**Abstract**

This essay argues that David Bowie’s explorations of identity can meaningfully be linked to explorations of the same topic by Enlightenment philosophers. It analyses these connections in both Bowie’s work and his life and considers the ways in which that life and work extend the thinking of John Locke, David Hume, and George Berkeley to offer a new possible construction of identity, one that depends on the viewer rather than the viewed.

**Biographical Note**

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**What We Talk About When We Talk About Bowie: David Bowie and Enlightenment Philosophies of Identity**

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All culture has a history, of course. We can trace Lord Byron back to Alexander Pope; we can trace David Bowie back to the Beat movement.[[1]](#endnote-1) But every history has its own history: we can trace Pope back to Horace and the Beats back to the Enlightenment. This lineage of reference prompts a question: Is posterity transitive? If I can link this writer to this thinker and this thinker to that thinker, am I justified in linking this writer to that thinker? In the case of Byron and Horace the answer is a safe “yes,” both because Byron produced a work called “Hints from Horace” and because his satire is demonstrably Horatian. The case of Bowie and the Enlightenment, however, is less clear. Bowie never acknowledged a debt to Enlightenment philosophy, and what critics know of his reading material doesn’t show any direct encounters with it.[[2]](#endnote-2) I would argue, however, that one *can* link Bowie back to the Enlightenment, not only because of his connection to the Beats, but also because much of his career demonstrates a preoccupation with themes and questions that also troubled Enlightenment philosophers. Gavin Budge has suggested that critics might profit from exploring Romantic writing’s debt to British Enlightenment philosophy (18). This essay offers an exploration of one facet of Bowie’s debt to the same movement: his exploration of identity.

Because “David Bowie” is an elastic term, I want to begin by explaining that the David Bowie I consider here is the David Bowie of the years 1972 to 1983. This is Bowie’s most fertile period and the one with which he remains most closely associated. Moreover, my discussion deals largely with Bowie’s public persona rather than his lyrics or music. As Adam Trainer has pointed out, “David Bowie as a phenomenon is primarily about performance,” and it is in his public presentation that he most clearly engages with Enlightenment thought.[[3]](#endnote-3) I also want to stress that this essay is part of the beginning of a longer project that considers Bowie’s engagement with Romanticism and its Enlightenment origins. What follows here is thus a series of ideas that I may well end up altering or disagreeing with further down the line.

In considering Bowie’s link to the British Enlightenment, it is useful to invoke ethnomethodologist Harold Garfinkel’s term, “indexicality.” Garfinkel defines indexicality as the meaning an object or concept has for those who invoke it, a meaning that does not necessarily align with its original meaning (although it retains something of that original meaning).[[4]](#endnote-4) Indexicality can be both transitive and mutable. If you hear Bauhaus’s version of “Ziggy Stardust,” for example, you now understand not “Ziggy Stardust” but Bauhaus’s indexicality of it. You may retain their indexical understanding, or you may process it into your own indexicality of the song, which would be your indexicality of Bauhaus’s indexicality of “Ziggy Stardust,” but would retain some of the meanings of Bowie’s original, too. Indexical transmission is thus a kind of game of signifying Chinese Whispers, although one in which each whisper does retain at least something of the original.

Bowie’s understanding of Enlightenment thought may be seen as an indexical process that begins with the Beats: he often acknowledged the influence the movement had on him.[[5]](#endnote-5) The Beats themselves were strongly influenced by the works of the Frankfurt School philosopher Herbert Marcuse, who believed that the critical spirit of the Enlightenment found continuation in the theories of Hegel and Marx, and “reproached the positivists for having killed the true spirit of the Enlightenment by stifling its fundamentally negative dimension.” For Marcuse, liberating people from their alienation—from “enslavement to the instruments of production” and “subjection to the economic sphere”—was the only true revolution, and he believed it could emerge only via “outsiders to the system – the young, the unemployed and others at the fringes of society” (Delacampagne 207–9). In light of this explanation, it is not surprising that Marcuse also influenced the hippies, another central influence on the young David Bowie. Thus, from the Beats and the hippies to Marcuse to the Enlightenment, a line of indexicality offers one possibility for how Bowie might have encountered Enlightenment thought.

However he encountered it, though, it is certain that the most obvious way in which Bowie connects to British Enlightenment philosophy is through his exploration of the concept of identity. That Bowie both engaged with and enacted questions surrounding identity is a commonplace by now. What has not yet been discussed, however, is that Bowie’s discomfort with single identity, and his attempts both to multiply identity and to determine what constitutes it, are engagements with and experiments upon hypotheses advanced by John Locke and David Hume.

In his *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), Hume argues that the notion of cohesive identity is a chimera: “There is properly no simplicity in [the mind] at one time, nor identity . . . whatever natural propension we may have to imagine that simplicity and identity . . . They are the successive perceptions only, that constitute the mind” (301). The assumption that people possess one continuous identity is, for Hume, founded on an error:

A fiction, either of something invariable and uninterrupted, or of something mysterious and inexplicable, or at least with a propensity to such fictions. What will suffice to prove this hypothesis to the satisfaction of every fair enquirer, is to shew from daily experience and observation, that the objects, which are variable or interrupted, and yet are suppos’d to continue the same, are such only as consist of a succession of parts, connected together by resemblance, contiguity, or causation. . . . A change in any considerable part of a body destroys its identity; but ‘tis remarkable, that where the change is produc’d *gradually* and *insensibl*y we are less apt to ascribe to it the same effect. The reason can plainly be no other, than that the mind, in following the successive changes of the body, feels an easy passage from the surveying its condition in one moment to the viewing of it in another, and at no particular time perceives any interruption in its actions. (I.4.6)

Bowie positions himself as a Humean through the best-known facet of his career: his personae.[[6]](#endnote-6) These personae and their reception prove Hume’s assertion that gradual change, although resulting in a new identity, is not perceived that way by those who witness it. If one traces the arc of Bowie’s evolution during the 1972–1983 period, one can see that the consecutive personae enact a process of progressive, interconnected change: Ziggy Stardust’s scarlet hair and pale skin (1972–73) remain in Aladdin Sane (1973), who dons an eye patch to become Hallowe’en Jack (1974), who cuts and lightens his hair but keeps it an autumnal shade and retains his pallor to become the Thin White Duke (1975–76), whose Germanic “kalte Pracht” [“cold splendour”] (Du Verger 13) is carried forward to an actual stay in Berlin from 1976 to 1979, during which period Bowie grows his hair out to its natural colour, which he keeps for 1980’s *Scary Monsters (and Super Creeps)* album, on the cover of which not only is his hair helpfully colored red by the designer but he is dressed as a Pierrot, an image that features in the cover art of 1969’s *Space Oddity* album.[[7]](#endnote-7) Yet, because of resemblance and contiguity, these “successive changes” produce “an easy passage from the surveying its condition in one moment to the viewing of it in another.” All are understood to be the same “David Bowie,” despite the fact that if one placed a picture of Aladdin Sane next to a picture of the *Scary Monsters* persona, one would be hard pressed to define them as sharing the same identity.[[8]](#endnote-8)

In fact, according to Hume, they do not share the same identity, and Bowie seems to follow him in this, too. Asked by Russell Harty in 1975 whether for his next persona he intended to continue with the “glittery Ziggy Stardust thing,” Bowie responded, “I think the image I adopt may well be me. I’m sort of inventing me at the moment” (Bowie, Interview 1:50). A good deal of music-critic dissatisfaction with Bowie, and a certain amount of philosophical discussion, centers around his alleged inauthenticity. Matthew Lampert, for example, asserts that “From the beginning, Bowie built his solo career on the inauthentic” (152), while Bethany Usher and Stephenie Fremaux argue that he “creates fictional characters brought to life through live performance and media interviews” (58). But Bowie’s response to Harty suggests something quite different: that the personae are not acts but selves. Indeed, he shows an attachment to the multiple self throughout his career, particularly vocally in this 1974–76 period: “If I’ve been at all responsible for people finding more characters in themselves than they originally thought they had, then I’m pleased,” he says in the 1974 documentary *Cracked Actor* (28:19), while the title of Bowie’s 1974 song, “Who Can I Be Now?” seems an extension of Hume’s odd description of his attempts to quantify selfhood. “When I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*,” Hume writes, “I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception.” Bowie’s title lays bare what these statements suggest: that the self can simultaneously be an other, and that humans can simultaneously possess within them more than one self (in Hume’s case, one that is analysed and one that analyses).

Bowie’s personae support this conclusion. Each has a different background (space, the Weimar Republic, post-apocalypse), not just fully realized but also different from the background of the other personae, and from Bowie’s own background. Each makes a different—or differently inflected—type of music; each has his own style of dress; each even moves differently on stage, the icy stillness of the Thin White Duke bearing no resemblance to the loose knees of *Let’s Dance*’s pop singer.[[9]](#endnote-9) Wade Hollingshaus asserts that “Bowie’s audiences are well trained in their approach to Bowie’s work; as they search for and identify the silent speech of that work, they allow whatever they find to coalesce around the ‘Bowie’ image” (121), but this is not quite the case. Bowie’s audiences may file each persona under the heading “David Bowie,” but they also recognize them as distinct beings in their own right: no Bowie fan worth her salt would tell you that Ziggy Stardust and the elegant clotheshorse of *Let’s Dance* are the same guy.[[10]](#endnote-10) When assuming a persona, then, Bowie both is and is not, simultaneously. Rob Sheffield describes the David Bowie of the Thin White Duke period as “a blond coat hanger with a dead rock star hanging on it” (39), and this mordant witticism is a more serious assessment than it at first appears to be. In *Cracked Actor* Bowie muses that “I couldn’t decide whether I was writing the characters or whether the characters were writing me” (37:00). Bowie may always be himself, but so are his personae.[[11]](#endnote-11)

In this way the personae are living enactments of Hume’s assertion that “The mind is a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety. . . . There is properly no simplicity in it at one time, nor identity in different. . . . They are the successive perceptions only, that constitute the mind” (I.4.6). The mistake critics and philosophers make is to read identity from Bowie’s exterior into his interior: because Ziggy Stardust is made visible to the audience from dyed hair, make-up, and costumes, the understanding is that he must be an assumed identity, an acted part. In fact, it would be more accurate to read from Bowie’s interior to his exterior: Ziggy is an extrusion of portion of David Bowie, garbed and colored in order to reify an interior way of experiencing the world.[[12]](#endnote-12)

Funnily enough, critics help Bowie to prove this—via another Humean assertion. In the second book of the *Treatise,* Hume argues for selves as social constructions:

if a person considered himself in the same light, in which he appears to his admirer, he would first receive a separate pleasure, and afterwards a pride or self-satisfaction, according to the hypothesis above explained. Now nothing is more natural than for us to embrace the opinions of others in this particular; both from sympathy, which renders all their sentiments intimately present to us; and from reasoning, which makes us regard their judgment, as a kind of argument for what they affirm. These two principles of authority and sympathy influence almost all our opinions; but must have a peculiar influence, when we judge of our own worth and character. (2.1.11)

As Ruth Boeker has pointed out, “If a self were merely a bundle of perceptions which is given in introspection, then it would be difficult for others to have access to myself, and to praise and blame me . . . a self will be accessible both from a first person . . . perspective and from the perspective of others” (5). By this logic, if a Bowie persona appears to be a fully-formed identity, then he is. A perceived self is (at least to some degree) an actual self. And both critics and fans frequently treat Bowie’s perceived selves as if they were actual selves. Every Bowie fan has a favorite persona, and the choice is based not on the excellence of the costumes nor the execution of the accompanying stage show, but on the character the persona exudes.[[13]](#endnote-13) Even academic writers often speak of a given persona as a being in his own right: Hollingshaus, for example, asserts that “Ziggy is more than just an alter ego for David Bowie. Ziggy is the protagonist in a rock star suicide” (107). Sometimes even as the personae are understood as Bowie creations they are simultaneously treated as real, as when Hollingshaus writes that “D.A. Pennebaker’s documentary recording of Ziggy’s farewell concert performance shows Bowie and his band, the Spiders, getting into costume backstage before the concert” (102). Strictly speaking, Ziggy doesn’t have a farewell concert. He doesn’t have anything, because he doesn’t exist separately from David Bowie. Yet, as Hollingshaus’s wording shows, it is difficult not to think of the two identities as having separate selfhoods.

Bowie’s fully realized personae, then, raises the very Humean question of how to identify identity. I have written elsewhere about the complications inherent in performances of the song “Ziggy Stardust.” Within the world of that song, its lyrics about a left-handed, odd-eyed rock star are sung in the voice of a member of his backing band. At the same time, in the stage performance, these lyrics are being sung by a left-handed, odd-eyed rock star dressed as the rock star he is singing about, but in the voice of that backing-band member. The singer is, of course, neither the rock star the song describes nor the backing-band member telling the story: he is David Bowie, singing in one persona about another persona. It would be difficult to find a better realization of Hume’s assertion that consciousness is made up of “successive perceptions only.”[[14]](#endnote-14) Indeed, Bowie’s stage performances of “Ziggy Stardust” raise the possibility that identity may consist of different perceptions occurring *simultaneously*. And in giving shape to Hume’s hypothesis and raising that possibility, the performances also connect back to the question that Hume poses: “What then gives us so great a propension to ascribe an identity to these successive perceptions, and to suppose ourselves possest of an invariable and uninterrupted existence thro’ the whole course of our lives?” (1.4.6).

Well, one might reply, what gives us such a propension in this case is the fact that all of the personae are performed by the same person, David Bowie. What’s more, this assertion has John Locke to back it up. In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), Locke draws a distinction between “man” and “person,” two labels I have avoided applying to Bowie in this article precisely because Locke gives them quite specific definitions. For Locke, “man” refers to “the same continued life communicated to different particles of matter, as they happen successively to be united to [an] organized living body” (II.27.8), while “person” means “a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places; which it does only by that consciousness which is inseparable from thinking. . . . It [person] is a forensick term appropriating actions and their merit; and so belongs only to intelligent agents capable of a law” (2.27.9–26). Using these definitions, David Bowie is both a man and a person, one who performs the personae and is not a being separate from them.

There is a problem, however. Also using these definitions, David Bowie, both man and person, does not exist. Bowie never legally changed his name; his particles of matter and thinking intelligent being were both legallyforensically—attached to the name David Jones throughout his life. And while arguing for a distinction between David Bowie and David Jones may at first seem a piece of pedantic literalism, it becomes less so when one knows that from very early on in his career, Bowie (or whatever we should call him) drew a distinction between David Bowie and himself. As early as an 1969 interview about his involvement with the Beckenham Arts Lab, he speaks of “Bowie” as if he were a separate entity:

*Interviewer: I wonder if you will still live within the same social framework if the record goes to number one?*

D: Yes, why not. We’ll invite the straight journalists back . . . after the Folk Club and Bowie will still be doing the same things and not answering the same questions.

. . .

D: I got immersed in Buddhism and had a big re-think about where I was at. . . . The David Bowie career was a physical manifestation of where I was at spirituallyit may seem that I’ve moved around a lot, but at least I was honest to my head . . . (Finnigan 90–2)

This dissociation of Bowie from Bowie continues as his career progresses. In the 1973 documentary, *Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*, he tells an interviewer that “I believe in my part all the way down the line, right the way down. But I do play it. Because that’s the way I do . . . that’s part of what Bowie is supposedly all about” (Pennebaker). In a 2014 interview in British newspaper *The Guardian*, Bowie’s wife Iman indicated that this division continued throughout Bowie’s life: “Bowie is just a persona. He’s a singer, an entertainer. David Jones is a man I met” (Cadwalladr). It would seem that David Bowie was just another persona for David Jones.

What are we to do with this? It is possible to discuss Ziggy Stardust, et al., as acted personae because it is possible to conceive of them as separate from David Bowie the performer. It is extremely difficult, however, to make the cognitive leap necessary to conceive of “David Bowie” as merely a persona enacted by the walking, talking being that we only know as David Bowie. What is this being if it is not David Bowie? Have critics been talking about Bowie when all along they should have been talking about Jones? Or are we to give David Bowie the legitimacy of personhood when he’s in use (as it were), since in that capacity he gives interviews, expresses beliefs, offers thoughts? Are these beliefs and thoughts different to Jones’s? Is the man who tells a dumb joke to camera in an outtake posted on YouTube David Bowie (he’s on camera!) or David Jones (it’s a personal moment!)?

All of which is to say that thinking of “David Bowie” as the ultimate piece of performance art by David Jones, performed so well that “he” appears to have become a fully extant being in his own right, raises fundamental questions about the nature of identity, and of personae. At what point does a persona become an identity, and to what extent is an identity a persona? Bowie’s “Bowie” persona asks this not in the tedious postmodern sense that invokes discourse, performativity, the absence of essential self, etc., etc., but in a concrete sense that extends Enlightenment questions about identity until they very nearly snap.

In fact, one might argue that he does make them snap but in the experiences of his real life rather than on stage. Having separated man from person, Locke remains preoccupied by the question of what precisely makes a person a person:

[I]t is plain, consciousness, as far as ever it can be extended – should it be to ages past – unites existences and actions very remote in time into the same person . . . so that whatever has the consciousness of present and past actions, is the same person to whom they both belong. . . . But yet possibly it will still be objected, –Suppose I wholly lose the memory of some parts of my life, beyond a possibility of retrieving them, so that perhaps I shall never be conscious of them again; yet am I not the same person that did those actions, had those thoughts that I once was conscious of, though I have now forgot them? To which I answer, that . . . if it be possible for the same man to have distinct incommunicable consciousness at different times, it is past doubt the same man would at different times make different persons. (2.27.9–20)

In other words, for Locke, if a man has no memory of a part of his life, then during that part he was, quite literally, not himself. Bowie may be the only public figure to offer an opportunity to consider the real-life implications of this philosophy.

It’s well known that for Bowie (and Jones) the 1970s were a whirlwind of heavy drug use.[[15]](#endnote-15) One result of this excess was that it left him with what he described as “incredible losses of memory. . . . Whole *chunks* of my life. I can’t remember, for instance, any*any*of 1975.” In one interview, Bowie detailed watching footage of himself performing as Ziggy Stardust and thinking, “This boy used to dress like that for a living? My *God* this is funny”; in another he remarked of recording the Thin White Duke’s 1976 album *Station to Station* that “I can’t even remember the studio. I know it was in LA because I’ve read it was. . . . I listen to *Station to Station* as a piece of work by an entirely different person” (Loder 334), and once asked to explain his puzzling 1971 song, “The Bewlay Brothers,” he said, “I can’t imagine what the person who wrote that had on his mind” (Pegg 39).

This real-life self-dissociation is something more extreme than Hume’s “successive perceptions.” Even if one agrees with Hume that a consciousness is merely a succession of impressions and/or thoughts passing through the mind, one must grant that these impressions are in some way connected, since empirical examination of one’s own consciousness reveals that one thought gives rise to another, which gives rise to another, which connects to an earlier impression, and so on. But the condition that Bowie outlines is one of disconnection: a consciousness (or personhood, or identity) interrupted then taken up again later. According to Locke’s reasoning, this would mean that David Bowie, the man, was in fact different *persons* throughout his life:

Let any one reflect upon himself, and conclude that he has in himself an immaterial spirit, which is that which thinks in him . . . let him also suppose it to be the same soul that was in Nestor or Thersites, at the siege of Troy . . . but he now having no consciousness of any of the actions either of Nestor or Thersites, does or can he conceive himself the same person with either of them? . . . [T]his consciousness . . . not reaching to any of the actions of either of those men, he is no more one self with either of them than if the soul or immaterial spirit that now informs him had been created, and began to exist, when it began to inform his

present body (1.27.14)

Since Bowie was ambulant and conversational (albeit sometimes barely), and working, during the years he cannot remember, there was some sort of identity existent, but by Locke’s lights this identity was not David Bowie. This would seem to turn the critical conversation on its head. It suggests that rather than thinking of the personae as performances by David Bowie, we should think of David Bowie as being performed, at least sometimes, by the personae: the Thin White Duke in 1975, Ziggy Stardust in 1973, and someone going by the name “David Bowie” and wearing a dress for men in 1971.

In other words, Bowie’s life experience suggests not simply that a persona can be an identity, nor that an identity may actually be a fully-fleshed and embodied persona, but that, in the most literal sense of the phrase, we are who we seem to be: if it looks like “David Bowie” and it sounds like “David Bowie,” then it *is* David Bowie, no matter who might be living inside it. Bowie’s lacunae of memory, coupled with his consistent existence as an acknowledgement as “David Bowie” during these periods of blankness, suggest that real, true being lies not inside the consciousness or the mind, where things may change and go missing, but in the perception of a cohesive self by others.[[16]](#endnote-16)

While this loops back to Hume’s notion of selves as social, it also connects to the philosophy of George Berkeley.[[17]](#endnote-17) For Berkeley, objects exist only as the mind perceives them. This does not mean that they vanish when not perceived, but rather that they exist *for* the mind as that mind understands them: as Berkeley puts it, “For what are . . . Objects but the things we perceive by Sense, and what, I pray you, do we perceive besides our own ideas and Sensations?” (I.4). Philosophers often consider what this means for the self that perceives, but they don’t tend to focus on what it might mean for the *perceived*. One is on safe ground asserting that a tomato exists for a mind only as a mind perceives it, but what about an ant? A cat? A boy from Bromley who makes himself into an icon? Berkeley’s *esse est percipi* [to be is to be perceived] suggests that the last of these, at least, has a minimum of two identities: the one in his own mind (however multifarious that may be), and the one perceived by those who encounter him. It further suggests that the identity in his own mind may be less his identity than the one others behold. While that interior identity may sometimes be absent, the one others see remains present: *percipi est esse*.

Now, where does that leave us? Both intrigued and somewhat slightly dazed, I imagine—but I judge only from my own perceptions. It also, however, leaves us with a David Bowie whose most significant connection to Enlightenment thought may be that he does what Enlightenment philosophers cannot quite force themselves to do: he brings his viewers face to face with the insolubility of identity. Even Hume, the boldest of these thinkers, ends his analysis by taking refuge in the assertion that “all the nice and subtile questions concerning personal identity can never possibly be decided, and are to be regarded rather as grammatical than as philosophical difficulties” (I.4.6). Bowie, I think, would disagree, precisely because he makes subtle questions concerning personal identity vividly material. Bowie moves abstract Enlightenment ideas into the world of lived art—indeed, he literally brings them to life. He thus suggests that despite the new media, digital effulgence, and virtual reality in which we are all constantly immersed (and of which he took full advantage), we continue to wrestle with an old question: Who am I? And who am I now? And now?

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1. Kevin Cann writes that in the autumn of 1961 Bowie frequented “central London’s beatnik haunt Trafalgar Square to talk to the denizens about Kerouac and the Beat movement” (21). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Admittedly, the evidence is small—limited to a widely published list of “David Bowie’s Top 100 Books” that originated on his official website. See [www.bowiebookclub.com/david-bowies-100-most-influential-books/](http://www.bowiebookclub.com/david-bowies-100-most-influential-books/). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See Adam Trainer’s “‘Well, I Wouldn’t Buy the Merchandise’: David Bowie as Postmodern Auteur.” Although critics have generally tended to consider Bowie’s performance of self rather than his music and lyrics, there are exceptions. See, for example, Wilfred Mellers, “Still Hunky Dory, After All These Years”; Shelton Waldrep, *Future Nostalgia: Performing David Bowie*; and Chris O’Leary, *Rebel Rebel* (itself a descendant of his blog, *Pushing Ahead of the Dame*). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. As the *Encyclopedia of Case Study Research* puts it, “Indexicality takes an interest in the “rules” people employ to make sense of verbal interaction. Indexical properties of language-in-use may refer … words that are understandable for the members of a social or cultural group in a particular context. Language is understood as naturally constitutive of social life and strongly depends on the context and history of the place in which it is used” (352). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. “I wanted to be just like Sal Paradise and Dan Moriarty [the central characters of *On the Road*],” Bowie once said (Cann 21). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. For more on Bowie and Hume, see Theodore G. Ammon, “The Flux of It All.” [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Permission costs keep me from being able to reproduce images, so instead I attempt to give stable urls for relevant images. For Ziggy Stardust, see [www.rollingstone.com/music/music-lists/exclusive-photos-speed-of-life-by-david-bowie-and-sukita-18036/](http://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-lists/exclusive-photos-speed-of-life-by-david-bowie-and-sukita-18036/); for Aladdin Sane, see [www.theguardian.com/music/2018/jun/20/david-bowie-aladdin-sane-allbum-photograph-donated-victoria-albert-museum](http://www.theguardian.com/music/2018/jun/20/david-bowie-aladdin-sane-allbum-photograph-donated-victoria-albert-museum). For Hallowe’en Jack compared to the Thin White Duke, see [www.skillshare.com/projects/David-Bowie-characters-Halloween-Jack-The-Thin-White-Duke/60290](http://www.skillshare.com/projects/David-Bowie-characters-Halloween-Jack-The-Thin-White-Duke/60290). For photos of Bowie during the Berlin years, see [www.musiclipse.com/misc/david-bowie-the-berlintrilogy](http://www.musiclipse.com/misc/david-bowie-the-berlintrilogy); for the cover of *Scary Monsters*, see [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scary\_Monsters\_(and\_Super\_Creeps)#/media/File:David%20BowieScaryMonstersCover](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scary_Monsters_(and_Super_Creeps)#/media/File:David%20BowieScaryMonstersCover); and for George Underwood’s cover art for *Space Oddity*, see [www.georgeunderwood.com/albumcovers](http://www.georgeunderwood.com/albumcovers). Underwood’s depiction of a Pierrot leading an elderly lady is reproduced precisely in the video for “Ashes to Ashes” (1980). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. This leaves aside the final version of Bowie, wandering Manhattan in a puffa jacket and a messenger bag, who looks nothing like any of the personae. See [medium.com/@sadydoyle/waiting-for-bowie-47e07fc3878a](mailto:medium.com/@sadydoyle/waiting-for-bowie-47e07fc3878a). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. For a discussion that argues for a uniformity of movement across Bowie’s personae, see Thorsten Botz-Borstein, “You Don’t Have to Be Stupid to Be Cool.” For one that considers the role of Bowie’s voice in the creation of persona, see Kevin Holm-Hudson, “‘Who Can I Be Now?’: David Bowie’s Vocal Personae.” [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. I use this word deliberately, in anticipation of this article’s later discussion of Locke’s use of the terms “man” and “person.” [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Simon Critchley writes, “during the 1970s . . . Bowie, almost ascetically, almost eremetically, disciplines himself into becoming a nothing, a mobile and massively creative nothing that could assume new faces, generate new illusions, and create new forms” (102). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. In fact, Usher and Fremaux all but acknowledge this, although they are determined to make Bowie’s adherence to the truth of the personae mean something else: “It is well documented that Ziggy Stardust, Aladdin Sane, and the Thin White Duke each took over Bowie to the point of excess. . . . Press and fans’ inability to differentiate between Bowie and his personae was supported by Bowie himself who, at times, spoke in character as Ziggy or emphasized them as being one and the same . . . In this way, Bowie’s use of personae was meant to be a piece of performance art” (58–59). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Certainly the costumes and stage show play a part in creating the persona, but rare is the fan who chooses “her” persona based on these. As for the choice of persona, a very informal straw poll suggests that The Thin White Duke is the favourite. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. See Emily Bernhard-Jackson, “‘Sometimes I feel like the whole human race’: Lord Byron and David Bowie Consider the Question of Identity.” [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. For simplicity’s sake, the essay continues to refer to him as Bowie until its end. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. He put out an album, presented a Grammy, made a movie, and performed with Cher all under this name in 1975. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. For another analysis of Bowie’s connection to Berkeley, see Nicolas Michaud, “The Babe with the Power.” [↑](#endnote-ref-17)