Cooper in his backstage dressing room, and Wayne asks a seemingly ordinary question. Alice’s response, this well thought-out, highly intellectual statement on Milwaukee’s “fair share of visitors” is surprising. We’d expect a simple “yes,” “no,” or “go away,” but instead Alice Cooper is trying to engage Wayne and Garth in a smart conversation. They don’t know how to respond. Garth looks at Wayne. Wayne says, “does this guy know how to party or what?” to which Alice stares blankly.
Another occurrence of this sort of intelligent remark paired against an idiotic backdrop is when Wayne speaks to Cassandra, the female love interest of the film, in perfect Cantonese. Not only has Wayne mastered a complex language, but quotes philosophers in complicated sentences in the language. Figure 4 depicts one of the things Wayne says to Cassandra, in perfect Cantonese. Wayne, only learning Cantonese over a short period of time, is now fluent in it. This moment, like the one with Alice Cooper, exists on the high/low slash because we do not expect it from Wayne. When Wayne begins to speak Cantonese, it’s funny. But when he starts saying these complicated sentences, evoking philosophers, actors, and using words like “self-nullifying,” we wonder how he’s been able to learn all of this, despite beginning the conversation with “slowly, I’m still learning.”

Figure 3: “Wayne Speaking Cantonese, With Subtitles.”
Photo: Michelle Arp, © 2018.

In the film, Wayne and Garth’s small business, their public access cable show produced in their suburban basement, battles against a large corporate TV company, run by Rob Lowe’s character, Benjamin. The premise of the film constantly oscillates between “low” concepts (the butt jokes, the sex jokes, the funny noises, the ironic “not!” at the end of sentences), and “high” remarks, indicated by the serious topic of corporate powers, as well as Wayne’s language register, using words like “necessitate,”
“extensive,” and “cunning.” When sitting on the hood of Garth’s car, the Mirth Mobile, at the edge of an airport runway, the pair discusses that in Latin, Cassandra would be called “babela majora.” Their knowledge of the dead language while laying back on a 1976 AMC Pacer making nearly sexist jokes (labia majora → babela majora) demonstrates how their characters inhabit the slash. Punctuating the high/low perspectives of this comic duo, the scene ends with a jet soaring above their heads and landing on the tarmac while Wayne and Garth wriggle on their car’s hood and bellow out “WOAHHHH!”

The film advances once again when Wayne and Garth realize that they can get Cassandra noticed by infiltrating a major record producer’s limo TV to air an episode of “Wayne’s World” as he is driving towards Chicago. To implement this complicated strategy, Garth comes up with a complex plan involving satellites and global positioning systems. How? Garth doesn’t have an engineering degree, or experience in satellite placement or even expertise in mathematic calculations. But somehow, perhaps because he lives on the high/low slash, he is able to come up with a highly intelligent plan, while only moments before he was putting sticks through jelly donuts while pretending to kill them in the heat of passion. Garth plays out this scene on the high/low slash because he is at first only interested in making a mess out of his food (a “low” activity), and then when Wayne comes in and tells him of his predicament with Cassandra, something in his brain snaps and he is able to come up with a perfectly thought out plan (the “high” punch line). The urgency of his switch is once again surprising, which makes it funny, but also shows the dynamic qualities of these comedic characters.

Even after the credits have started rolling, Wayne and Garth appear on our screens again. On the infamous couch, speaking directly to the camera, and therefore us, Wayne
begins: “We hope you found it entertaining: whimsical and yet relevant, with an underlying revisionist conceit that will belie the film’s emotional attachments to the subject matter.” To which Garth adds: “I just hope you didn’t think it sucked!” The smart comment is always underscored by the idiotic punch line. Throughout the movie, a combination of language registers, unpredictability, and symbolic imagery highlight the high/low slash. The statements made by Wayne and Garth are smart because they say intellectual statements in intelligent ways, but they are also two idiots, relying on a punch line to get a laugh. However, they know how to combine the two together, seamlessly, making us laugh and think at the same time.

Living in my Parent’s Basement: The Slacker/Loser Guy

The trope of the loser/slacker guy first came to me in Halberstam’s *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal* (2012). Well, that’s a lie. The trope of the loser/slacker guy first came to me in real life, by dating loser/slacker guys as if it was some sick, twisted hobby.

“Do you wanna talk about it?” Garth asks as he puts his arm around me.

“Maybe later, but thanks.”

Halberstam identifies the slacker/loser guy as a Seth Rogan-like stoner dude who does nothing all day but frolic around suburbia with other stoner friends, and relies on his super successful girlfriend/wife to make the money, make his life organized, and keep their relationship afloat. Halberstam goes on to say of the slacker guy that “…they may have no prospects of a job any time soon, they may lack good hygiene, tell few jokes, show little to no initiative, but, heterosexual love being what it is, and given the market’s tilt toward male eligibility, as long as the guy has a semifunctional penis, and sometimes
even if he doesn’t, he will get laid!” (20). Halberstam’s idea here shows that despite all of
the negative qualities that a (white) heterosexual male may have, he is still charming,
loveable, and our hero. They could be complete losers with no job and we would still be
able to see through all of that. Halberstam goes on to say in *Gaga Feminism* that, “…true
love lets losers win…[sic] as long as they are male” (19).

“But that’s not us! We may not have real jobs, but we’re charming and amazingly
cool!” Wayne says, still seated at my mother’s dining room table.

“And we have functional, well, you know,” Garth adds.

While Wayne and Garth tell a lot of jokes, have seemingly decent hygiene, and
show some initiative, they are still losers. In the first scene, Wayne himself declares his
loser status when he proclaims that living at home “is both bogus and sad.”

But how exactly do they portray the slacker/loser trope?

Throughout the film, there are many occasions in which we can tell that Wayne
and Garth are inherently *not cool*. After the initial scene of the film, Wayne greets us, the
audience, in his kitchen to “bring us up to speed,” after a taping of “Wayne’s World.” He
relinquishes his loser/slacker guy status to us in all of its glorious details. We find out,
through the broken fourth wall, that:

1. He lives in Aurora, Illinois, which is a suburb of Chicago. Excellent.

2. He’s had plenty of “Joe jobs,” but nothing he would call a career.

3. Living in his parent’s house is “bogus and sad.”

4. He is proud of his amazing cable access show.

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15 *Wayne’s World*. Dir. Penelope Spheeris. Perf. Mike Myers and Dana Carvey.
Paramount Pictures, 1992. DVD.
5. He still knows how to party.

Wayne unsurprisingly announces to us that he dreams of doing “Wayne’s World” for a living. It might happen – ch’yehd, and monkeys might fly out of his butt!\textsuperscript{16}

Here Wayne is outwardly announcing that he is not cool. It is through this uncoolness that we are able to see the masculine/feminine slash being opened. This scene in particular relates to the high/low slash: Wayne knows he is a loser (“low”), but it is this articulate analysis of what makes him a loser that places him on the “high” part of the dichotomy also. That knowledge and ability to be self aware and self-analytical further explicates his intellectually-inclined abilities. Because he lies on both sides, but not wholly either, he is somewhere on the slash, in the middle.

From their falling for Benjamin’s plan to steal Cassandra and foil “Wayne’s World” (the cable access show), to them making fun of Vanderhof, the rich and unwanted sponsor of the show, to playing hockey in the street like a couple of kids, to well, living in their parents’ houses, Wayne and Garth have not gotten cooler with age, and are still in the slacker/loser realm.

Halberstam also writes about this trope that, “true love, these [mumblecore] films now tell us, can bring a lovely lady to see the charm of a crusty loser; it can allow a go-getter femme to ignore the complete lack of ambition of her geeky partner; true love lets losers win…as long as they are male” (19). And yes, Wayne and Garth do win (as does everyone else in the “mega happy ending”\textsuperscript{17}), but it is Cassandra who is the successful

\textsuperscript{16} Wayne’s World. Dir. Penelope Spheeris. Perf. Mike Myers and Dana Carvey. Paramount Pictures, 1992. DVD.

\textsuperscript{17} Wayne’s World. Dir. Penelope Spheeris. Perf. Mike Myers and Dana Carvey. Paramount Pictures, 1992. DVD.
one. Cassandra has the totally awesome band, while Wayne and Garth (even by the completely unsuccessful sequel that came out in 1993), are still struggling to get *Wayne’s World* to commercial success. Even though, by *Wayne’s World 2*, the pair realizes their loser status by bumping into two *complete losers*, and realizing they are just like them.

If women become more competent, then men are relieved of their obligations to be efficient and productive. If the woman is earning well, then maybe the man can take a long break. If she can manage the household, the kids, the banking, the shopping, and their sex life, then maybe he should just kick back, put his feet up, and wait for her to tell him what to do (Halberstam, 20-21).

While Cassandra doesn’t necessarily tell Wayne and Garth what to do, they do just kick back and see what happens, without *much* intervention. But when they see things getting totally out-of-control, they step in (when Benjamin is about to steal Cassandra’s love: enter Wayne). This slacker/loser trope shows these types of men as not wholly masculine, but more masculine than their typically ‘queer’ counterparts. By utilizing this trope, Wayne and Garth show themselves as on the slash in another way: on the masculine/feminine slash. They are men, yes, but not 100% masculine in the traditional sense.

The slacker/loser status of Wayne and Garth is both performative and parodic. Performative, not only because it is comedy and an impersonation of real-life people (Myers and Carvey in “Extreme Close Up”), but also because they are performing a *type* of person as well. They are hyper-slackers in this sense: ripped clothing, Aerosmith t-shirts, living at home, no real job, head banging to Queen, etc. They are also parodic in this sense; they are parodying a *type*. Here performance and parody are closely connected.
The loser/slacker parody extends to other types of parody in the movie; not only are Wayne and Garth parodic of a type of early 90s head bangers, but the film in general is parodic of other films. *Wayne’s World* breaks the cinematic fourth wall, that is by directly speaking to the camera, as if in a documentary. Garth uses the camera, via breaking the fourth wall, as a means of comfort. He finds it more comfortable to speak to the camera (is it us, the audience, he is ultimately talking to?) than to talk to Wayne sometimes. Also parodic of film, there are various “titles” throughout the movie, to introduce common filmic scenes. Some of these titles are “Gratuitous Sex Scene,” and “Oscar Clip,” which show popular types of scenes in films, and make fun of them. *Wayne’s World* also alludes to other pop cultural artifacts such as *The Terminator*, *Star Trek*, and that Grey Poupon commercial from the 80s. These parodies, along with Wayne and Garth as a parody, represent the ridiculous yet self-aware foundation of *Wayne’s World*.

It is through the use of parody that we are able to see the slash come to light. Throughout the film, Wayne and Garth (Mike Myers and Dana Carvey) parody two head banging idiots, who are also intellectually inclined. They are able to weave in and out of “low” joke and “high” comments. These moments in the film are not only funny, but they are smart; similarly, their “loser” status evokes a feminized masculinity because they are
not wholly “manly.” By utilizing both sides of the high/low and masculine/feminine
dichotomies, we are able to see them as more than two head banging losers, rather highly
complicated and interesting characters.

**Wayne’s (Postmodern) World**

*Wayne’s World* (1992) contains a lot of postmodern ideologies. Wayne and Garth
break binarisms: the high/low through their witty yet stupid remarks, and the
masculine/feminine through their inherent loser lifestyles. They also appear on the
loser/cool slash in that they are losers, but everyone thinks they’re cool (they are like
celebrities in Aurora, aren’t they?). These binarisms are performative and parodic, easily
broken by the slash.

“Ok so what now? Now after you’ve called us queer losers?” Wayne asks.

“Now we talk about David Bowie and gender performativity,” I answer, getting up
from my mother’s dining room table, my knees cracking.

“No way!”

“Way!”
Part III: Glitter Rock, Glam Rock, and Guys Who Look Like Girls

*Girls will be boys, and boys will be girls/it's a mixed-up, muddled-up, shook-up world.*
–*The Kinks, “Lola”*

Wayne and I are on the L heading towards Brooklyn. We get off at 1st Avenue and start walking towards St. Mark’s. The cold March air reddens our faces.

“You hungry?” I ask Wayne as we make our way past coffee shops and tattoo parlors.

“Yeah, s’ppose.”

We walk until we’ve reached Crif Dog, a hole-in-the-wall establishment with retro arcade games and a large selection of hot dog toppings. We sit down at a small table with our bacon-wrapped hot dogs, cheese fries, and cold PBR cans.

![Crif Dog](image)

*Figure 5: “Eat Me.” Photo: Michelle Arp, © 2018.*

“I used to walk down St. Mark’s all the time. I mean, it wasn’t that long ago, but it feels it.” I say to Wayne, who is finishing off his beer.

It is December of 2012. Wayne is still with me, but sitting across the restaurant is another man from my past: Greg, and seated next to him is Judith Butler.

“Why do you smell like smoke and leather? Are you still the same Michelle?” Wayne asks, panicked, ironically disturbed by our time-travelling adventure.
“I used to smoke and wear a lot of leather. I used to have really short hair too,” I say, reaching for my long hair, which isn’t there but instead replaced by a cropped pixie cut.

“She’s a babe! Schwing!” Wayne exclaims and then continues, “who’re those guys?” pointing towards Greg and Judith Butler.

“Well that’s Greg, he’s a loser, and that’s Judith Butler, one of my favorite gender theorists.”

“Wait – I thought you brought me here to talk about Bowie!” Wayne yells.

“I did.”

* 

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler describes many ideas about gender, but I will be focusing on her deconstructionist views on drag and gender performativity in relation to the slash as exemplified in the glam rock genre of music; I am not interested in analyzing entire musical careers, but instead taking specific songs and music videos which exemplify the specific axioms of the genre.

Early on in *Gender Trouble*, Butler writes: “‘intelligible’ genders are those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice and desire” (23). “Unintelligible” genders, therefore, would evoke a disconnect between sex, gender, and desire – or at least a disconnect between heteronormative practices of sex, gender, and desire. In other words, if a person’s biological sex (male/female) does not match society’s heterosexually prescribed gender standards, bells go off in our heads. If we look at the heterosexual correlation between gender and sex in a very fundamental way, certain assumptions are almost always made:
only women are feminine, wear makeup and like glitter; men are masculine, strong, and like fast cars and babes.

“Schwing!” Wayne exclaims.

But by breaking these ‘traditional’ boundaries, new interpretations of gender are able to come to the surface.

However, Butler proposes that all of this sex, gender, and desire stuff is really just socially and culturally constructed, and then she goes a step further and claims we perform our gender as if performing a play: “…gender is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence” (34). If we were able to select our gender everyday, would it still align to meet our society’s norms on (heterosexual) gender separatism? Or would we ‘try on’ different gender formulations based on our feelings of the day?

“Gender. It’s like a new pair of underwear. At first it’s constrictive, but then after a while they become a part of you,”18 Garth says.

“Garth, how did you get here?” I ask.

“I took the shuttle bus. It was easy.”

For Butler, the performance of gender is more or less revolving around heterosexual models of how gender is expressed. She writes that, “…acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, and illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality” (186). As Butler later

describes, parodic gender performance (i.e. drag) breaks away from this normative model of male as man, and female as woman in order to demonstrate the unnaturalness of gender distinctions. Drag, for my purposes in examining glam rock, is as essential as Stan Mikita’s Donuts is to Wayne and Garth. While Wayne and Garth are always stuffing their faces with jelly donuts and crossing boundaries of high and low, glam rockers are always balancing on a gender-ambiguous, masculine/feminine tightrope, performing their “desired” gender.

Parody (drag) resembles a copy of the originary gender being performed, yet there is something “off” about it. As Butler writes:

Practices of parody can serve to reengage and reconsolidate the very distinction between a privileged and naturalized gender configuration and one that appears as derived, phantasmatic, and mimetic – a failed copy as it were. And surely parody has been used to further a politics of despair, one which affirms a seemingly inevitable exclusion of marginal genders from the territory of the natural and the real (200).

The very act of parody emphasizes the artificial qualities of gender distinction, and because of this seeming artificiality, genders, parodic or not, are taken in on the superficial level. By looking at “parody,” there is an implied “original” gender, as Butler notes, but if we only derive the original gender from socially constructed ideologies, then the parody itself will be a parody of a parody – a copy of a copy.

“Am I a parody? Is Garth?!” Wayne asks, fear in his eyes.

“I’m afraid you are. You guys were inspired by Mike Myers and Dana Carvey, remember? You just told the story like 15 pages ago!”
Instead of only analyzing glam rock as a parodic gender formulation, I am going to attempt to look at it in this ‘twice-removed,’ copy of a copy lens in order to more fully situate its place on the Derridean slash.

**The Difference Between Metal and Disco**

Glam rock is a genre on the Derridean slash (remember him?).

“I still don’t like that guy,” Wayne says to me.

The genre, as identified by a spacey atmosphere, glitter, women’s clothing, make-up, platform shoes, and high pitched vocals, while only including men, lives somewhere between heavy metal and disco of the 1970s. Glam rock has attributes of the other two genres, but is not wholly one or the other.

If we take Black Sabbath’s 1970 “War Pigs,” specifically the performance in Paris of that year, we find something so completely un-glam. The stage is bare and black, Ozzy Osbourne sings about witches, and sorcerers, unlike the un-gendered glitzy space aliens of glam. Also, without a doubt, the music is heavier; there isn’t a happy loophole to it. The band is wearing sneakers and jeans, their hair is long and in their faces. Yes, Ozzy gets to the high notes, but he is screaming, not crooning; he is making a spectacle, but not a “safe” one. We feel a threat with “War Pigs,” not only because of the subject matter, but also because of the unwelcoming nature of the band’s mannerisms\(^\text{19}\) (i.e. they head bang, we can’t see their faces, and they are *harsh*).

We can also look at Led Zeppelin’s 1973 Madison Square Garden Performance of “The Ocean,” which is featured on their documentary/fantasy film The Song Remains the Same (1976). Again, the music is heavier, but unlike Sabbath, Zeppelin emulate the hypersexuality found in Gary Glitter, and Bowie’s “Moonage Daydream” performance. Also unlike Ozzy Osbourne, Robert Plant doesn’t use his high voice to scream, but instead he sings like the glam artists.

“Zeppelin didn’t write tunes everyone liked, they left that to the Bee Gee’s,”20 Wayne says.

And that is true. According to Billboard, the Bee Gees have nine #1 hit songs, the third most of any group behind The Beatles (20), and The Supremes (12). Led Zeppelin didn’t have any. The prominence of disco didn’t come for another few years, but the roots were laid out in pop music. Take for example Elton John’s 1972 “Crocodile Rock,” especially the performance of the song on The Muppet Show. John is decked out in large, colored feathers, and a rhinestone-encrusted bathing cap, and accompanied by mechanical Muppet creatures.21 His voice is high and the atmosphere is light. You can’t get any further way from Black Sabbath than Elton John. Similarly, KC and the Sunshine Band’s 1975 “Boogie Shoes,” according to the official music video by DVJ Luka Productions, shows a fun, dancing, smiling show, and starts to break away from pop,


entering disco. Disco music, as defined by the *OED*, alludes to “pop music intended mainly for dancing to at discos, typically soul-influenced and melodic with a regular bass beat and popular particularly in the late 1970s.” KC brings in this soul-influence by utilizing saxophones and a racially diverse band (and audience).

Of course, the Bee Gees, while rising to prominence a few years after the explosion of glam rock and heavy metal, exemplify the essence of disco, with their songs “You Should be Dancing” (1976), “Staying Alive” (1977), “How Deep is You Love” (1977), etc. and their white jumpsuits, flowing hair, swaying hips, and light-up dance floor. There are no better examples of full-blown disco than that of the 1976 film *Saturday Night Fever*, with disco balls, glitter, dancing, silk shirts, and a very young John Travolta. The difference between disco music and that of glam rock is the inherent pop quality to it; glam still sounds like rock music if we take away the visuals, disco always sounds like disco.

If we think of glam rock as on the Derridean slash, to the left of that would be the full-blown, glittery pop and disco music of the mid-late 1970s, with its happy vocals and smiling back up singers. To the right would be the dark, satanic, cigarette-smoke-on-your-neck rock and roll music of early heavy metal bands. Glam rock bands, despite the glitter, still rock. They have the outfits of the pop and disco stars, but the flirtation and guitar solos of the heavy metal bands. Just like their parodic sense of gender identity fits on the slash, their music and personas do as well; while holding elements of both disco and heavy metal, glam rock remains its own enigma.

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Glam Rock Beginnings: David Bowie

Glam rock has always been associated with grand performances that outweigh the musical qualities of the genre. The Oxford Companion to Music (2011) defines glam rock as: “a theatrical and gender-bending style of rock and pop presentation (of a certain ‘glamour’) rather than a musical style; it is sometimes seen as an expression of dissatisfaction with the macho image of heavy rock (though not necessarily less ‘heavy’ in musical content…” Glam rock is on the opposite pole of heavy metal in almost every aspect of it, regarding theatrical performance. While heavy metal rockers rely more on their music, performing in underwhelmingly average clothes, glam rockers tend to put on an outrageous, glittering production (think: heavy metal’s beaten up sneakers to glam rock’s sequined platform shoes).

Because of its performative nature, glam rock enacts Butler’s notion of all gender as drag, which is parodic and “put on.” Mike Kelley, in his “Cross Gender/Cross Genre” (2000) writes: “Glam Rock was a music that fully understood the commercial music world and accepted it as an arena of façade and emptiness. It used the image of the drag queen as a sign of this status.” Kelley here is articulating the connection between drag and emptiness; that is, the connection between gender performativity and its seeming bottomlessness of possibility. Kelley underscores Butler’s ideas on drag because he understands the idea of drag (or more specifically, the drag queen) as a “show” of gender; further, that gender is a performance. I believe that drag does represent an emptiness in a way, but not wholly. By experimenting with genders, as drag does, we are able to see the possibilities of gender. While Butler asserts that gender is an act of parody and therefore unreal in a sense, drag opens up that parody to reveal that there is something to gender;
by removing gender form its originary form, we are taken aback, or even confused, and isn’t that something, not pure emptiness? – a reaction.

When I think of Bowie, I do not concentrate upon the auditory experience, but the ever-changing hair and the blue and red lightning bolt slash across his Aladdin Sane face. While Bowie is not necessarily the very first musician to perform this genre of rock (English band T. Rex is perhaps the first to experiment with glam, with their song “Bang a Gong (Get it On)” from 1970), I will be using his music and stage persona as a template to analyze the genre because of his fame, the accessibility to his music, and the fact that he shaped not only my life, but so many others, in so many ways.

Jason Roush, in “Stardust Memories” (2006) writes: “an artist like Bowie who initially came into the world as David Jones, continually seeks to destabilize received gender and sexual norms, and thereby prompts audiences to question their own prejudgments on these identity issues. Bowie ‘himself’ has professed to being gay, bisexual and heterosexual at various points in his career…” David Bowie, with his chameleon-like identity, represents not only the ambiguity of gender in the glam rock genre, but also the queerness of such an ambiguity. If Bowie has claimed to have three separate sexual orientations within the span of his career, my only question is: which one came first?

David Bowie’s song “Life on Mars?” is from his 1971 album, Hunky Dory. The official music video opens with a piano note and a stark flash of bright orange hair against an almost translucently white background. Bowie comes across as shocking; we cannot tell if it’s a man, a woman, or a sexually ambiguous clown. The camera pans down as the voice continues, “it’s a god-awful small affair/to the girl with the mousey
hair,” as we, the audience, are struck by Bowie’s eyes. One pupil is clearly larger than the other – almost twice the size – and both are thickly outlined by powder blue eye shadow. But more so than that, I am struck by the use of “the girl with the mousey hair.” Always with Bowie’s music, but especially with this song, all plain, uninteresting, quiet girls from the suburbs hear themselves being spoken to by Bowie. We are nothing like him, but he knows us through and through. Against Bowie’s ghostly skin, the combination of bright hair and eyes makes for an unsettlingly, clown-like appearance. The rest of the video pans over Bowie while he sings – no, preaches – about the “freakiest show” in a light blue suit. We get profile shots, close-ups, top-to-bottom shots, bottom-to-top shots, and panoramic views of Bowie’s androgynous body of blue and orange against pure white. The variety of angles in the video only adds to the complexity of Bowie; we are able to see him in a variety of ways, emulating a variety of personas.

The viewpoints of this music video exhibit Bowie as if in a museum; he is putting on a show for us, but we can’t touch, we can only watch. Besides the makeup and the hair, what sets this apart from other rock music at the time is the voice. Bowie’s voice streams out of him, carrying high-pitched notes across the screen and into our ears; it’s not dark, yet it’s not light, it is quintessentially Bowie and undoubtedly on Derrida’s slash. It is not the expected “low” voice of a man, nor the screeching high voice of a woman: it lies somewhere in-between. When he stretches out the words “sailors” and “Mars,” we are able to feel the emotion in it, and we are able to believe that he believes that there is life on Mars. Bowie has created for us an escape from reality. We wish to be a part of the “freakiest show” and we wonder, along with Bowie, if there is life on Mars.
During the final shot of the video, he gives us an “OK” sign with his thumb and forefinger, as if to say, “yes, that worked.” And it did, Bowie.

“Thank you darling,” Bowie says.

“David Bowie?! You’re here too?” Wayne asks.

“I just wanted to say, I’m glad you enjoyed this video.”

Bowie emulates the masculine/feminine slash in that he is not only playing with gender dynamics (ask yourself: what is he playing up more? the male, the female, or the sexually ambiguous clown?), but also with the reality/fantasy slash. In “Life on Mars?” Bowie has presented to us all of these “intermediary planes” (Derrida): an androgynous chanteur that is singing about a (perhaps) fantastical situation. We are unsure where to look and what to think, but it is OK because Bowie is there with us.

In the 6 July 1972 Top of the Pops broadcast of “Starman,” Bowie portrays a space-alien-like man named after the title character of his album Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars. In his Rolling Stone Magazine critique of Ziggy’s performance, Rob Sheffield writes:

The legendary Top of the Pops performance of July 6th, 1972 – the moment when Bowie truly became Bowie. He strums a blue acoustic guitar, with crimson hair, a rainbow spacesuit and astronaut boots, casually draping an arm around Mick Ronson. In less than four minutes, he went from a plodding folkie to England's most


scandalous rock sensation. Virtually every kid who watched this clip went on to start a band.  

First, we see that blue acoustic guitar, and then, instead of the striking, artificially blue makeup-clad eyes, we see a normal, skinny man with a smirk. That is, until the camera pans out, and we see a psychedelic space suit. The video plays out as such: Bowie and his band are on a stage, each musician dressed brightly, looking spacey but aware.

The lyrics tell us the tale of Bowie’s interaction with the “starman.” What sets this apart from his glam beginnings in “Life on Mars?” is the overt sexuality expressed. When Bowie sings “I had to phone someone/so I picked on you, ooo, ooo/ hey that’s far out/so you heard him too, ooo, ooo” he points, and looks, directly at the camera. Bowie is flirting with us here: looking, pointing, smirking, sharing secrets of the starman, as opposed to the colder, powder blue preacher of his “Life on Mars?” personality. I feel myself flirting back; Bowie holds all of this universal knowledge, it makes me feel less alone, and I am attracted to his confidence despite (or maybe enhanced by) his gender-queer, androgynous façade. And Bowie is not alone here as he is surrounded by his band and an audience of adoring fans, he is less shy than in “Life on Mars?,” he is smiling and interacting. His glam rock persona is breaking the glass that was once in front of him. This song and performance, despite being less performance art and more concert-like, demonstrates a very thought-out and carefully planned breaking of male/female binarisms. He is not wearing makeup, but his skin-tight, psychedelic jumpsuit and thin features blur the line between completely masculine and completely feminine. He is on the slash in this ‘is it a boy, or is it a girl?’ sense. His gender and sexuality queer façade

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sits comfortably on neither side of the dichotomy that separates male from female, but rather he sits on the middle, in a queer, in-between space.

“Man, Bowie wails!” Garth says.

“And who knew that all his weird stuff was a play on gender? Talk about layers!” Wayne responds.

Bowie’s “Moonage Daydream” brings all of these elements of glam rock together, in the performance of the song from the 1973 concert film, Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars. “Moonage Daydream” opens with a typical concert scene: young people close together in a dark room. Bowie begins, “I’m an alligator/I’m a mama papa calling for you/I’m a space invader,” to which we see his bright white skin, orange hair, and what appears to be a Japanese Kimono. The camera’s view widens, and we see spectacle: Bowie is not wearing any pants. He appears more confident than ever; he seems to have grown into his Ziggy Stardust character since we last saw him on Top of the Pops. He is no longer just flirting with the camera, but he is also flirting with the audience in real time. We want to be a part of the daydream, just like we wanted to be a part of the freakiest show.

Bowie is still playing with parodic gender identity as he has on makeup, and traditional women’s clothing. As he struts across the stage (he does not walk but dances), we notice his knee-high platform boots, and potential lack of underwear. In “Plumbing the Surface of Sound and Vision: David Bowie, Andy Warhol, and the Art of Posing” (2012), Judith A. Peraino writes:

Although ‘Ziggy played guitar,’ as the lyric proclaims, David Bowie in his Ziggy Stardust performances rarely did. Influenced by his training in mime theater, Bowie moved from one dramatic pose to the next while he sang; his tight physical control and positioning of his body contrasted starkly with other lead singers of
the era – the exaggerated strutting of Mick Jagger, the ecstatic shudders and head shaking of Robert Plant, and the fist-pumping and microphone swinging of Roger Daltrey (157).

The music is more “rock and roll,” as there is a wailing guitar solo at the ¾ mark, and perhaps because of the shadowy stage, but the guitar has a phallic quality to it. The space age atmosphere only adds to the glam persona. Space aliens can be perceived as un-gendered, or lacking gender. Bowie, like the space aliens, lacks a distinctive gender, at least one we can identify on this earth-bound stage. In *Gaga Feminism*, J. Jack Halberstam describes this act of parodic gender identity, influenced by Judith Butler and contemporary politics, as “occupying gender” (xiv). Bowie does more than simply occupy a gender. He weaves in and out of genders, much like he weaves in and out of time and space. He doesn’t conform to a specific gender, but makes it more difficult for us to guess; there is ambiguity in his gender. We know he is a man because his name is David Bowie, after all. But is that how he felt? Just like that girl from Long Island. She is a woman, but did she feel that way? Or did she feel more un-gendered, identifying as simply, “poet?” Are feelings intertwined with actions? I would say no, and that is because there is always a small voice reminding us to stay in-line with societal norms.

Peraino writes: “Like the feminine evocations of mass-produced Campbell’s Soup, Bowie’s bisexuality appeared to be organically related to the effeminizing effects of commodification. By this logic, all sellouts are queer and all consumers are poseurs.” Was Bowie a “poseur,” choosing a sexuality or gender based on what would be best for his performance? Or was it genuinely felt?

“I think Judith Butler is shaking her head,” Wayne says to me as we walk out of Crif Dog and onto St. Mark’s.
“No she’s laughing, man! Lady. Un-gendered entity named Michelle.” Garth trails off and looks down.

“Because she knows how ridiculous it is to think that any gender performativity is genuine,” I add.

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The day David Bowie died, I was watching the news in my pajamas, enjoying my final winter break of college. The news of his death hit suddenly and stabbing; I cried as soon as the words left the reporter’s lips. Bowie represents a fearless need to be yourself. Listening to “Life on Mars?,” “Starman,” and “Moonage Daydream” on the day Bowie died, made me realize I had lost a friend I had never met. I cried and cried and cried, and looked to the Long Island sky that night, and wished I would be able to have, one day, half the courage Bowie had on stage. Half the raw energy. Half the artistry, and half the confidence.

*Space Age Futurity and Gender Anomalies: Gary Glitter, Roxy Music, and The Sweet*

Perhaps influenced by David Bowie’s pioneering glam rock persona, other glam bands emerged from England with similar interests: space age futurity, high voices, and platform shoes, locating themselves on the masculine/feminine slash. Gary Glitter’s 1972 performance of “Rock and Roll Pt. 2” is a good place to start. The song is entirely instrumental, except for Glitter’s occasional “hey!” The 1972 video opens with a large, dark crowd, like Bowie’s “Moonage Daydream,” and Glitter in, well, glitter, and his band decked out in makeup and sequined jumpsuits. Of course, we cannot forget Glitter’s gyrating, swaying, and circling hips. Despite Glitter not emulating a more androgynous persona (like Bowie), his disco-ball outfit is far from a traditionally “masculine” look.
Glitter exists on the slash as such: he is outwardly a man, but is performing in more woman-like clothing (i.e. the sequins, and the platform shoes).  

Famous glam band, Roxy Music, transcends more of the space-aged-ness aspects of glam rock, as opposed to Glitter’s outward glittering hypersexuality. The 1972 performance of “Ladytron” on the television program *The Old Grey Whistle Test* opens with a green-suited clarinet player. We see a disco ball, a control center reminiscent of the moon landings, and musicians dressed in silk, glitter, rhinestones, and animal prints. The music is much more mellow and toned down as opposed to “Rock and Roll Pt. 2,” giving off a psychedelic, hippie quality. Roxy Music, during this specific performance, is not emitting sexual energy, but instead giving off that un-gendered, alien-like vibe. The video plays out as a call and response between the lead singer/piano player, and his band of freakish mates. In terms of glam, the spacey jumpsuits are especially poignant. Roxy Music does not emulate a sexualized, un-gendered alien-like entity like that of Bowie and, to some extent, Gary Glitter, but they do provide an atmosphere of a space aged, ‘not quite of this planet,’ performed theatricality. They have glitter, they have weird music, and yet they remain more masculine than Bowie and Glitter. However, their masculinity is *otherworldly*, and therefore living on the masculine/feminine slash because we are unable to pin it down on either side of the dichotomy.

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The Sweet’s 1973 “Ballroom Blitz,” and the official music video can’t be overlooked in any glam analysis.

“That’s the song Cassandra played at the end of our movie!” Wayne says, “I love that song, man. It wails!” Garth adds.

From the fast drumming at the beginning and the “introductions” made by each band member (“are you ready Steve? Uh huh. Andy? Yeah!”), we are quickly brought into a gender-bent world. The responses to the roll call are effeminate and sexualized as the “uh huh” and “yeah!” are high-pitched and flirtatious. The band members are all wearing high-collared suits of varying colors, and their hair is coiffed in such a way that they could be mistaken for high school cheerleaders. They are all wearing makeup.

The lead singer, Brian Connolly, sings about a hallucinatory trip, telling us, or some lover, that he’d “like to tell you everything [he] see[s].” Throughout the song, and in-between the ‘story,’ Connolly gives us high-pitched, organismic “oh yeahs!” which remind us of the sexualized nature of what’s happening on stage. He does not explicitly tell us his visions, backing vocalist and guitarist Andy Scott does. The call and response nature of this song, similar to “Ladytron,” represents consciousness and unconsciousness; Connolly is consciousness, telling us he has these crazy visions, and Scott is unconsciousness, relaying these visions to us, play-by-play.

“Whoa, man. I’m having déjà vu over here!” Garth says, as he puts his head in his hands.

“My only question is, how does this relate to us?” Wayne asks.

“Well, remember how I placed you guys on the masculine/feminine slash?”

“I thought we were on the high/low slash…” Garth asks, putting his chin in his hand.

“You’re on both,” I start.

“Ok, so we’re like Bowie and the other glam bands because we’re also on the masculine/feminine slash. But we’re on the slash because we’re losers. He’s on it because he’s a man-lady-queer-alien? Which makes us different, yet similar…” Wayne says.

“Yes. Exactly.”

**Contemporary Glam: The Darkness**

In 2003, glam rock made a brief (very brief) revival. OK, it wasn’t a revival. It was one song by a one-hit-wonder band. This band, as it seems, took every single aspect of glam rock and utilized it in this one song. That is The Darkness’ “I Believe in a Thing Called Love.” After glam rock dissipated in the late 1970s and branched off to hair metal in the 1980s (think: Motley Crue, Poison, and Guns N’ Roses), perhaps no one ever thought it would come back, for even as briefly as it did. According to a 9 October 2003 *Pitchfork* article written by Scott Plagenhoef: “…what do The Darkness sound like?

Well, they’re a blend of 70s pomp-rock, early 80s metal, and bombastic, shiny arena rock. What they do well might be best exemplified by “I Believe in a Thing Called Love,” which most effectively pairs their sense of theatricality and grandiosity with their penchant for great pop hooks.”

“Excellent!” Wayne and Garth say.
The music video opens with crushing guitar sounds, as the lead singer, Justin Hawkins, emerges from a bathtub. One of the first things we notice about him is the long, pink hair. Throughout the video, Hawkins rolls around on a spinning bed (inviting us?), fights aliens with lasers, and sings in an almost annoyingly screeching voice about “touching me, touching you.” Hypersexuality? Check. Space age futurity? Check. High voice? Double check. Hawkins’ and his band mates’ outfits do reflect a thing of the past; they wear jumpsuits, patterned silk shirts, flower crowns, and high boots. At the end of the video, after the aliens are defeated, Hawkins gives us a thumbs up, a wink at David Bowie and “Life on Mars?”

Is this a parody of pardoic gender identity? Perhaps. Does it lie on the Derridean slash? Of course. But, as we will see in the next section, “I Believe in a Thing Called Love” is remarkably cool compared to some of the other bands at the time. While The Darkness emits a sexualized, glittery, rock and roll fire, other early 2000’s bands display a loser, slacker, living-in-my-mom’s-basement-and-I-don’t-care aura. We will see how those “loser bands,” as I will call them, emphasize Halberstam’s theories and bring us full circle, right back to Aurora, Illinois with Wayne and Garth.

Figure 6: “A Lad, Insane.” Photo: Michelle Arp, © 2018.

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Part IV: The Losers of Rock and Roll

*Soy un perdedor/I’m a loser baby/so why don’t you kill me?*

*Beck, “Loser”*

“Man, I’m tired now. There’s just so much about gender and drag…” Garth trails off. The three of us, Wayne, Garth, and I are driving now to the Long Island Railroad station from my house.

“I’m so excited to see Times Square! I bet it’s excellent!” Wayne says

“Guys we’re definitely not going to Times Square. We’re going to a place where I have spent so many hours. One of my favorite places, unironically. You’ll see. And you’ll probably hate it.” I say as we pull into small the parking lot of the Great River LIRR station.

“I often wonder who caused me to hate myself so much.”

Brian M. Peters writes in “Emo Gay Boys and Subculture: Postpunk Queer Youth and (Re)thinking Images of Masculinity:”

[Dick] Hebdige [in *Subculture: The meaning of style*] suggests that David Bowie's glam-rock image had followers stimulated by 'questions of gender' (1979, p. 88). These followers were, not unlike contemporary emo boys, 'attempting to negotiate a meaningful intermediate space somewhere between the aprent culture and the dominant ideology: a space where an alternative identity could be discovered and expressed' (Hebdige, 1979, p. 88) (136).

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Peters’ article is about gay “emo” youth culture, which is different than the alternative rock culture I am analyzing, but they do share some similarities and parallel each other. Like the glam rock tradition we have seen, emo and alternative rock attempt to locate themselves on the ‘intermediate space’ – on the slash. Emo, as Peters writes about, questions gender in a more streamlined way (i.e. guyliner, tight skinny jeans, long hair, lyrics about existentialism and romanticism31 etc.) the ‘losers of alternative rock’ that I will be analyzing are without a doubt “straight” but queered in their masculinity (or lack thereof). Similar to Halberstam’s theories on the loser/slacker (as seen in Part II: Wayne’s (Queer) World), the losers of alternative rock are inherent slackers, seemingly no-job-living-in-my-parent’s-basement dudes, but they also show a “don’t care attitude” which we didn’t see in Wayne’s World. These losers know they’re not cool, and they really don’t care.

“But what exactly is this ‘alternative rock’ you speak of,” Wayne asks as the conductor takes our tickets.

“You know grunge? No, you guys weren’t really around for that. Um. It’s like heavy metal-ish mixed with pop sometimes. And they’re really into skateboarding,” I answer.

“Ah, I see,” Garth says as he takes out a piece of red rope licorice from his pocket.

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“Yeah, and their lyrics are always about how they’re losers and they don’t care because *screw the system and the popular people anyway.* This is the music I really connected with in high school, you know?”

“Ah yes. Like for me, it was somewhere between Van Halen and Elton John,” Wayne responds.

“And for me it was Aerosmith, man! Those guys can still wail!” Garth adds.

*The Queer Art of Alternative Rock*

Similar to the analysis of glam rock, I will be analyzing not only the songs of these alternative rockers, but also their appearance and performance in the music videos, and how their persona emits a slacker/loser air which connects to the masculine/feminine slash because they are not necessarily “manly” but are more of a feminized masculine, yet wholly neither.

Sum-41’s 2001 “Fatlip” is without a doubt a loser anthem. The video opens with the band rapping in a gas station store, the owners amused, but annoyed. The guitar starts and we begin to see the entourage of freaks: goths, skaters, unnaturally colored hair, piercings, bras and underwear, a goose coming out of a van, a tin man, children, and old people – plenty of mismatched losers who’ve come to see this band of blonde punks play their instruments and skate. There’s an altercation with the police, an Asian girl gets her hair shaved off, and the band, in a very smart way makes fun of boy bands at the time
(N’SYNC, and The Backstreet Boys, namely) by imitating synchronized dances. These elements show their loser/slacker/outsider status in that they are a pastiche of freaks, outsiders, not polished and col but rather messy and uncaring of what we think. Peters writes: “For the art of crafting oneself to be shunned means that the flip side is acceptance within the desired subcultural space” (139). These people would not be accepted into conservative American society, but they do fit in to their own haven they have created; they’re unaccepted at large, but make a local community where they no doubt belong.

I never found this sort of community, perhaps because I prefer the company of myself. I found one or two people, maybe, but not a whole tribe surrounding me. How nice would it have been to be around bookworms with rock and roll lyrics tattooed on their stomachs and cigarettes hanging out of the school bags? No, I don’t think those kinds of losers like to band together: always afraid someone will steal their poetry ideas or make fun of their love of black coffee.

“Fatlip” is no doubt rock and roll. The lyrics, instead of declaring their coolness (don’t guys want to be in rock bands to get chicks?) show that they know they’re uncool, and they don’t care. For example: “I don’t want to waste my time/become another casualty of society/I’ll never fall in line/become another victim of your conformity” shows their knowledge of existing on the outside, their acceptance of it, and their blunt


refusal of conforming to the mainstream. This shows their loser-ness as such. They know they’re on the outside and they frankly don’t care.

“It’s like a big F you to the world!” Garth says as we’re passing through Jamaica, Queens on the train.

“Precisely.” I reply and smile.

Simple Plan’s “I’m Just a Kid” (2002) plays out in a similar, yet more juvenile way. Pierre Bouvier and his Quebecois band begin the song “I woke up it was seven/waited ‘till eleven/to figure out that no one would call/I think I’ve got a lot of friends/but I don’t hear from them.” The video plays out: the band is in a high school courtyard, and horrible things are happening all around them. A bus hits someone, fights break out, and a guy wipes out on a skateboard. These people are more closely related to Peters’ emo subjects because they have the skinny jeans and the sweeping hair, but their music is more pop-like and young. Bouvier, the lead singer, claims, “everyone is having more fun than me” proposing his loser status, and then furthering it by singing: “what the hell is wrong with me/don’t fit in with anybody.” Similar to Sum-41’s “Fatlip,” this song is also about not fitting in, being left out, being a loser (i.e. ‘not hearing from your friends’ and ‘spending another night alone’). But unlike Sum-41, Simple Plan’s song doesn’t announce it proudly.

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“Guys, we’re here,” I announce as the conductor says “this is Penn Station, the last stop. All must exit here. This train is going to the yard.” We walk up the stairs and I stop.

“Wait, this is what you wanted to show us?” Wayne asks, astonished and holding his nostrils, not used to the stench of the LIRR New York City hub.

“Yes. The Long Island Rail Road. I’ve spent a lot of time here.” I answer.

“On purpose?” Garth asks.

“When you have commuted from Long Island to Manhattan for six years, you get pretty used to this place. I’ve read so many books and listened to so many songs here. To me, this represents my slash: the slash of loneliness and contentment. Not completely one or the other, but somewhere in between.”

“What? You’re talking about this place? This place right here? With the smells and the rude people and the filth?” Wayne asks, still holding his nose.

“I don’t necessarily love it, but it makes me comfortable. It’s like the slash for me, as I’ve said. It’s the middle point between my life in the city and my life at home. It’s my slash, and I like it.”

“Can we go to Times Square?” Wayne asks.

“Sure.” I respond, looking down.

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Good Charlotte’s “The Anthem” (2002) is the ultimate loser anthem. Even the lyrics claim “this is the anthem/throw all your hands up/now that you feel me/sing if you’re with me/another loser anthem.” The video, like “Fatlip” is another pastiche of freaks, weirdos, and losers. While these misfits are more rock and goth, less skater, they
are losers all the same (to me, there is not hierarchy of Loserdom). They wear makeup
(like the glam rockers), they have tattoos and pitbulls, and they don’t care what you
think about them. The Madden twins (Benji on guitar and Joel on vocals) come across as
tough (tougher than Bouvier) and they believe what they sing about; they have an
awareness of their loser status, but they don’t care, they accept it.

Throughout the song, you get a sense of questioning. They are questioning you,
me, us, if we really want to fit in.

Do you really want to be like them?
Do you really want to be another trend?
Do you want to be part of that crowd?
‘Cause I don’t ever wanna,
I don’t ever wanna be you,
Just like you.  

These lyrics could have come out of my high school and college diaries, filled with angst,
a need to not fit in, a need to not care about conformity, and a yearning to be so confident
about it. This exists on the slash between loser and cool: they know they’re uncool and
don’t fit in, but show a cool confidence in their uncaring attitude. They’re accepting of
who they are, and make you question yourself: do you really want to be like them?
Really?

All of these songs and supplementary music videos have (at least) one thing in
common: they are all very suburban. From the backdrops they live in front of (high
schools, skate parks, houses with yards), to the desire to stand out (a very suburban

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=desJKYvdq9A

quality, hard to attain when you’re surrounded by constant alikeness), these songs and videos – the specific subset of alternative music in general – relates to the suburban need to be different, even if that means standing on the sidelines.

**Emo(tional) Youth: Weezer**

Is this genre a “young thing?” Are there any older, angsty alternative rockers? Or do they simply grow up and look back on their music as a sort of *bildungsroman*? Peters asks in his analysis of queer emo rockers that, “However, an important question here remains: is contemporary teenage emo a subculture or a teen culture? In other words, my findings reveal emo is a youth subculture rather than one that transgresses age” (135). I agree with Peters, yet disagree when it comes to the sort of alternative rock I am interested in. This is where Weezer comes in.

Weezer and their 2005 song “Beverly Hills” is another loser alternative song, but what makes this different form the other loser songs/bands is that they are *older*. The song is about a yearning to be a part of Beverly Hills’ upscale society, and a revealing of their loser/slacker status. Rivers Cuomo, the lead singer professes: “I’m just a no class, beat down fool/and I will always be that way/I might as well enjoy my life/and watch the stars play.” These lyrics reveal Cuomo’s acceptance that he will never be cool; he is forever on the cool/uncool slash because while he is a successful rocker, he’s no David Bowie. The video features Hugh Hefner and various incarnations of Playboy bunnies (it takes place at the infamous Playboy mansion, too) and another group of losers partying, dancing, and laughing in an open space.

“Take my picture!” Wayne says as he poses with Spiderman in Times Square.

“Do you guys not care about my story anymore?” I ask, annoyed.
“No, go on.” Garth says, pointing to the huge Bubba Gump restaurant.

“I was just gonna say that I feel like an old loser, like Weezer. But now I’m hungry. You guys want a pretzel?”

“Cool!” Wayne and Garth exclaim as I hand them money and point to the cart on the corner.

By the numbers, Sum-41 had an average age of 22.6 years when “Fatlip” came out in 2001; Simple Plan had an average age of 23.3 years when “I’m Just a Kid” (the music video) came out in 2003; Good Charlotte had an average age of 22.25 years when “The Anthem” came out in 2002. Weezer, in 2005 when “Beverly Hills” came out, had an average age of 37 years. Here, unlike Peters’ emo subjects, old losers do exist, and they’re just as uncaring as the young angsty ones. This proves that not all loser youths grow up to be happy, conforming adults. Another dichotomy is broken.

**Alternative**

All of these losers of alternative rock do not fit in on either side of the cool/uncool slash in that they understand that they are not cool, but they don’t care, which makes them *a little* cool. They are doing cool things: hanging out with a lot of people, playing music, some are even getting girls, but they remain uncool, and their songs tell us that.

Peters writes, “...not fitting in was certainly better than trying to fit it, for it allows the subject to be” (141). Reinforcing my ideas about the masculine/feminine slash in Part II: Wayne’s (Queer) World, these losers are male, but not necessarily masculine. They are emotional, and are very self-aware and self-conscious. Again, they sit comfortably on

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39 According to my own calculations by figuring out the average age of the band members when their “loser” song came out.
this slash – more of a crossroads in this case – between masculine/feminine and cool/uncool. And because they are neither, they are queer.

Unlike glam, these rockers are not cool, even though they are both on the slash, and I consider them both to be queer. They differ from glam rockers because of their loser/slacker status (can you imagine saying that David Bowie is a loser?), but do not stray too far from the queer world.

“Now what?” Garth asks as we are heading back to Long Island.

“Well, that’s really it. I was planning to go to the beach. You guys in?”

“Yeah!” Wayne and Garth exclaim.
Part V: And They All Lived Happily Ever After…NOT!

Performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual  
– Judith Butler, Gender Trouble

Wherever we are: in a text where we already believe ourselves to be  
– Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology

Clowns to the left of me/jokers to the right/here I am/stuck in the middle with you.  
– Stealers Wheel, “Stuck in the Middle With You”

“So guys, we’re at the end, what did you think?” I ask the carload of people I’m driving. We are going over the Robert Moses Causeway Bridge, which connects Long Island and Fire Island. And by “we” I mean, me, of course, Wayne, Garth, Derrida, David Bowie, Judith Butler, and Rivers Cuomo. There’s barely enough room for everyone in my 2006 Jeep Liberty, so the beach chairs, coolers of beer, and umbrellas are stacked on their laps as the sun shines down on our faces, and Aerosmith’s “Livin’ on the Edge” permeates the radio.

“It was good. You executed my slash very well, but why bring in these idiots?” Derrida says, motioning towards Wayne and Garth, seated next to him, David Bowie, and Rivers Cuomo in the backseat.

“Your ideas on gender are well thought out!” Judith Butler says, riding shotgun.

“Rivers, anything to add?” I ask.

“Um, why did you call my band “old losers” We’re not that old…”

“That’s what you care about? Didn’t I do a good job by explaining those loser qualities?”

“I’m glad you didn’t call me a loser, darling.” David Bowie smirks.
“Yeah Bowie, she called us losers plenty of times, man!” Garth says, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Yeah,” I begin, “but losers in a cool way! I mean, you’re not complete losers, you’re on-the-slash-losers!”

“What’s the slash?” David Bowie asks.

“Bowie, I put you on the slash too. You know, the middle point? You’re on the masculine/feminine slash because we can’t figure your gender out, man!” I say.

“And how is this queer?” Garth asks.

“Because when you’re on the slash you’re not one thing or another. You’re in the middle, so you’re queer, off-the-beaten path, twisted, a distorted version of an original.”

“Like gender!” Judith Butler exclaims.

“You could say that. You could say that we’re all performing, we’re all queer, and we’re all on the slash.”

“Ah, my slash.” Derrida sighs.

“Wayne, you’ve been quiet back there. What did you think?” I ask.

“I found your synthesis between theory, culture, and memoir refreshing. Your voice was charming, your writing style accessible, and your titles and subheadings witty, yet intellectual,” Wayne adds.

“I’m just glad you didn’t think it sucked!” I exclaim and laugh as we make a right onto Ocean Parkway.

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I’m glad you stuck out through our journey on the slash. We learned about low culture, high culture, losers, queer theory, Stan Mikitas donuts, androgynous rock stars in sequined jumpsuits – the list goes on. We went through time and space. We spoke to Derrida, Bowie, and Wayne and Garth. But everything boils down to this: the difference between low culture and high culture is that there is none. What’s low to me is high to you. It’s subjective, it’s ambiguous, and it’s totally excellent.

* 

I’m parking the car and everyone is filing out in bathing suits, sunhats, and sunglasses: noses streaked with lotion, and hands full of beer. We start to walk towards the sand.

“Party on, Michelle!” Wayne says.

“Party on, Judith!” I say.

“Party on, Garth!” Judith Butler says.

“Party on, David Bowie!” Garth says.

“Party on, Rivers!” Bowie says.

“Party on, Wayne!” Rivers says.

“Party on, Garth!” Wayne says.

“Party on, Derrida!”
WORKS CITED


“Fancy Drinks and Bad Deals.” Photo: Michelle Arp, © 2018.


