

GENRE AND/AS DISTINCTION:
THE MARS VOLTA AND THE SYMBOLIC BOUNDARIES OF PROGRESSIVE ROCK

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ABSTRACT

R. Justin Frankeny: Genre and/as Distinction: The Mars Volta and the Symbolic Boundaries of Progressive Rock
(Under the direction of Dr. Aaron Marcus)

In the early 2000's, The Mars Volta's popularity among prog(ressive) rock fandom was, in many ways, a conundrum. Unlike 1970s prog rock that drew heavily on Western classical music, TMV members Omar Rodriguez-Lopez and Cedric Bixler-Zavala routinely insisted on the integral importance of salsa music to their style and asserted an ambivalent relationship to classic prog rock. This thesis builds on existing scholarship on cultural omnivorousness to assert that an increase in omnivorous musical tastes since prog rock's inception in the 1970s not only explains The Mars Volta's affiliation with the genre in the early 2000s, but also explains their mixed reception within a divided prog rock fanbase. Contrary to existing scholarship that suggests that the omnivore had largely supplanted the highbrow snob, this study suggests that the snob persisted in the prog rock fanbase during progressive rock's resurgence (ca. 1997-2012), as distinguished by their assertion of the superiority of prog rock through discourses of musical complexity adapted from classical music.

Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's theorization of the "fields of cultural production" and research in musical border studies (especially that of Alejandro L. Madrid), this thesis studies the social distinctions that occur both within (between the snobs and the omnivores), as well beyond the genre of progressive rock (between prog rock and other genres). Building on Jack Hamilton's work on race in rock music, it suggests that progressive rock originated in the 1970s as a genre in which "authenticity" was coded as white, European, heteronormative, masculine, and middle- to

upper-class, which informed prog snobs' claims to cultural superiority. By the late 1990s, however, omnivorous listening practices had become the dominant mode of appreciating progressive rock, and the principle of snobbish exclusion lost ground to a concern for cultural diversity, identifiable by *performed omnivorousness*. Online fan forums and reviews that discuss The Mars Volta demonstrate that the snobs and omnivores struggled for dominance during the prog resurgence. While the omnivores understood sonic and visual signifiers of Rodriguez-Lopez's and Bixler-Zavala's Puerto Rican and Chicano heritage (respectively) as *social progress* within the historically non-diverse context of progressive rock, the snobs understood these signifiers as *noise*. Both positions have the effect of essentializing The Mars Volta's identities, which are better understood fluidly through the descriptor "border kids." This thesis concludes that, while the struggles between the snobs and omnivores result in symbolic boundaries at the intersection of race, class, gender expression, and geographic origin both within and beyond progressive rock, these struggles also contributed to the resurgence of progressive rock as a stable field and genre.

To Nora and to a bright future together.

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INTRODUCTION: THE SNOB, THE OMNIVORE, AND THE MUSIC OF THE MARS VOLTA

One of the most controversial bands on ProgArchives.com is The Mars Volta. On a site dedicated to a musical genre often said to have died in the late 1970s, a newly formed “progressive rock” band active in the twenty-first century was bound to ruffle the feathers of the fanbase’s old guard. Forum user Mirror Image, one of these old guard fans, provoked a debate by responding to user Thatfabulousalien’s praise of The Mars Volta in 2017 as “currently my favorite band, truly mesmerizing, trippy, complex, experimental prog rock”:

[Mirror Image]: I never have liked them as their music just sounds completely chaotic with no rhyme or reason. I’ve become increasingly interested in music that tells some kind of story and everything I’ve heard from The Mars Volta hasn’t really given me any kind of narrative other than “Hey, let’s just play a bunch of nonsense and hope somebody into noise will enjoy it.”¹

[Thatfabulousalien]: Dude, their first four albums are heavily conceptual, first three are concept albums telling very surreal stories. They’re not nonsense or even extreme in that way, lol They have a connection to psychedelic rock in their roots, they like sound scapes, unconventional musical shapes, harmonies, rhythms, melodies. I can’t say I ever see you listening to any avantgarde prog, so perhaps this music is a little outside your comfort zone? which is fine

[Mirror Image]: My point is I don’t hear anything remotely resembling a melody, any interesting chordal ideas...yeah, they’re just not my cup of tea. I’m an old fart when it comes to progressive rock as I like Genesis, Steve Hackett, Pink Floyd (NOT their early psychedelic stuff), Yes, King Crimson, Anthony Phillips, and Emerson, Lake, & Palmer. . . . Even in my own songwriting, I seem to be stuck in another time and place or so I’m told.²

¹ All fan forum posts in this thesis are quoted verbatim: spelling, punctuation, and emoticons appear as in the original post. As discussed below, many of these stylistic choices are specific to fan forum culture. Due to the proliferation of spelling and punctuation “mistakes” according to the standards of academic English, the [*sic*] designation will largely not be used within fan forum quotations.

² Thatfabulousalien and Mirror Image, “Mars Volta Fans!” Prog Archives (PA), posted May 22, 2017, http://www.progarchives.com/forum/forum_posts.asp?TID=111176&KW=mars+volta+fans&PID=5462965#5462965.

At first glance the above debate may seem to boil down to nothing more than generational differences in musical taste, a commonly-discussed phenomenon both in scholarship and casual conversations about music.³ A closer reading of these two users' presence on Prog Archives, however, reveals starkly different musical values that inform their reception of The Mars Volta and progressive rock more broadly.

Mirror Image, the "old fart," listens only to progressive rock, classical music and jazz,⁴ and generally asserts the supremacy of these three genres over lesser genres of any era. For instance, when one user posted albums by Boney M. (a Euro-Caribbean disco and reggae vocal group) and Eric Clapton (English rock and blues guitarist) as some of their favorites, Mirror Image responded, "Oh, look another spammer. Get out of here!"⁵ To Mirror Image, these artists were not worth discussing at all, despite the fact that they were all active in the 1970s—the era that is supposedly more representative of Mirror Image's "old fart" musical tastes. Mirror Image strongly favors the "classic" progressive rock of groups such as Genesis, Yes, and King Crimson, and tends to criticize progressive rock bands that deviate stylistically from the classics—including The Mars Volta.

³ Torn W. Smith, "Generational Differences in Musical Preferences," *Popular Music & Society* 18, no. 2 (July 2008): 43-59; Omar Lizardo and Sara Skiles, "Musical Taste and Patterns of Symbolic Exclusion in the United States 1993-2012: Generational Dynamics of Differentiation and Continuity," *Poetics* 53 (September 2015): 9-21.

⁴ "Here are my loves: classical, jazz, and progressive rock. That's about it." Mirror Image, "Grateful Dead?" PA, posted May 12, 2014, http://www.progarchives.com/forum/forum_posts.asp?TID=98076&KW=&PID=4986014#4986014.

⁵ To which another user responded, "Maybe the worst sort of spammer is the one that doesn't allow for the possibility that music that is not Prog has any value." ExittheLemming, "Damn Animals with Pink Floyd is overrated!" PA, posted May 17, 2014, http://www.progarchives.com/forum/forum_posts.asp?TID=97875&KW=&PID=4988126#4988126.

In contrast, Thatfabulousalien describes progressive rock as only one facet of their eclectic musical tastes.⁶ Thatfabulousalien often cites a diversity of genres as a demonstration of their musical knowledge, as can be seen in their description of John Zorn: “His music in some projects are very proggy, some bands are grindcore jazz, Klezma, surf rock, CLASSICAL, you name it! 🤖🎸”⁷ While Thatfabulousalien is not a fan of all musical genres—for example, they dislike Christian rock⁸—they are generally hostile toward other users who are not as open to genre diversity, such as Mirror Image in the above exchange.

Mirror Image and Thatfabulousalien represent two contrasting dispositions toward progressive rock: the snob and the omnivore, respectively. The musical snob, a remnant of traditional highbrow/lowbrow distinctions, is a high-status individual that willfully rejects music that they view as culturally inferior. Lawrence Levine argues that, with the emergence of the highbrow/lowbrow dichotomy in the late nineteenth-century United States, (predominantly white) snobs asserted the cultural superiority of classical music as a means either to distinguish themselves from cultural or ethnic others *or* assimilate them into their values.⁹ Beginning in the 1950s, another genre gradually emerged as a highbrow music worthy of snobbish distinction

⁶ In an effort to be gender-inclusive toward the anonymous users in a predominantly cisgender male-dominated genre, I employ the gender-neutral pronoun *they* in relation to all forum users.

⁷ Thatfabulousalien, “John Zorn’s Alchemists,” PA, posted December 4, 2016, http://www.progarchives.com/forum/forum_posts.asp?TID=109591&KW=John+zorn&PID=5404065#5404065.

⁸ “But in general I find modern christian music to be......” Thatfabulousalien, “Are Non-Christians Able to Enjoy Neal Morse Music?” PA, posted December 28, 2016, http://www.progarchives.com/forum/forum_posts.asp?TID=109789&PN=1.

⁹ Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 176-177.

among aficionados: jazz.¹⁰ And for a short time in the 1970s, I will argue, so did rock—specifically, a sub-genre of rock now known as *progressive* rock. With their use of irregular time signatures, thematic or conceptual albums, extended musical forms, and other instrumental or harmonic borrowings from European classical music, the “big six” progressive rock bands—Pink Floyd; Yes; Genesis; King Crimson; Jethro Tull; and Emerson, Lake, and Palmer—seemed next in line to join the ranks of classical music and jazz as an institutionalized highbrow art. Until the genre’s fall from grace in the late 1970s, snobbism adapted from the other “high arts” became increasingly prevalent among the fans and practitioners of progressive rock.

At the same time, sociologists began to observe the gradual emergence of a different disposition among high-status individuals: that of the omnivore.¹¹ In contrast to snobs, omnivores are open to consuming a wide variety of traditionally lowbrow musical genres in addition to highbrow ones. Sociologists Richard A. Peterson’s and Roger M. Kern’s quantitative study on musical omnivorousness suggests that, by 1992, the omnivores had largely supplanted the snobs as the dominant disposition among high-status U.S. Americans, both due to generational replacement and changing tastes of older generations.¹² Similar findings were later

¹⁰ Scott DeVeaux, “Constructing the Jazz Tradition: Jazz Historiography,” *Black American Literature Forum* 25, no. 3 (Autumn 1991): 544-546; Roderick Graham, “Jazz Consumption Among African Americans from 1982-2008,” *Journal of Black Studies* 42, no. 6 (September 2011): 993-1018.

¹¹ Paul Dimaggio and Michael Useem, “Social Class and Arts Consumption: The Origins and Consequences of Class Differences in Exposure to the Arts in America,” *Theory and Society* 5, no. 2 (March 1978): 156; Richard A. Peterson, “Understanding Audience Segmentation: From Elite and Mass to Omnivore and Univore,” *Poetics* 21 (1992): 243-258; Richard A. Peterson and Roger M. Kern, “Changing Highbrow Taste: From Snob to Omnivore,” *American Sociological Review* 61, no. 5 (October 1996): 900-907; Gabriel Rossman and Richard A. Peterson, “The Instability of Omnivorous Cultural Taste Over Time,” *Poetics* 52 (2015): 139-153.

¹² For Peterson and Kern, high-status individuals are those who appreciate “highbrow” music (classical music and opera), while low-status individuals are those who tend to exclusively appreciate “lowbrow” genres of music (country, bluegrass, gospel, rock, and blues). According to these criteria, they found that highbrows “have about two years more education, earn about five thousand dollars more annual family income, are about 10 years older, are more likely to be White, and are more likely to be female than are others in the sample.” Peterson and Kern, “Changing Highbrow Taste,” 900-01.

reported in other countries such as Australia, Japan, and several countries in Europe.¹³ The omnivores distinguish themselves from *univores*: low-status individuals who like only a limited range of traditionally lowbrow genres, such as country and gospel.¹⁴ Yet, if omnivores had largely supplanted snobs as Peterson and Kern suggest, what explains the presence of snobbish musical discourse articulated by actors such as Mirror Image? Peterson's theory of omnivorousness would suggest two possible answers: Mirror Image is a low-status individual and therefore a univore, or Mirror Image is an anomaly. However, further analysis reveals that both explanations fall short.

Peterson and Kern operationalize "highbrow" as "liking both classical music and opera, and choosing one of these forms as best-liked from among all kinds of music."¹⁵ While Mirror Image does not distinguish between classical and opera in their tastes, they nonetheless note that their appreciation of classical music at least equals that of jazz and prog rock, at times surpassing them.¹⁶ Thus, according to Peterson and Kern's definition, Mirror Image is a highbrow. Furthermore, based on the high frequency and quality of Mirror Image's participation in the forum, it is likely that Mirror Image maintains the financial stability characteristic of a high-status individual that permits this level of access and participation.¹⁷ The inherent anonymity of Prog Archives (and forums in general) prevents one from knowing any demographic information

¹³ For a review of this literature, see Romain Brisson, "Back to the Original Omnivore: On the Artefactual Nature of Peterson's Thesis of Omnivorousness," *Poetics* 76 (2019): 1-2.

¹⁴ Ibid, 901, 905-06.

¹⁵ Ibid, 900-01.

¹⁶ Mirror Image, "Why Do you prefer Prog over other music genres?" PA, posted July 11, 2014, http://www.progarchives.com/forum/forum_posts.asp?TID=98890&KW=Prog+over+other+music+genres&PN=4.

¹⁷ Lincoln Dahlberg, "The Internet and Democratic Discourse: Exploring the Prospects of Online Deliberative Forums Extending the Public Sphere," *Information, Communication & Society* 4, no. 4 (2001): 626-28.

on any one individual, but based on the aforementioned evidence, Mirror Image is a high-status *prog snob*. And Mirror Image is not alone: while they may not be in the majority, snobs are nonetheless a prominent faction of the userbase. Dormant or even repressed in certain contexts, their snobbish dispositions come to the fore in threads such as “Why Do you prefer Prog over other music genres?”, with claims like, “I just think I like music for the mind” and, “The only thing I prefer more than prog is The Symphony, and that is no faint praise coming from me!”¹⁸

Using the reception of The Mars Volta as a case study, in this thesis I argue that the longstanding highbrow aspirations of prog created conflict among high status individuals during the prog rock resurgence. Beginning with progressive rock’s origins in the 1970s, I trace the prog snob into the genre’s “death” in the late 70s and later into its resurgence in popularity in the 1990s. While prog snobbism was generally looked down upon by the time of the prog rock resurgence, it nonetheless continued to shape the musical values of a large part of the fanbase. Formed in 2001 amidst the prog rock resurgence, The Mars Volta (colloquially known as TMV for short) quickly became one of the leading progenitors of newly-written progressive rock at the time, despite some key differences that marked them as anomalies in the genre: notably, their El Paso, Texas origins, their Chicano and Puerto Rican identities, and their asserted ambivalence toward “classic” prog rock. As demonstrated in Table 1, Prog Archives users who like the music of The Mars Volta tend to demonstrate more omnivorous dispositions. Conversely, prog fans who dislike The Mars Volta tend toward snobbish dispositions. Thus, considering disagreements over the music of The Mars Volta as a site where these two dispositions meet and conflict, I examine these discourses in order to understand how these two sides of the fanbase relate. While these dispositions exist on a spectrum, I operationalize the snob as disliking more genres than

¹⁸ “Why Do you prefer Prog,” PA, created July 10, 2014.

liking (excluding progressive rock, jazz, and classical) and the omnivore as liking more genres than disliking.

Users that like The Mars Volta				Users that don't like The Mars Volta			
User	# of genres liked	# of genres disliked	Composite score	User	# of genres liked	# of genres disliked	Composite score
Thatfabulousalien	14	1	13	Mirror Image	0	1	-1
Moatilliatta	13	1	12	Hercules	2	13	-11
BroSpence	5	1	4	Salmacis	2	7	-5
Anthony H.	7	4	3	moshkito	1	4	-3
Figglesnout	4	5	-1	Dim	5	3	2

Table 1. Omnivorous and snobbish tendencies of fans versus non-fans of The Mars Volta in Prog Archives. The number of genres liked or disliked are pulled from definitive statements these users make about genre (including subgenres) in their participation in the “General Music Discussions” forum.¹⁹ A higher integer positive number in the composite score represents a higher tendency toward omnivorousness, while a higher integer negative number correlates to snobbism.

Sociologist Michèle Ollivier suggests that omnivores, in their performance of openness toward musical diversity, are expressing an openness to cultural diversity.²⁰ As for snobs, Levine suggests that they maintain cultural exclusion through their exclusive musical tastes.²¹ If this is

¹⁹ Closely related genres to prog, such as psychedelia, progressive metal, and krautrock were excluded from the genre count, as were jazz and classical. Statements about liking only some of a particular genre were also excluded. With the exception of Mirror Image, users whose responses yielded less than five genres in either category were deemed inconclusive and thus were excluded. Additionally, while a number of these users made statements about appreciating various artists, some of whom may not be considered prog, I refrained from making judgments as to which genres these artists belonged. Thus, statements about individual artists are excluded.

²⁰ Michèle Ollivier, “Modes of Openness to Cultural Diversity: Humanist, Populist, Practical, and Indifferent,” *Poetics* 36 (2008): 120-147.

²¹ Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 176-177.

true, how do prog snobs maintain cultural exclusion through their rejection of The Mars Volta? In other words, following sociologist Bethany Bryson, what are the “symbolic boundaries” that separate the tastes of the prog snobs versus prog omnivores as made known through disagreements over The Mars Volta?²² I ultimately conclude that these symbolic boundaries demarcate conflicting understandings of the word *progressive* and its implications for the intersection of age, class, race, geographic origin, and gender expression. While the snobs maintain these symbolic boundaries by labeling music deemed incompatible with classic prog values as “noise,” the omnivores reciprocate through what I will term *performed omnivorousness*, or the ability to cite a variety of genres.

Progressive rock is an excellent case study in omnivorousness for several reasons. As a short-lived subgenre of rock in the 1970s, prog rock has a fairly stable meaning in retrospect, which enables comparisons between the music and fan dispositions in the classic prog (ca. 1969-1978) and prog resurgence (ca. 1997-2012) eras. Additionally, progressive rock’s birth, death, and resurgence from the 1970s to the 2010s provides an ample time period against which to test the findings of Peterson et al.’s studies in omnivorousness, which covers the time period of 1982 to 2008. Finally, while existing studies in omnivorousness tend to emphasize classical music (and to a lesser extent, jazz) as the traditionally highbrow music, progressive rock’s oft-noted influence from classical music and associated highbrow discourses allow for an analysis of highbrow snobbishness in a novel, emergent historical context: that of rock.

This thesis offers a fresh perspective on the literature on omnivorousness by capturing the intricacies of how snobs and omnivores relate and struggle for dominance in the context of a

²² Bethany Bryson, “‘Anything but Heavy Metal’: Symbolic Exclusion and Musical Dislikes,” *American Sociological Review* 61, no. 5 (October 1996): 884-889.

genre case study. While my findings in this research, overall, support the notion that the omnivore has largely supplanted the snob as the *dominant* mode of distinguishing highbrow taste, nonetheless, I also argue that the snob never truly died. That the omnivore represents the dominant taste pattern of highbrows can be seen in how Thatfabulousalien maintains their high ground in the exchange that opens this chapter: on the basis of *openness*. Not only are they open to more music than Mirror Image (to whom The Mars Volta is “outside [their] comfort zone”), but they are also open to the idea that other people will not like as much music as they do (“which is fine”).

As a case study into the values and struggles within progressive rock, the theorization of genre as a relatively stable site of discourse at a given point in time is integral to my thesis. This is not to suggest that progressive rock is, or ever has been, a static grouping of empirically verifiable, similar-sounding musical texts—to the contrary, the idea of musical change over time is built into the very nature of the genre through the idea of *progress*. Rather, following David Brackett, I understand genre in this thesis as “associations of texts whose criteria of similarity may vary according to the uses to which the genre labels are put.” The primary “use” of the progressive rock genre label with which I contend is what Brackett calls the discursive level of the “critic-fan genre”: genre specificity as a site of discourse and struggle among critics and the fanbase.²³

Furthermore, rather than theorizing genre as an exclusive entity in which some texts can be said to belong to the genre while others do not, drawing on border studies, I theorize progressive rock as an epistemological border which understands genre as a “fluid give-and-take

²³ David Brackett, *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth-Century Popular Music* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 3-4, 29.

[area] where complexity, negotiation, and hybridity are everyday constants.”²⁴ The notion of genre as border zone is especially salient here due to TMV’s El Paso “border kid” identities, the musical and social consequences of which will be discussed in Chapter 2. This theorization recognizes both “limits and connecting tissue,” “discontinuities and continuities,” and “margins and . . . centers” inherent within genre, any or all of which are very real to the participants within the genre depending on their position.²⁵ For participants in the genre of progressive rock, the border zone serves as a liminal space in which both individual identity (as prog snob, prog omnivore, or most commonly, somewhere in between) and genre identity (e.g. whether TMV is or is not truly progressive rock) are constantly negotiated through processes of inclusion, exclusion, and power dynamics.

My deployment of the term “progressive rock” to designate the entirety of that which may be described as prog rock through the 2010s may be fairly contentious or even presumptuous. Many fans, and even some scholars such as Edward Macan,²⁶ may not consider newly composed progressive rock after the 1990s as progressive rock proper. Nonetheless, as I will demonstrate below, this tension around the boundaries of the genre is integral to the genre’s maintenance. When distinctions are necessary, however, I employ the term “new prog” to denote prog rock composed by bands formed after the year 1990 and “classic prog” to refer to that composed during the so-called golden years of prog rock in the 1960s-70s.

²⁴ Alejandro L. Madrid, *Nor-tec Rifa!: Electronic Dance Music from Tijuana to the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3-4.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Macan groups this music under “post-progressive.” Edward Macan, *Rocking the Classics: English Progressive Rock and the Counterculture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 211.

Literature Review: Genre and/as Distinction

While evidence of omnivorous tastes was found in 1978 by Paul Dimaggio and Michael Useem and even as early as 1948 by Karl F. Schuessler,²⁷ Richard A. Peterson first theorized the highbrow trend toward omnivorousness in 1992. In contrast to Pierre Bourdieu's findings in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* that class distinction occurs along the lines of cultural snobbism in 1960s France,²⁸ Peterson argued that in the 1980s U.S., high-status individuals distinguished themselves from those of low status by virtue of an *openness* to musical diversity.²⁹ In 1996, Peterson and Kern provided the first quantitative data for this theory, utilizing studies conducted in 1982 and 1992.³⁰ Peterson and his interlocutors' theory has had a tremendous impact on twenty-first century musicological studies. Most significantly, their theorizing of omnivorousness has contributed to studies on connections between musical taste, neoliberalism, and postmodernism in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.³¹

This work on omnivorousness, however, is founded on several theoretical issues and limitations. In the first place, the survey data is restricted by a limited range of seemingly static musical genres. They list "country music, bluegrass, gospel, rock, and blues" under "lowbrow"

²⁷ Karl F. Schuessler, "Social Background and Musical Taste," *American Sociological Review* 13, no. 3 (June, 1948): 330–35.

²⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

²⁹ Peterson, "Understanding Audience Segmentation," 254–56.

³⁰ Peterson and Kern, "Changing Highbrow Taste," 900–07.

³¹ See, for instance, Chapter 7 on constructing individual identity through neoliberalist consumption in the age of omnivorousness in Jeffrey T. Nelson, *I'm Not Like Everybody Else: Biopolitics, Neoliberalism, and American Popular Music* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018), 73–83; Chapter 1 on the "anything but country music" aphorism representing a stigmatization of bigotry for working-class whites after the rise of "neoliberal subjectivity" in Nadine Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 23–50; and David Blake, "Musicological Omnivory in the Neoliberal University," *Journal of Musicology* 34, no. 3 (summer 2017): 319–53.

genres; “mood/easy listening, Broadway musicals, and big band music” under “middle-brow;” and “classical music and opera” as “highbrow.”³² While such a limited characterization of genre was necessary to maintain variables throughout their longitudinal study, it nonetheless fails to account for the cultural trajectory of these genres over time. For instance, while rock is labelled as lowbrow in their study, it does not account for different iterations of the genre, like prog rock, which distinguishes a highbrow subgenre. As such, a pure prog snob filling out this survey in 1992 would be labeled as a lowbrow univore under their theorization. A 2015 repeat study by Rossman and Peterson found that, based on the existing genre variables, omnivorousness had declined between 2002 and 2008. While the authors suggest that omnivorousness may have been a peaking fad, these results may also be explained in part by the instability of genres over time, as well as the persistence of the highbrow snob that I posit in this study.³³

As noted by Bethany Bryson, the surveys conducted by Peterson et al. also fail to account for musical *dislikes*. Her study clarifies that, while omnivores may be defined by an openness to musical diversity, often this openness stops short of a select few genres, such as country, rap, and metal. She argues that these musical dislikes represent a “symbolic exclusion” between high status U.S. Americans and groups of people they do not like who are signified through these musical genres.³⁴ Furthermore, Will Atkinson argues that distinctions and symbolic exclusions occur within every genre, citing progressive rock as one such distinction within the genre of

³² Peterson and Kern, “Changing Highbrow Taste,” 900-01.

³³ Rossman and Peterson, “The Instability of Omnivorous,” 139.

³⁴ Bryson, “‘Anything but Heavy Metal’,” 884-85.

rock.³⁵ Justin Williams' study on how jazz rap became high art within the genre of hip hop can be understood as one manifestation of Atkinson's argument.³⁶

Douglas B. Holt notes that Peterson and his associates' work is founded on misinterpretations about the specificity of Pierre Bourdieu's theorization of taste, especially in regard to capital and class distinctions. While Peterson et al. assume Bourdieu's theories and findings are specific to 1960s France, Holt points out that, for Bourdieu, the way distinction is produced and correlated to cultural capital varies from culture to culture. In other words, Bourdieu's theories in *Distinction* do not reduce to his specific, culturally- and historically-situated empirical findings. Holt argues that Peterson et al. focused on the objectified state of cultural capital, but the embodied state is more useful in delineating taste and class distinctions in the contemporary United States. As such, while Peterson et al. study objectified cultural capital in the form of openness to the consumption of a variety of different genres, their studies do not account for the cultural capital associated with musical taste in its embodied form: *how* music is consumed, instead of *what* is consumed.³⁷

Following Holt, in this thesis I draw on Bourdieu's "fields cultural production" in order to determine how consumption of progressive rock has and continues to shape distinctions of prog rock fandom, *both within and beyond the genre*. To do this, I will be drawing on several

³⁵ Will Atkinson, "The Context and Genesis of Musical Tastes: Omnivorousness Debunked, Bourdieu Buttressed," *Poetics* 39 (2011): 177. Atkinson's argument may provide counterevidence to my thesis that progressive rock is uniquely positioned as popular music genre with highbrow aspirations due to its associations with classical music. I hypothesize, however, that progressive rock, due in part to the genre's age, is more exclusionary than most other "intellectual" popular music genres. Such a hypothesis would require more evidence in comparing prog snobbism to that in other popular music subgenres, which is beyond the scope of this thesis.

³⁶ Justin Williams, *Rhymin' and Stealin': Musical Borrowing in Hip-Hop* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 66.

³⁷ Douglas B. Holt, "Does Cultural Capital Structure American Consumption?" *Journal of Consumer Research* 25, no. 1 (June 1998): 4, 6.

key concepts from Bourdieu's theories.³⁸ A *field* is the space of positions and position-takings, which is structured by the distribution of forms of capital specific to the field. As demonstrated by Figure 1, fields are multiple and hierarchical; some examples that I will discuss in this thesis include the field of progressive rock, which is within the field of music, itself within the broader literary and artistic field. In a given field, a *position* is the status that an individual occupies within this hierarchy, while *position-takings* are the manifestations of an individual in trying to change their position. A position is defined by the amount of *cultural, social, and/or economic capital* that the agent possesses. A given field is defined by the forces or struggles of the various position-takings within it, with individuals trying to achieve or maintain control over these types of capital.

Economic capital is the universe of mercantile exchanges oriented toward the maximization of profit. While Bourdieu builds on this traditionalist economic theory, he nonetheless deems it an inadequate representation of capital in its entirety.³⁹ This is where social and cultural capital come in. *Social* capital describes the capital acquired by an agent's affiliation with more or less institutionalized social networks, as well as the ability to mobilize these relationships when necessary.⁴⁰ Finally, *cultural* capital refers to an agent's ability in a particular field to operationalize distinctive tastes, skills, knowledge, and practices unique to that field. It occurs in three forms: *embodied* ("long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body"), *objectified*

³⁸ I draw these theories primarily from Pierre Bourdieu, "The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed" in *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randall Johnson, trans. Richard Nice (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 29-73; and Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. J. Richardson, trans. Richard Nice (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1986), 241-58.

³⁹ Bourdieu, "Forms of Capital," 15.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 21.

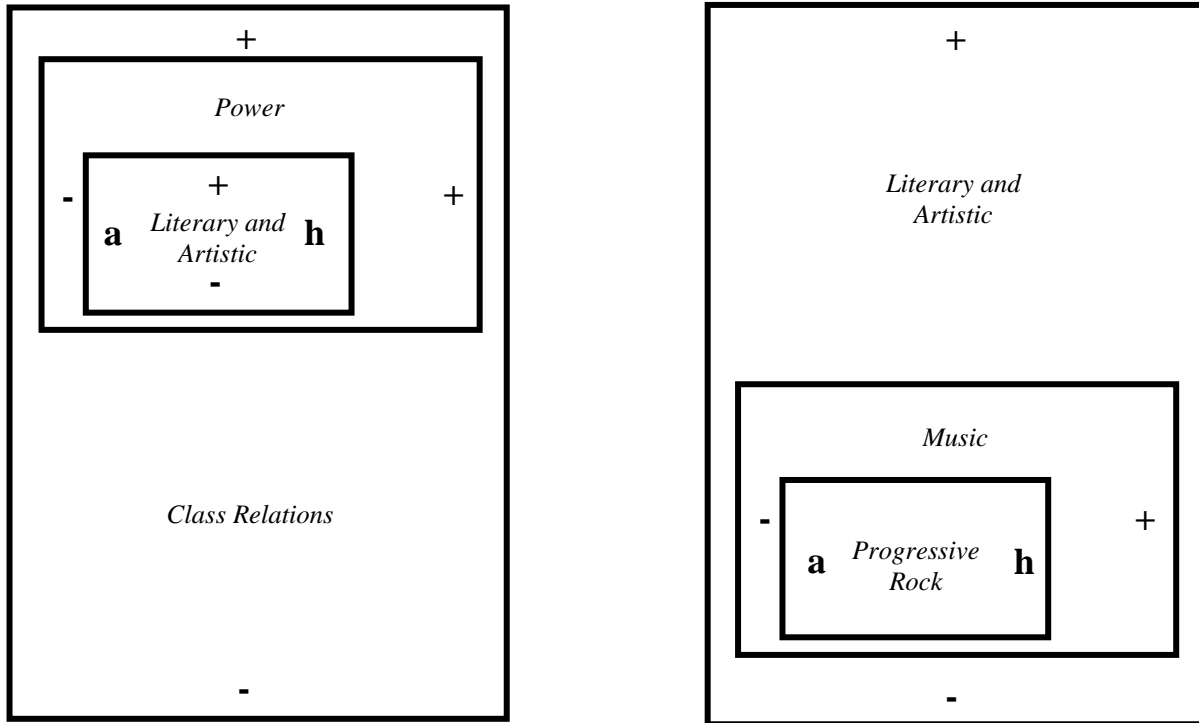


Figure 1. Graphic representation of progressive rock within the fields of cultural production. On the right is the field of progressive rock in 2010 nested hierarchically within the fields under which it is subsumed, and on the left is a recreation of Bourdieu’s original figure from “The Field of Cultural Production.” The “+” end of each field designates a dominant position within that field, while the “-” designates a dominated position. The “a” and “h” ends of the progressive rock and literary and artistic fields represent the autonomous and heteronomous principles of hierarchization, respectively.⁴¹

(“in the form of cultural goods . . . which are the trace or realization” of embodied cultural capital), and *institutionalized* (embodied cultural capital that is accrued and can be conferred by existing institutions such as universities).⁴² Following Holt, of these three types, cultural capital is the most pertinent to this research, especially in its embodied form, since I will be analyzing the *enactment* of musical taste by prog rock fans made known through their internet presence.

⁴¹ Bourdieu, “Field of Cultural Production,” 38. The field of music is not limited to popular or classical music, but broadly inclusive of both. Music occupies a dominated position in the modern literary and artistic field due to the extent that the author feels that *literary* artistic values tend to dominate the values of the arts at large—an issue not entirely relevant for the purposes of this thesis. Progressive rock occupies a dominated position within the field of music due to the narrative of the genre’s “death” (discussed below) and that narrative’s implications for the genre’s lack of contemporary value or significance.

⁴² Ibid, 16-21.

Institutionalized cultural capital plays an important secondary role in these analyses, as the cultural capital accumulated and conferred by institutions (fan forums, music review websites or journals) factors strongly into these actors' curated representations of their tastes.

Cultural capital is specific to its given field, and as such each field has its own prevailing laws for the struggles that define it. A field governed entirely by its own internal logic or cultural capital (e.g. aesthetics and artistic prestige) is said to be *autonomous*, while one that is governed entirely by the fields that subsume and surround it is *heteronomous*. No field is purely one or the other; every field contains a mixture of both autonomous and heteronomous principles (represented in Figure 1 by the “a” and “h” ends of progressive rock field). For instance, progressive rock is heteronomous to the extent that it draws on the prevailing laws from both the field of rock music and the field of classical music, but autonomous to the extent that it persists in institutions such as fanzines and fan forums largely free of the market values that structure the economic field.

Finally, the *habitus* is a system of dispositions held by agents in the field. For the agents in the field of prog rock, the snob is one manifestation of a habitus. The agents with a more omnivorous habitus hold a higher position in this field, which allows them to control the distribution of capital within the field. And, although the snobs and omnivores are two distinct habitus within the field, snobs still often feel compelled to use the dominant language and value system of omnivorous discourse as a means to attain more cultural capital. For instance, user Salmacis tends toward a snobbish habitus based on a greater number of genre dislikes over likes, as seen in Table 1. Despite their dismissiveness toward a number of genres, Salmacis nonetheless

has written, “I personally think it's a little unhealthy to just listen to one type of music, whatever that might be. I think you get a bit too 'blinkered' doing that...”⁴³

In order to critically evaluate the various actors and types of actors in progressive rock, I consider the genre on two levels: as a field itself and as a position within larger fields. By investigating the *position* of progressive rock in relation to the broader field of music, I seek to determine the cultural capital claimed (or not) when an agent within the field of music invokes prog rock. I take this approach especially in Chapter 1, as I explain the trajectory of prog rock as high art. As its own distinct *field*, progressive rock is a “space of possibilities” in which the snobs and omnivores struggle for a dominant position in the field. These agents compete for capital both *within* and *between* prog rock and related genres. In other words, taking progressive rock as a position, associated position-takings use genre *as* a means of hierarchical distinction. Taking progressive rock as a field, distinctions still occur within: genre *and* distinction.

There are several existing studies of musical genre that utilize aspects of Bourdieu's theories. One of the earliest applications can be found in Simon Frith's *Performing Rites*, in which Frith draws on Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital to introduce three discursive practices, or “value discourses,” through which people value music: bourgeois/high art, commercial, and folk. While this model may be useful for observing genres and artists' positions in the marketplace, it nonetheless focuses on the objectified forms of cultural capital in music, such as classical/art music in the bourgeois/high art category, music industry in commercial, and emphasis on tradition in folk.⁴⁴ Frith's work is thus subject to Holt's same criticism of Peterson

⁴³ Salmacis, “Embarrassing Taste,” PA, posted January 24, 2008, http://www.progarchives.com/forum/forum_posts.asp?TID=45631&KW=&PID=2752340#2752340.

⁴⁴ Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 35-46.

et al.'s work, and as such will not play a prominent role in my thesis, which focuses more on the embodied and institutional forms of cultural.

In his analysis of hip hop, Ewoodzie draws on Bourdieu and the sociologist Andrew Abbott's work to account for the boundary formations and sites of difference that gave rise to hip hop as a distinct genre in the Bronx. Ewoodzie, however, focuses more on the external boundaries that help distinguish hip hop from other cultures, rather than the internal struggles that structure the field of hip hop.⁴⁵ Similarly, Brackett draws on Bourdieu's concept of the field to demonstrate the extent to which musical genres only exist relationally to other genres.⁴⁶ While both studies are useful as models for delimiting the boundaries and formations of a genre field, they nonetheless only briefly consider how the struggles *within* a genre actually structure the internal logic of the field.

"The End(s) of Genre" by Eric Drott is perhaps the closest extant example to my conceptualization of genre and/as distinction in this thesis. In arguing against the common misconception that genre is dead for Western art music in the twentieth century, Drott draws on Bourdieu's social fields to demonstrate how struggles and relational boundaries of genre are, in fact, necessary to the maintenance of genre. By studying genre as "something that is enacted and not a given a priori," Drott discusses genre in its multiplicity of levels and meanings as an arena that continues to be fruitful for analysis. Taking as his example Gérard Grisey's composition *Les espaces acoustiques*, Drott argues that a listener is never free of generic contexts. *Les espaces acoustiques*, for instance, operates within the genre of spectralism, which stands in opposition to

⁴⁵ Joseph C. Ewoodzie Jr., *Break Beats in the Bronx: Rediscovering Hip-Hop's Early Years* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 7-11.

⁴⁶ Brackett, *Categorizing Sound*, 8.

serialism, both of which are subsumed under European avant-garde, etc.⁴⁷ Drott's article, however, generally does not account for the importance of position and hierarchy to the struggles that define fields. It would seem that the decision to exclude positions was intentional, as Drott criticizes Bourdieu for tending to "assume the existence of relatively stable social fields that stand above individuals and shape their conduct."⁴⁸ The existence of positions (and consequently, hierarchy) *without* the possibility of position-takings would do just that. But by simultaneously excluding position-takings—the agency of individuals in seeking to change their position and the structure of the field—Drott actually fails to account for agency inherent in Bourdieu's social fields (exactly what he argues is missing) while ignoring the fact that hierarchies are ever-present and ever-changing within and between genres.

Recent literature in the burgeoning field of border studies provides a corrective to many of the extant issues in the aforementioned exclusivist readings of Bourdieu's fields of cultural production. In response to the mainstream understanding of national borders as dichotomies of nationality (e.g. U.S. American/Mexican) and legality/illegality, Alejandro L. Madrid argues for a theorization of borders as liminal spaces of fluidity and becoming.⁴⁹ Epistemologically, the theories of border studies applied to Bourdieu's fields of cultural production allow for an understanding of genre as a liminal space in which oppositional dichotomies are present but are neither exclusive nor all-encompassing. Donald Henrique's study of mariachi aesthetics and identity among Mexican Americans provides an excellent example by demonstrating how

⁴⁷ Eric Drott, "The End(s) of Genre," *Journal of Music Theory* 57, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 3-4, 23.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 4.

⁴⁹ Alejandro L. Madrid, "Transnational Musical Encounters at the U.S.-Mexico Border: An Introduction," in *Transnational Encounters: Music and Performance at the US-Mexico Border*, ed. Alejandro L. Madrid (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 8-9.

contemporary mariachi both participates in and transcends the dichotomy of high/low art.⁵⁰ The present study seeks to contribute to this literature by foregrounding how forces of opposition contribute to the formation of a genre as an epistemological border zone.

Methodology

The majority of evidence supporting this thesis derives from deep textual analyses of discourses in fan forums and fanzines, interviews, and reviews, all found online. The resources surveyed range from 1965 to 1980 for classic prog, and 1995 to 2020 for the prog rock resurgence. Evidence for classic prog bands derives primarily from contemporaneous reviews and interviews,⁵¹ with sociological information on the fanbase coming primarily from Frith's *Sociology of Rock* and Macan's *Rocking the Classics*.⁵² As for the prog rock resurgence, I draw on reviews and interviews with The Mars Volta, while using fan forums to gather information about the fanbase at large. Prog Archives serves as the primary site for information, but these analyses are also informed by comparisons to fanzines and fan forums dedicated to specific prog bands, such as The Comatorium (The Mars Volta), *A New Day* (Jethro Tull), and *Elephant Talk* (King Crimson).⁵³

⁵⁰ Donald Henriques, "Mariachi Reimaginings: Encounters with Technology, Aesthetics, and Identity," in *Transnational Encounters: Music and Performance at the US-Mexico Border*, ed. Alejandro L. Madrid (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 84-110.

⁵¹ These resources are drawn primarily from the online database *Rock's Backpages*.

⁵² Simon Frith, *The Sociology of Rock* (London: Constable, 1978); Macan, "A Sociology of Progressive Rock," in *Rocking the Classics*, 144-166.

⁵³ My selection of material from each of these sites derives primarily from keyword searches for relevant information. For instance, "Mars Volta" was a common keyword search in Prog Archives' search functionality, as was "noise" for Chapter 3. For the sake of transparency, many of these searches are still visible in the links that accompany the forum citations. A general survey of TMV-centric threads was attempted on Prog Archives, but no attempt was made at a comprehensive survey the entirety discussions of any of these sites. As such, the conversations selected for use in this thesis cannot be said to represent the progressive rock fanbase (or even any of these individual sites) at large, but they nonetheless represent active conversations *within* the fanbase.

Two existing studies on progressive rock have also drawn on fan contributions to Prog Archives: Jarl A. Ahlkvist's 2011 study uses fan-written album reviews to study their role in "shaping expectations" about the prog rock genre and its boundaries, and Chris Anderton's 2010 study utilizes "lay definitions" of the Prog Archives fanbase to describe progressive rock as a "meta-genre" encompassing a variety of European progressive styles and subgenres.⁵⁴ My approach to Prog Archives differs substantially from both Ahlkvist and Anderton in that I do not use fan contributions towards the end of defining or describing genre. Furthermore, neither study explicitly makes use of *forum* contributions for the purposes of textual analysis. Kevin Prouty's research on the "virtual jazz community" of the forum "All About Jazz" is one of the closest methodological precedents to my use of fan forums, however his study focuses more on community formation and less on hierarchies both within and beyond the field of struggle that is enabled by these online communities.⁵⁵ Additionally, while Prouty describes his work as drawing on "unique ethnographic moments,"⁵⁶ my work stops short of "virtual fieldwork" in that I do not actively participate in these discussions.⁵⁷

Formed in 2003, Prog Archives strives to be "the most complete and powerful progressive rock source." About one-third to one-half of the site userbase lives in the United States and United Kingdom, with the rest primarily from South America and other North

⁵⁴ Jarl A. Ahlkvist, "What Makes Rock Music 'Prog'?": Fan Evaluation and the Struggle to Define Progressive Rock," *Popular Music and Society* 34, no. 5 (2011): 639-660; Chris Anderton, "A Many-Headed Beast: Progressive Rock as European Meta-Genre," *Popular Music* 29, no. 3 (October 2010): 417-435.

⁵⁵ Ken Prouty, *Knowing Jazz: Community, Pedagogy, and Canon in the Information Age* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 115-150.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 119.

⁵⁷ Timothy J. Cooley, Katherine Meizel, and Nasir Syed, "Virtual Fieldwork: Three Case Studies," in *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology*, 2nd ed., ed. Gregory Barz and Timothy J. Cooley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 91.

American and European countries.⁵⁸ While the forum makes up a majority of the activity that occurs within this site, other services offered by Prog Archives include “Prog Rock Guides” for an introduction to prog rock, albums reviews, and prog band biographies.⁵⁹ Members of the site are welcome to initiate and post within forum threads, but can also contribute beyond the forum in the form of album reviews or biographies. The “New Members Guide” in the site guidelines explicit states, “unlike other sites, we do not restrict the posting of reviews to a chosen few ‘expert’ reviewers, we value your opinion.” Part of the incentive for producing reviews is to acquire cultural capital and improve one’s position in Prog Archives. Depending on the quality or quantity of user engagement, users can attain the status of (from highest to lowest): founders, admin team, special collaborator, prog reviewer, forum senior member, or newbie.⁶⁰ Although this cultural capital acquired from one’s status is restricted to the field of Prog Archives due to the site’s anonymity of users, certain skills attained on one’s way to achieving this status, such as the ability to write reviews, are transferable to broader fields. As such, I will often consider the status of the users I study as one manifestation of capital at work within the broader field of prog rock.

In their study of online communication factors, psychologists Noam Lapidot-Lefler and Azy Barak observed what they and other scholars of virtual human behavior have called the “disinhibition effect,” in which the anonymity, invisibility, and lack of eye-contact in virtual

⁵⁸ Geographic statistics drawn from “The ‘Where You At’ Poll,” PA, created January 13, 2007, https://www.progarchives.com/forum/forum_posts.asp?TID=33165&KW=where&PID=2338343#2338343; and “Where ‘ya from?” PA, created June 26, 2006, https://www.progarchives.com/forum/forum_posts.asp?TID=25031&KW=where&PID=2036680#2036680.

⁵⁹ “Home,” PA, accessed March 11, 2020, <http://www.progarchives.com/>.

⁶⁰ “New Members Guide,” PA, created April 3, 2008, http://www.progarchives.com/forum/forum_posts.asp?TID=47597.

spaces disinhibit toxic behaviors, such as “flaming.” Lapidot-Lefler and Barak define flaming as “the use of hostile expressions toward others in online communication” which “typically includes the use of a variety of textual elements, such as aggressive and hostile language, swearing, derogatory names, negative comments, threats, and sexually inappropriate comments.” Textual evidence of flaming includes the use of capital letters, excessive question marks and exclamation points, mixture of letters and numbers, and use of color.⁶¹

While the disinhibition effect may provide evidence for the lack of truth to the claims of cultural snobbism in Prog Archives, there are nonetheless certain safeguards in place that prevent flaming, such as the ability to report offensive behaviors and fan forum moderators, which may ultimately lead to ejection of users.⁶² Lincoln Dahlberg describes these types of safeguards as “self-management,” which help guide users to more respectful discourses that may ultimately have the effect of influencing the public sphere beyond the forum itself.⁶³ This is especially pertinent to Prog Archives, as the more cultural capital a user attains in the forum, the more influence they are likely to have beyond the forum, such as simple Google searches for album reviews. Nonetheless, some instances of flaming and trolling slip through the cracks. In these cases, I have used the above guidelines to identify instances of flaming and exclude them from the evidence for this project so as not to skew the results.⁶⁴

A large part of this project pertains to reconstructing the field of prog rock, especially the “habitus” (plural) that make up the dispositions of the various members of the field. This is no

⁶¹ Noam Lapidot-Lefler and Azy Barak, “Effects of Anonymity, Invisibility, and Lack of Eye-Contact on Toxic Online Disinhibition,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 28 (2012): 434-435.

⁶² “Site rules and guidelines,” PA, created October 14, 2005, http://www.progarchives.com/forum/forum_posts.asp?TID=13083.

⁶³ Dahlberg, “Internet and Democratic Discourse,” 625.

⁶⁴ For instance, user DJPuffyLemon was observed to exhibit flaming behavior.

easy or obvious task, as noted by Bourdieu: “one of the major difficulties of the social history of philosophy, art or literature is that it has to reconstruct these spaces of original possibles which . . . were part of the self-evident givens of the situation.”⁶⁵ Nonetheless, in studying the field and symbolic boundaries of prog rock, it is necessary that I seek to reconstruct these “self-evident” dispositions of the snob and omnivore. Arturo Arriagada argues for the existence of a “digital habitus” that is distinct from in-person relations.⁶⁶ In this project, however, I make the case that these users’ digital habitus sustain and manifest their everyday habitus. For instance, while a user may feel less inclined to speak about their snobbish dispositions in everyday conversation, the anonymity and group of like-minded individuals of Prog Archives allows for a space in which their snobbism can come more to the fore—an instance in which the “disinhibition” of online interaction can actually serve as an impetus for more truthful expressions.

Finally, all fan forum posts in this thesis are quoted verbatim, with spelling, punctuation, and emoticons appearing as in the original post. Although “academic English” factors prominently into the performance of status for many of these users, certain language styles and demonstrate affluency in language specific to the site or fan forums more generally.⁶⁷

Chapter Outline

In Chapter 1, I trace the historical lineage of prog rock as a position within the broader fields of music and class relations in order to demonstrate its highbrow tendencies. The *progressive* in this context, I argue, may have begun as politically progressive activism against

⁶⁵ Bourdieu, “Field of Cultural Production,” 31.

⁶⁶ Arturo Arriagada, “Unpacking the ‘Digital Habitus’ of Music Fans in Santiago’s Indie Music Scene,” in *The Production and Consumption of Music in the Digital Age*, eds. Brian J. Hracs, Michael Seman, and Tarek E. Virani (New York and London: Routledge, 2016), 225.

⁶⁷ For instance, the Prog Archives site guidelines specifically encourage the use of “emoticons to convey your mood.” “Site rules and guidelines,” PA.

certain conservative policies in the United States and United Kingdom, but it ultimately came to be received as *progressing* toward the status of a higher art form. Most of this chapter will focus on the purported birth (late 60s) and death (late 70s) of prog rock, as well as the genre's reception in the United States. It is amidst this transatlantic exchange that I will argue progressive rock took on an unmarked backdrop of white, male, high-status authenticity. Furthermore, drawing on contemporaneous reviews, interviews, and sociological studies (the only contemporaneous study being Frith's *Sociology of Rock*), I examine the struggles that defined the field of prog rock in the 70s and argue for the existence of the prog snob. After the genre's death in the late 70s, however, the field of progressive rock ceased to exist as such, and what was left of progressive rock after its death was a position against which other artists, fans, or genres could position themselves in the broader field of popular music. Thus, I argue that the death of prog narrative was essential to the genre's stabilization during its resurgence in the 1990s. Finally, I examine the state of snobbism in post-90s prog rock resurgence and argue that, while it still persists as a remnant of classic prog fandom, it nonetheless holds a dominated position in relation to the omnivores.

Chapter 2 traces the emergence of The Mars Volta as a progressive rock band. I argue that their association with the genre, to which they have asserted an ambivalent relationship, is due both to the factor of the prog resurgence, as well as increasing concern with omnivorousness among certain members of the prog rock fanbase and beyond. Drawing on interviews with members Omar Rodriguez-Lopez and Cedric Bixler-Zavala, I demonstrate the extent to which a *performance* of omnivorousness is integral to their brand, which I relate to their El Paso "border kid" identities and the fluid and hybrid manifestations of identity that this entails. Furthermore, I argue that their insistence of the salsa musical influence in their music is a resistance to the

white-washing tendency of progressive rock, and even rock music at large. Finally, drawing on album reviews and discourses within a Mars Volta-centered fanbase The Comatorium, I demonstrate that omnivorousness plays a critical role in their reception. Following the work of Michèle Ollivier, who suggests that openness to musical diversity is often coded as openness to cultural diversity,⁶⁸ I suggest that the “progressive” in prog rock for these omnivores represents a *social* progressivism, which values an increase in ethnic and racial diversity in the genre. In addition to simply expressing an openness to diversity, this performance of social progressivism, based on one’s ability to cite a variety of genres, enables fans and reviewers to enact cultural capital in the field of music, in which omnivores hold the dominant position.

Finally, in Chapter 3 I focus my analyses on disagreements over The Mars Volta in Prog Archives in order to demonstrate the extent to which implicit symbolic exclusions of age, race, gender expression, class, and geography continue to manifest within the snobbish habitus. These disagreements, I argue, are rooted in conflictual values of “progressivism” between the two groups, with the snobs valuing the lack of diversity found in classic prog and the omnivores a more diverse future of prog. Drawing on Jacques Attali and Alex E. Chavez’s theorization of noise as a site of disjuncture and incomprehensibility, I describe several different types of noise in dissents to The Mars Volta, such as rhythmic, modal, intervallic, ambient, instrumental, vocal, and visual noise as sites in which different types of exclusions are enacted. In an attempt to resist the essentializing of The Mars Volta’s identities that occur as a result of these symbolic exclusions, I present an interpretation of their music and brand focused around *violence*, in which The Mars Volta both participate in and exceed the stylistic expectations of a number of genres. I ultimately conclude that, while symbolic exclusions of age are most explicit in moments of

⁶⁸ Ollivier, “Modes of Openness,” 121.

dissent, they often serve as coded language for other implicit exclusions of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class.

CHAPTER 1: THE GENESIS OF PROGRESSIVE ROCK AND THE PROG SNOB

The “progressive” of progressive rock has troubled artists, fans, and scholars alike since the genre’s inception. It seems that, with each definition comes a counter-definition, with each genre label, a genre rejection. Nonetheless, a progressive rock canon has formed around a core of bands such as Yes, Genesis, Jethro Tull, King Crimson, Gentle Giant and Van Der Graaf Generator, also colloquially known as the “big six,” which in turn has canonized affiliated conceptions of progressivism. What values and circumstances allowed for these bands’ canonization as progressive? What values structured these progressive rock bands’ conception and reception both then and now?

In this chapter, I delve into the early history (ca. 1969-78) and resurgence of classic progressive rock (ca. 1997-2017) and suggest two meanings of progressivism integral to the genre’s reception: political progressivism and status progressivism. I argue that in the 1970s, progressive rock began as *politically* progressive dissent to military pursuits of the United States and United Kingdom in Asia and Africa, but ultimately came to be received as progressing toward a higher *status*. Through this latter definition, I demonstrate that the genre of prog rock was founded on principles of elitist snobbism. This rethinking of the history of classic prog rock will contextualize the conflictual values of progressivism during the prog rock resurgence that I explore in the next two chapters via the reception of The Mars Volta.

Drawing on the work of David Brackett, I discuss the genre of progressive rock from a “genealogical approach” that focuses on “how a particular idea of a category emerges and stabilizes momentarily (if at all) in the course of being accepted across a range of discourses and

institutions,” rather than “what constitutes the contents of a musical category.”¹ Putting this genealogical approach in dialogue with Madrid’s work in musical border studies,² I use Prog Archives to distinguish between the “center” and “margins” of the progressive rock canon that only stabilized in retrospect. This demonstrates how only a select few British rock bands came to constitute the purest of progressive rock style, while other closely-related (primarily U.S. American) bands and artists are often relegated to the marginal status of subgenre. Focusing primarily on the aforementioned “big six” classic prog bands as the “center” of this canon, I interrogate progressive rock’s position in the various fields in which it operates. I focus on the emergence and “death” of prog rock in an attempt, through this genealogical approach, to demonstrate that the “progress” in classic prog rock attempted to raise its status position, like jazz before it, relative to Western classical music.

Furthermore, drawing on Bourdieu’s “fields of cultural production,” I trace the trajectory of prog rock by analyzing it as both a field itself, as well as a position within the fields of music and class relations. Within the field of music, progressive rock’s position-takings (such as album releases demarcated as prog and general practices of prog snob elitism) sought to elevate itself to a dominant position similar to that occupied by classical music. Within the field of class relations, progressive rock continued in the trajectory of psychedelia in seeking to elevate the formerly low-status position of rock to a position in which it could be respected by high status individuals. As a field itself, the struggles that define prog rock include dialectical relationships between rock and classical music, between commercial success and aesthetic autonomy, and between artist and critic-fan understandings of the genre. With the death of prog these struggles

¹ Brackett, *Categorizing Sound*, 5-6.

² Madrid, *Nor-tec Rifa*, 3-4.

ceased to exist, and until the prog resurgence all that was left of prog was a position against which other artists, fans, or genres could position themselves in the field of music.

I begin by tracing the emergence of prog rock and its associated transition from political to status progressivism—one that is tied up in notions of unmarked white, male, high-status authenticity. In doing so, I also briefly discuss the perceived stylistic borrowings from classical music and jazz, arguing that the former contributed to its reception as elitist, while the latter was minimal and mostly legible to fans and scholars retrospectively due to their similar status trajectories. Furthermore, by engaging with contemporaneous reviews, interviews, and sociological studies, I examine the different positions of the fans within the field and conclude that the snobs held a dominant position within the 1970s field of prog rock. Simon Frith's *Sociology of Rock* demonstrates that in the 1970s, prog rock was not quite the stable entity that fans understand it to be today. I argue that the death of prog narrative was essential to the genre's stabilization during its resurgence in the 1990s. Finally, I examine the state of snobbism in the post-millennium prog rock resurgence and argue that, while it still persists as a remnant of classic prog fandom, it nonetheless holds a dominated position among the omnivores.

The Evolution of the Prog Rock Dinosaurs

Progressive rock is normally said to have originated in late 1960s England. Most scholars describe the genre's emergence as an offshoot of counterculture, psychedelia, and the British invasion.³ The album that supposedly bridged the pre- and post-counterculture demographics was The Beatles' 1967 album *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*.⁴ With its stylistic

³ See, for instance, Macan, *Rocking the Classics*, 15-22; Ahlqvist, "What Makes Rock," 640; Anderton, "A Many-Headed Beast," 422-23.

⁴ Robert G. H. Burns, *Experiencing Progressive Rock: A Listener's Companion* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018), 3-4; Jay Keister and Jeremy L. Smith, "Musical Ambition, Cultural Accreditation and the Nasty

eclecticism (drawing on, for instance, Western classical and Hindustani classical music), electronic experimentation, and cohesion of individual tracks into a unified whole, *Sergeant Pepper* was a significant break from the Beatles' earlier work, and its reception would come to characterize the discourses of intellectualism to be taken up by progressive rock.

At their peak of popularity in the mid-1970s, progressive rock bands were selling out arenas, especially in the United States.⁵ Several factors may explain the popularity and financial success of prog rock at this time. John R. Palmer notes that the economic prosperity of the recorded music industry in the late 1960s and early 1970s allowed artists more freedom and experimentation in the recording studio.⁶ Another factor may be what Hamilton describes as the “myth” of the British invasion. Hamilton states, “When a vast network of British musicians were enfolded into a single construct, what emerged was a perceived ‘rebirth’ of rock and roll music produced by new imaginings of white male musicality that came bundled with the otherness of British musicians.”⁷ As a continuation of the British invasion, the “otherness of British musicians” in progressive rock was bundled with perceptions of Western art music—that is, a supposedly intellectually superior artform, the most refined of which was imported from Europe.

This connection to Western art music in both the composition and reception of progressive rock is the baseline from which I begin my ensuing analyses of its genre and class distinctions. This is the same position from which Edward Macan begins his now-classic *Rocking the Classics*:

Side of Progressive Rock,” *Popular Music* 27, no. 3 (2008): 447; Paul Hegarty and Martin Halliwell, *Beyond and Before: Progressive Rock Since the 1960s* (New York and London: Continuum, 2011), 31.

⁵ Macan, *Rocking the Classics*, 200.

⁶ John R. Palmer, “Yes, ‘Awaken,’ and the Progressive Rock Style,” *Popular Music* 20, no. 2 (May 2001): 243.

⁷ Jack Hamilton, *Just around Midnight: Rock and Roll and the Racial Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 89.

The defining features of progressive rock, those elements that serve to separate it from other contemporary styles of popular music, are all drawn from the European classical tradition. These hallmarks include the continuous use of tone colors drawn from symphonic or church music, the employment of lengthy sectional forms such as the song cycle or the multimovement suite, and the preoccupation with dazzling metrical and instrumental virtuosity.⁸

To this list I would add *discourses* adapted from classical music, especially snobbism, as an integral feature to the genre. Jay Keister and Jeremy L. Smith argue convincingly that many classic prog rock bands, such as King Crimson, Genesis, and Yes, actually used stylistic traits and discourses from classical music as a scathing criticism of “rampant militarism and social conformity” in the 1960s and 70s UK and US. For instance, the liner notes to Gentle Giant’s album *Acquiring the Taste* have often been cited by scholars as one example of prog rock’s snobbishness. The notes state, “it is our goal to expand the frontiers of contemporary popular music at the risk of being unpopular. . . . From the outset we have abandoned all preconceived thoughts on blatant commercialism. Instead we hope to give you something far more substantial and fulfilling.” Keister and Smith point out, however, that this album is actually parodying these discourses and their implications for social conformity, as demonstrated by the album cover which features a tongue that is “acquiring the taste” by licking what looks like a person’s buttocks.⁹

Nonetheless, while this music may have begun as politically progressive activism, its reception tended towards a different type of progressivism: rock music that is *progressing upward in status*.¹⁰ The two following reviews of King Crimson’s early work, from the US and UK respectively, demonstrate this particular type of progressivism:

⁸ Macan, *Rocking the Classics*, 12-13.

⁹ Keister and Smith, “Musical Ambition,” 433-34.

¹⁰ Several authors have made similar arguments, including John Rockwell, “The Emergence of Art Rock,” in *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll*, ed. Anthony DeCurtis and James Henke (New York: Random

There are certain problems to be encountered by any band that is consciously avant-garde. . . . This set was an ambitious project, to say the least. King Crimson will probably be condemned by some for pompousness, but that criticism isn't really valid. They have combined aspects of many musical forms to create a surreal work of force and originality.¹¹

As a musician, [Robert Fripp] abounds in experience and knowledge. He has played in dance bands and pop groups for years, and is a skilled and individual guitarist who eschews the debased, cliché phrases of his contemporaries. But it is his compositions for which he will eventually earn his due recognition. Carefully structured over complex, often overlapping rhythmic patterns, their tonality held down by the bass guitar, they may consist of jerky, puppet-like riffs, played by over-dubbed saxophones, or the cold, windswept string tone of the Mellotron, a keyboard instrument which simulates—but not quite—the sound of an orchestra.¹²

The ambitions of status are implied in both, with the descriptions of King Crimson's musical "pompousness" and ambitions toward a classical music-inspired compositional legacy. Interestingly, Keister and Smith single out the early work of King Crimson, such as their 1969 album *In the Court of the Crimson King*, as an expression of Robert Fripp's "political 'meta-language'," notable for its, "unprecedented sonic violence in rock music."¹³ But as these two reviews suggest, King Crimson's early reception quickly took on a new meaning: that of an authenticity rooted in notions of the white-male-genius composer.

Jack Hamilton argues that most post-1960 rock music performed by white musicians took on a type of authenticity rooted in individualism. In contrast, rock music by black musicians was received in terms of "imagined aesthetic strictures imposed on a group," with many black Motown musicians derided as "insufficiently black."¹⁴ In the case of progressive rock, this white

House, 1986), 170; and Ken Tucker, "The Seventies and Beyond," in *Rock of Ages: The Rolling Stone History of Rock and Roll*, ed. Ed Ward, Geoffrey Stokes, and Ken Tucker (New York: Rolling Stone Press, 1986), 480.

¹¹ John Morthland, review of *In the Court of the Crimson King* by King Crimson, *Rolling Stone*, December, 1969.

¹² Richard Williams, "Reincarnation of King Crimson," *The Times*, December, 1970.

¹³ Keister and Smith, "Musical Ambition," 439.

¹⁴ Hamilton, *Just Around Midnight*, 15-16.

individualist authenticity was exacerbated not only by the fact that the vast majority of musicians were white men, but by its associations with classical music. While this association is informed by many of the stylistic traits mentioned above by Macan, covers or citations of classical pieces—such J.S. Bach’s *Bourrée in E Minor* (BWV 996) by Jethro Tull and Modest Mussorgsky’s *Pictures at an Exhibition* by Emerson, Lake, and Palmer—make this association even more explicit. These covers called upon notions of the white-male-genius composers associated with these pieces, exacerbating the trend of white individualism already in play in rock music outside of prog.

Thus, while this white male authenticity may have been rooted in prog rock’s reception in the United States with the myth of the British invasion, in a transatlantic exchange prog rock came to be received as such in the United Kingdom as well. In the next chapter, I will discuss how this unmarked backdrop of white, male, and high-status authenticity was integral to the reception of The Mars Volta during the prog rock resurgence. I begin, however, by demonstrating how this particular type of status progress effected the position of prog rock within the relevant fields of cultural production.

Raising the Brow in Classic Prog

If, as I argue, the progress in classic progressive rock was one of upward social mobility, how was this progress enacted by prog rock musicians and their fanbase? To answer this question, I once again turn to Bourdieu’s fields of cultural production and examine progressive rock as a position within the broader fields of music and class relations. Progressive rock sought to elevate the position of rock more generally through various position-takings, which include compositional choices by the musicians and means of social distinction by members of the fanbase.

As already mentioned, the most defining compositional choices made by progressive rock musicians are drawn from classical music. These choices were enabled largely by many of these musicians' middle- to upper-class backgrounds and education that often included training in classical music. For instance, the original members of Genesis attended the illustrious Charterhouse school in Surrey in the 1960s, with founding members Peter Gabriel and Tony Banks receiving classical piano lessons there.¹⁵ As a demonstration of their intellectual prowess, Genesis drew lyrical content from such sources as the Bible, Greek mythology, and T.S. Eliot, with songs composed as multi-movement suites reminiscent of classical music—all just in their song “Supper’s Ready.”¹⁶ As noted by Michael Long, such associations with the concert hall and classic literature in progressive rock represent a shift in *register*, or semiotic representations of status, “within rock’s communicative systems.”¹⁷ In other words, through sounding the “classics,” Genesis expressed a high register not typically associated with rock at the time.

Keister and Smith argue that, “What has not been sufficiently recognized is that this group of social elites used their intellectual prowess to express their virulent condemnation of English and American society and mores.”¹⁸ While this may be the case, it does not necessarily make their music any less elitist. Indeed, a great deal of classical music throughout history has been overtly political, such as Ludwig van Beethoven’s Symphony No. 3 “Eroica” (1804) and Frederic Rzewski’s *The People United Will Never Be Defeated* (1975). It was only a recent

¹⁵ Keister and Smith, “Musical Ambition,” 441; Dave Bowler and Bryan Dray, *Genesis: A Biography* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1992), 8.

¹⁶ Mark S. Spicer, “Large-scale Strategy and Compositional Design in the Early Music of Genesis,” in *Expression in Pop-Rock Music: A Collection of Critical and Analytical Essays*, ed. Walter Everett (New York: Garland, 2000), 77–111.

¹⁷ Michael Long, *Beautiful Monsters: Imagining the Classic in Musical Media* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 14, 16.

¹⁸ Kesiter and Smith, “Musical Ambition,” 441.

phenomenon that after World War II with the rise of musical modernism (especially serialism), art music composers sought to distance themselves from contemporary political events.¹⁹

As I have demonstrated above, these high-status intellectual references played no small part in prog rock's reception by contemporaneous reviewers. But this status was equally integral to prog rock's identifying fanbase. As noted by Robert G.H. Burns from his own experiences growing up with prog rock, "There is no doubt that the progressive rock audiences had pretensions of musical elitism, because much of the progressive rock audience attended tertiary institutions."²⁰ This observation is further supported by the only contemporaneous study of the progressive rock fanbase, Simon Frith's 1978 *Sociology of Rock*, which suggests that the college circuit was essential to the market of Virgin Records and *Melody Maker*, both of which specialized heavily at this time in progressive rock.²¹ Although this fanbase consisted largely of university students, they were not afforded the same institutional cultural capital of music studied at these universities, like classical music (and increasingly at the time, jazz). Instead, progressive rock relied on the short-term institutional cultural capital of various music journals that reviewed and discussed them, such as *Melody Maker*, which conferred high-status (in the field of class relations) cultural capital on prog rock through its famously "serious" music criticism.²² As I will discuss below, however, this institutional capital was later revoked as these journals moved onto other genres.

¹⁹ A distance that, even still, Richard Taruskin argues was founded on principles of positivism that pervaded as a result of political circumstances of the Cold War: Richard Taruskin, "Afterword: Nicht Blutbefleckt?" *The Journal of Musicology* 26, no. 2 (2009): 275.

²⁰ Burns, *Experiencing Progressive Rock*, 2.

²¹ Frith, *Sociology of Rock*, 69.

²² Ulf Lindberg, Gestur Guomundsson, Morten Michelsen, and Hans Weisethaunet, *Rock Criticism from the Beginning: Amusers, Bruisers, and Cool-Headed Cruisers* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 85, 88, 89–91.

Frith found that, among his survey of 14- to 18-year-olds at a comprehensive school in Keighley, Yorkshire, those who identified with progressive rock tended to be middle-class in background and the most highly educated, being in the sixth form (final two, noncompulsory years of education in the United Kingdom) and aspiring for university study. For these students, what Frith calls the “hairies and hippies,” rock music does not serve a practical function like dancing, but rather is stimulation for intellectual contemplation.²³ Frith provides the following quote from this demographic to demonstrate their stylistic proclivities and musical dispositions:

Rock music, progressive and heavy are fantastic. If they were not there life would not be worth living. They are the backbone behind music as a whole—showing us what it should really be like.²⁴

Although Frith notes that the class backgrounds of his interlocutors’ parents were not always consistent predictors of musical proclivities, he contests that in his survey, “it was clear that music was important as a symbolic expression of values only for those young people who were rejecting their given class cultures, whether middle-class pupils rejecting academic success or working-class pupils rejecting the street, and the ‘hairies’ equally rejecting the values of commerce.”²⁵ Thus, individuals who formerly held a dominated position in the field of class relations could use progressive rock as one means of elevating their status. This is consistent with Bourdieu’s findings in 1960s France, in which he found that “middle-ground” arts such as photography, cinema, jazz, or “intellectual song” that were in the process of increasing cultural legitimation attracted individuals undergoing social trajectory.²⁶

²³ Frith *Sociology of Rock*, 40-42.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 42.

²⁵ *Ibid* 49-50, 55.

²⁶ Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 87.

There is evidence to suggest that what Frith and his interlocutors describe as progressive rock was not as canonized as it later would be during the prog resurgence. For instance, while Frith subsumes both under the term progressive, the above quote mentioned “heavy” rock, a subgenre at the time that included groups such as Led Zeppelin and Black Sabbath—bands that would later only maintain a loose connection to the prog rock canon. Furthermore, one of the “hairies” Frith interviewed professed to liking the band T. Rex “when [they were] called Tyrannosaurus Rex,”²⁷ which may suggest that T. Rex’s early psychedelic music was also received in terms of its progressive tendencies. These quotes demonstrate that, following Brackett’s genealogical approach to genre,²⁸ classic progressive rock had not yet stabilized into the genre that was understood during the prog resurgence. What was received as progressive was therefore any rock that fulfilled a need for progressing toward a high-status social distinction. During the prog resurgence, however, band such as T. Rex and Led Zeppelin have been relegated to progressive sub-genres in Prog Archives and thus do not fit squarely into the progressive rock’s center.²⁹

Frith’s study demonstrates that many prog rock fans maintain social distinction by a high degree of snobbishness. For instance, one sixth-former stated, “Rock music is unfortunately fashionable and its followers are exploited. It is very hard to separate true opinion from ‘conditioned response’.” And while many of the different musical social groups such as

²⁷ Frith, *Sociology of Rock*, 43.

²⁸ Brackett, *Categorizing Sound*, 5-6.

²⁹ Led Zeppelin is labeled as “prog-related” while Tyrannosaurus Rex (not T. Rex) is labeled “prog folk”: “Progressive Rock Music Bands/Artists List Starting with letter [L]” and “Progressive Rock Music Bands/Artists List Starting with letter [T],” PA, accessed March 23, 2020, <http://www.progarchives.com/bands-alpha.asp?letter=l>, <http://www.progarchives.com/bands-alpha.asp?letter=t>. In Anderton, “A Many-Headed Beast,” Anderton argues that as a result of these sub-genres, progressive rock is much more inclusive than most commentators presume. However, by being cast aside as not “pure” prog, these subgenres are marginalized from the center of the fanbase.

“skinheads,” “grebos,” or “crombie boys and girls” maintain their own social distinctions to some extent, Frith notes that “the self-identified hairies and hippies, with their missionary zeal for progressive rock and a hatred of commercial pop” offered “the most assertive statements of image and shared tastes.”³⁰ Fans of progressive music thus looked down on other forms of rock that are perceived as more “fashionable,” maintaining a social distinction of status through intellectual selectivity. This distinction is demonstrative of Peterson’s notion of the traditional snob, or “elite-to-mass” status hierarchy that prevailed before “omnivore-to-univore.”³¹ Yet, due to its proximity to these “lower” types of rock at the time, progressive rock had not yet fully achieved this distinction from mass culture. For a model of how to achieve this mass-to-elite progression, critics and fans turned increasingly to the only other genre to do so successfully: jazz.

Close Enough for Jazz?

Frith mentions little about the hippies and hairies’ relationship to classical music or jazz. He does, however, note how jazz was often used as a genre of social ambition, both for its audiences and rock musicians who sought to elevate the status of their music.³² This is because, as noted by Scott DeVeaux, jazz adapted discourses from classical music in its ambitions toward “America’s art music” with the rise of bebop and “progressive jazz” (an old genre designation which seems to have been closely associated with bebop) in the 1940s and ‘50s. In “constructing the jazz tradition” in the image of classical music’s historical periods (Classical, Romantic, Modern, etc), critics and scholars situated bebop as an organic musical development that

³⁰ Frith, *Sociology of Rock*, 41-42.

³¹ Peterson, “Understanding Audience Segmentation,” 243.

³² Frith, *Sociology of Rock*, 55, 167-68.

occurred *after* swing, even though both styles of jazz existed simultaneously.³³ By the time of progressive rock's heyday, jazz heightened its position within the field of music, but still did not enjoy the same amount of institutional cultural capital that it does today.

Progressive rock scholars and commentators often note progressive rock's stylistic borrowings from jazz, often at an equal footing with classical music.³⁴ However, these statements are generally unfounded in the music itself. For instance, of the stylistic hallmarks of jazz, such as standard jazz instrumentation found in big bands (saxophones, trumpets, trombones, upright bass, among others), harmonies with extended voices (e.g. 7ths, 9ths, etc.), swing rhythms, antiphonic "trading fours," and virtuosic improvisations, only the last of these is a notable stylistic feature of progressive rock.³⁵ And while some progressive rock musicians such as Keith Emerson have noted the jazz origins of their improvisational skills, Ian Anderson of Jethro Tull derived his solo abilities from other rock genres (eschewing jazz and improvisation entirely).³⁶

Thus, while there are some instances of stylistic borrowing from jazz in the progressive rock canon, the influence of jazz does not nearly match the influence of what John Covach

³³ DeVeaux, "Constructing the Jazz Tradition," 538-46.

³⁴ See, for instance, Ahlqvist, "What Makes Rock Music," 647; Keister and Smith, "Musical Ambition," 433; Hegarty and Halliwell, *Beyond and Before*, 108-17.

³⁵ Although the definition of progressive rock on Prog Archives states that "chords and chord progressions . . . augmented with 6ths, 7ths, 9ths, and compound intervals" are an integral part of prog's style musical style, musical analyses of prog rock songs by Akitsugu Kawamoto and John R. Palmer demonstrate that these extended chords occur no more frequently than the classical music from which they are influenced. "A Definition of Progressive Rock Music," PA, accessed March 24, 2020, <http://www.progarchives.com/Progressive-rock.asp>; Akitsugu Kawamoto, "Can You Still Keep Your Balance?: Keith Emerson's Anxiety of Influence, Style Change, and the Road to Prog Superstardom," *Popular Music* 24, no. 2 (May 2005): 234; Palmer, "Yes, 'Awaken'," 247-48.

³⁶ Caroline Boucher, "Emerson Lake and Palmer: Why Keith Wants to Become Immortal," *Disc*, May 13, 1972; "Ian Anderson," *ZigZag*, December, 1969; Vernon Gibbs, "The Rise and Fall off God as Told by Ian Anderson," *Circus*, August, 1971.

describes as the “tension between these two widely disparate styles”: rock and classical.³⁷ Kevin Fellezs describes a similar dialectical relationship in jazz fusion, a musical style contemporary to progressive rock, with what he calls the “broken middle” between jazz and rock, with fusion often deemed to inadequately represent either.³⁸ It is no coincidence that many of these fusion musicians were black, which, returning to the work of Hamilton, resulted in reception centered on stylistic expectation based on their race. Unlike white progressive rock musicians, black musicians on either side of this “broken middle” were understood to be regressive, rather than progressive by watering down the progress made in jazz.

That progressive rock did not experience this dialectical struggle in its reception like fusion further demonstrates that progressive rock is a field distinct from jazz in which the effects of this struggle are largely not felt. This is further demonstrated by Jon Anderson, lead singer of Yes, when he said, “We are rock musicians who borrow ideas from the classics—we sometimes emulate the structural form, just as [*other*] rock groups emulate jazz, soul, and rhythm and blues in their music.”³⁹ Those rock acts that more heavily draw on jazz music are often relegated to a more marginal status as progressive rock sub-genres or prog-related genres such Jazz Rock, Fusion, or Avant-Prog, which symbolically excludes them from the prog canon. As such, the stylistic influence of jazz on prog rock’s center is negligible. Nonetheless, the genres of jazz fusions and progressive rock did have an overlap in audiences, especially in the United States,⁴⁰ which may partially explain jazz’ legibility within progressive rock.

³⁷ John Covach, “Progressive Rock, ‘Close to the Edge,’ and the Boundaries of Style,” in *Understanding Rock: Essays in Musical Analysis*, ed. John Covach and Graeme M. Boone (NY: Oxford University Press, 1997), 22.

³⁸ Kevin Fellezs, *Birds of Fire: Jazz, Rock, Funk, and the Creation of Fusion*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 8.

³⁹ Emphasis mine. Quoted in Covach, “Progressive Rock,” 7.

⁴⁰ Fellezs, *Birds of Fire*, 31-32.

What progressive rock *did* adapt from jazz was the idea that status progress was possible by adopting discourses from classical music. This similarity in the status trajectories of the two genres is what *increasingly* allowed for the legibility of jazz signifiers in progressive rock for fans, critics, and scholars. While a stylistic proclivity to jazz was mentioned in only some contemporaneous classic prog journalism,⁴¹ it is a nearly universal aspect in both fan- and scholar-generated definitions of prog rock since the 1990s.⁴² That the “influence” of jazz on progressive rock was recognized more so in retrospect is due to the stabilization of both genres over time. Jazz’s stabilization as “America’s art music” was due to the firmly entrenched institutional cultural capital of jazz studies in universities. For progressive rock, its stabilization and the formation of a progressive rock canon was enabled by the genre’s “death” in the late 1970s—at which point, it could progress no more. It is to this death of prog narrative that I now turn.

The Extinction of the Prog Dinosaurs

Prog rock quickly fell out of mainstream favor in the late 1970s: King Crimson broke up in 1974 while bands such as Genesis and Yes supposedly simplified their sound in an attempt to make it more radio-friendly.⁴³ This narrative has been popularized in mainstream media as “the

⁴¹ Some examples: Gary Lucas, review of *Larks’ Tongues in Aspic* by King Crimson, *Zoo World*, 1973; Mark Williams, review of *Yes* by Yes, *International Times*, July 18, 1969.

⁴² In addition to the three scholarly works mentioned above, see the following fan-based definition drawn from Prog Archives: “arrangements often incorporated elements drawn from classical, jazz, and world music.” “Definition of Progressive Rock,” PA.

⁴³ Macan, *Rocking the Classics*, 183.

death of prog.”⁴⁴ Although it has received significant backlash in recent scholarship,⁴⁵ one popular narrative holds that “punk killed prog”: the contemporaneous rise of punk as the music of the youth in the late 1970s was the final death blow to progressive rock. While both traced their origins back to rock and roll, progressive rock’s intellectualist ideology and esoteric musical forms were incompatible and perhaps even mutually opposed to the DIY, nihilistic aesthetic of punk.

Although I agree with Keister and Smith that progressive rock originally represented the political progressiveness of the youth, prog rock’s ultimate reception toward high art ambitions eventually alienated the music from its young, college-age audience. Politics Professor Emily Robinson argues that in the 1970s, progressive rock proper emerged at a time when the political progressivism (represented by the Labour Party and Progressive Alliance) movement in the United Kingdom came to be understood as both “elitist” and “bloated, decadent and out of touch.” It was at this time that progressive rock, a term formerly used to describe anything from the Beach Boys to MC5, came to represent a more specific group of now classic prog bands. As prog rock progressed ever more toward elitist intellectualism, it increasingly lost touch with “authentic labourist” (as symbolized by the trade unionist faction of the Labour Party) culture that it purportedly represented.⁴⁶ The infamous backlash that Yes’ 1973 album *Tales from Topographic Oceans* received for its excessively long song structures and lyrical and conceptual

⁴⁴ Jeff Biehar, “How the Beasts of Prog-Rock Went Extinct,” *New York Post*, June 12, 2017; Mira Fisher, “The Endless Death of Prog Rock,” *Cipher*, n.d.; Rob Salkowitz, “How Prog-Rock Went from Chart Topper to Laughingstock,” *Forbes*, June 18, 2017.

⁴⁵ See, for instance, Hegarty and Halliwell, *Beyond and Before*, 163-65 and John Albiez, “Know History!: John Lydon, Cultural Capital and the Prog/Punk Dialectic,” *Popular Music* 22, no. 3 (October 2003): 357-74.

⁴⁶ Emily Robinson, “Ahead of Their Time: From Progressive Rock to the Progressive Alliance,” *Juncture* 22, no. 3 (2015): 220, 223-24.

incomprehensibility symbolizes the genre's progress toward esoterica. Similar criticisms were levied toward other progressive bands that followed in Yes' intellectualist footsteps, such as Genesis with *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway* in 1974.⁴⁷

Thus, I argue that punk actually *did* kill prog in that it better fulfilled the needs of “authentic labourist” culture. Sean Albiez notes that the actual financial success and long-term impact of punk is overstated due to the “academic celebration of spectacular ‘oppositional’ working-class subcultures.”⁴⁸ Yet it is nonetheless true that punk now laid claim to the temporary institutional spaces that once provided prog with cultural capital—not only “academic” contexts but, importantly, coverage in *Melody Maker*⁴⁹—that paved the way for the death of prog. Prog lost its position in the field of music when many of the bands moved increasingly toward a mainstream pop sound, and even though punk temporarily enjoyed much of the same institutional capital and fanbase as progressive rock, it did not have the same upward status trajectory. In fact, a punk identity was often employed by fans as a way of rejecting what was perceived as middle-class hegemony. Genre distinction for punk music was more so a means for distinguishing oneself *from* rather than *as* high culture. Positions in the field of music had shifted and it was no longer fashionable to express one's high status (in the field of class relations) through the values represented by progressive rock.

Beyond prog rock's mainstream demise, narratives differ about the trajectory of the genre in the 1980s. Burns focuses on classic prog rock bands and their continued mainstream success (albeit in different stylistic guises) and discusses jazz fusion, such as Chick Corea's *Elektric*

⁴⁷ Covach, “Progressive Rock,” 23-24.

⁴⁸ Albiez, “Know History!” 360.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 359.

Band, as a new manifestation of the genre.⁵⁰ Hegarty and Halliwell shift their focus to “neo-progressive” bands such as Marillion, IQ, Pendragon, Pallas, and Twelfth Night, which effectively picked up where the classic prog rock bands left off, but now as an anti-mainstream response to punk.⁵¹ At the same time, Romano argues that bands from the United States such as Kansas and Styx took up the torch of progressive rock in the 1980s.⁵² While the torch of progressive is different for each of these authors, they all maintain that progressive rock never completely died out.

Contemporaneous reviews, however, suggest otherwise. In a 1984 review of a Marillion concert, for instance, author Mick Brown expresses surprise at their popular success, “as they are the quintessential extinct English group of the mid-70s.”⁵³ In 1980 Peter Gabriel, ex-lead singer of Genesis, expressed his disappointment in the commercial direction of formerly progressive bands such as Yes and his own former band, describing bands such as Talking Heads and the Human League as the future of progressive music.⁵⁴ For all intents and purposes, by 1980 progressive rock was dead *as a field*. Bourdieu notes that fields disappear as such when the autonomous principle of hierarchization (governed by internal aesthetic struggles) give way to heteronomous principles of hierarchization (those that structure the larger fields of power in which prog rock is a constituent).⁵⁵ Those struggles that had defined the field of classic prog—

⁵⁰ Burns, *Experiencing Progressive Rock*, 69-78.

⁵¹ Hegarty and Halliwell, *Beyond and Before*, 181-202.

⁵² Will Romano, *Mountains Come Out of the Sky: The Illustrated History of Prog Rock* (Milwaukee: Backbeat Books, 2010), 151-62.

⁵³ Mick Brown, review of Marillion live at Hammersmith Odeon, London, *The Guardian*, March 13, 1984.

⁵⁴ Jim Sullivan, “The Evolution of Peter Gabriel: Why He Believes in Taking Risks with His Music,” *Boston Globe*, July 3, 1980.

⁵⁵ Bourdieu, “Field of Cultural Production,” 38.

the rock-classical dialectic, the position-takings toward high art, etc.—had ceased to exist or (as described by Gabriel) moved elsewhere. What was left of progressive rock after its death was a position against which other artists, fans, or genres could situate themselves in the broader field of popular music. For instance, in the aforementioned review, Marillion were heckled at the concert not for their ability or inability to meet the stylistic expectations of prog rock, but rather that they resembled prog rock in the first place, which was a genre that was decidedly outdated.⁵⁶ Ironically, it was only in the context of this narrative that progressive rock took on the stable genre entity felt in the prog rock resurgence.

The Snob Rock Resurgence

Regardless of the trajectory of progressive rock in the interim period, Burns, Hegarty and Halliwell, and Romano all note the resurgence of the genre in the 1990s. Not only were classic prog rock bands receiving renewed attention, but new bands were forming that developed the genre of progressive rock in new directions. Only a few newly-formed “prog” bands are mentioned in all three of these texts, among them Spock’s Beard, Radiohead, Muse, and The Mars Volta. This resurgence was facilitated by several simultaneous processes of institutionalization. As noted above, one of the reasons for the decline of progressive rock in the 1970s was the lack of mainstream press coverage and its inability to establish long-term institutional capital in university spaces as a “high art.” It was only in the late 1990s that prog rock finally received a claim to the intellectual space of the university through the first scholarly publications on prog rock (Macan 1997, Covach 1997). At the same time, a proliferation of artisanally-generated fanzines created a new institutional space in which discourses on prog rock could take place among dedicated fans. As demonstrated by Robert Atton, these fanzines filled a

⁵⁶ Brown, 1984.

void left by the lack of prog rock criticism in mainstream media after the genre's death in the late 70s.⁵⁷

In the most substantial textual study of prog rock fanzines throughout the 1990s, Atton analyzes the discourses from *Where but for Caravan Would I?*, *ELP Digest*, *Proclamation*, *A New Day*, *Elephant Talk*, *Pilgrims*, *Notes from the Edge* and *Facelift*, representing Caravan; Emerson, Lake and Palmer; Gentle Giant; Jethro Tull; King Crimson; Van der Graaf Generator; Yes; and the Canterbury scene, respectively. Drawing on Frith's notion of "value discourses," Atton suggests that the discourses in these fanzines, while not homologous between each, generally oscillate between "bourgeois/high art," "commercial," and "folk" discourses.⁵⁸ Yet, in drawing on Frith's work, Atton focuses too heavily on objectified forms of cultural capital, such as the way these zines are crafted and the recordings they discuss. As Douglas Holt suggests, the embodied state (long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body) of cultural capital is more useful than the objectified in determining class distinction in post-1990s US.⁵⁹ When examining these fanzines from this perspective, they are much more high status than Atton acknowledges. For instance, Atton takes the following statement from *A New Day* as a demonstration of commercial discourses, or at the very least, "anti-intellectual":

. . . might be fine if you're a philosopher who has studied English Literature and the classics; but, actually, probably isn't fine really. To me, the Jethro Tull story is one of an above average blues band . . . whose work has to be judged in the context of rock music.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Chris Atton, "'Living in the Past?': Value Discourses in Progressive Rock Fanzines," *Popular Music* 20, no. 1 (January 2001): 29-30.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 32-33.

⁵⁹ Holt, "Does Cultural," 6.

⁶⁰ Quoted in Atton, "Living in the Past," 36.

While this quote may outwardly reject interpretations of Jethro Tull's music adapted from high art, it nonetheless demonstrates a familiarity with the rock-classical dialectic within progressive rock's field of struggle. In advancing an interpretation of Jethro Tull's music as "an above average blues band" this contributor still demonstrates Holt's notion of high cultural capital in emphasizing "abstracted discussion of ideas and pleasures removed from the material world . . . [in which] taste becomes a realm of self-expression, a means of constructing subjectivity."⁶¹ In situating their own positionality ("to me") within the struggles of the prog rock field, this contributor expresses this very type of individual subjectivity removed the economic and material realities of the music industry. Furthermore, in arguing for a continuity with a more authentic "blues" historiography of rock, this statement also attempts to construct a rock tradition that is similar to the construction of the jazz tradition that Scott DeVeaux argues helped enable its high art status.⁶²

This same demonstration of high cultural capital can be found in the discourses of most of the fanzines that Atton studies. In support of his argument of the "folk" value discourses of prog rock fanzines, Atton argues that "the bulk of the fanzines here focus on the artefact, the package, the recording or concert as a document of commerce, not as a creation of aesthetes."⁶³ But this is largely not the case, as the documentation of artefacts often serves as a springboard for more aesthetically-oriented discussion of these artefacts. For instance, the February 2007 final issue of *Elephant Talk* featured as one of its topics Robert Fripp's disdain for amateur photography during King Crimson concerts. Following Atton's arguments, one would expect

⁶¹ Holt, "Does Cultural," 8.

⁶² DeVeaux, "Constructing the Jazz Tradition," 526.

⁶³ Atton, "Living in the Past," 36.

that these discussions would revolve around attaining access to rare photographs of these performances—however, most contributors instead weighed in on the aesthetic and ethical principles behind Fripp’s disdain for flash photography (distracting the musicians, “punishing” the audience by walking off stage, etc.).⁶⁴ Contrary to Atton’s contention that *Elephant Talk* is “anti-intellectual,”⁶⁵ the discourses in *Elephant Talk* demonstrate that “their education emphasizes abstracted discussion of ideas and pleasures removed from the material world.”⁶⁶

That fanzines are often sites dominated by discourses of high cultural capital was also noted by Frith in *The Sociology of Rock*.⁶⁷ Furthermore, in his monumental study on zines, Stephen Duncombe notes that zine contributors most often come from white, middle- to upper-class backgrounds that enable them to have less time constraints due to money.⁶⁸ And although I demonstrated above that class background is not necessarily demonstrative of these audiences’ class trajectories (indeed, most of the zines that Duncombe studies actively reject dominant culture), for the most part the ‘90s prog rock fanzines again maintain a high level of intellectual discourse characteristic of high social standing.⁶⁹

Thus, in the institutionalized spaces dedicated specifically to classic prog bands, the high-status progressive ambitions of the classic prog era were maintained in the field of music through

⁶⁴ Jakub Misak, “Robert and the dread amateur photogs,” *Elephant Talk*, February 18, 2007, <http://et.stok.ca/digests/1251.txt>.

⁶⁵ Atton, “Living in the Past,” 35.

⁶⁶ Holt, “Does Cultural,” 8.

⁶⁷ Frith, *Sociology of Rock*, 56.

⁶⁸ Stephen Duncombe, *Notes from the Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* (London and New York: Verso, 1997), 7-8.

⁶⁹ Nonetheless, not all the fanzines described by Atton focus primarily on high cultural discourses. *ELP Digest*, for instance, demonstrates the lowest cultural capital by emphasizing what Holt describes as “that which is functional or practical—the taste of necessity.” Much of the discussion focuses on the appreciation of Emerson, Lake, and Palmer through the acquisition of recordings or other related materials or learning how to perform their music.

intellectualist and aesthetic discourses. But how did the fans in this resurgent fanbase maintain distinction toward other music? Unfortunately, the fanzines provide little opportunity to examine such questions as they are dedicated almost exclusively to discussions of the bands for which they are named and closely related classic prog bands. Prog Archives, however, allows for a more nuanced look at these genre and class distinctions since it hosts threads dedicated to a wider range of (prog-affiliated and non-prog) music. As I discussed in the Introduction, while omnivorousness holds a dominant position among discourses in Prog Archives, a highbrow snobbism still persists.

This snobbism is very similar to that found in the classic prog fanbase. For instance, user Prog_Traveller's contention that "one thing about prog is that the music (and usually the lyrics also) are not dumbed down to appeal to Joe six pack"⁷⁰ bears a conceptual resemblance to the above quoted prog fan from Frith's 1978 study that "rock music is unfortunately fashionable and its followers are exploited." There is also evidence within Prog Archives to suggest that this snobbism is a direct descendent from fans in the classic prog fanbase. In a thread titled "The Myth of the 1990s Prog Resurgence," several contributors note that they grew up listening to classic prog in the 70s, but their interest did not resurge again until the 1990s.⁷¹ Many of these users, including The Dark Elf and moshkito, display snobbish dispositions in this thread.

In addition to prog snobbism, users in Prog Archives often discuss classical music and jazz in similar capacities of high-status distinction. While the classical music may come to no surprise, the presence of jazz as holding an approximately equal footing to classical music is

⁷⁰ Prog_Traveller, "Why Do You Prefer Prog over other music genres," PA, posted July 11, 2014, http://www.progarchives.com/forum/forum_posts.asp?TID=98890&KW=Prog+over+other+music+genres&PN=4.

⁷¹ "The Myth of the 1990's Prog Resurgence," PA, created December 6, 2017, http://www.progarchives.com/forum/forum_posts.asp?TID=112409&KW=prog+resurgence&PN=1.

significant because, as mentioned above, jazz did not hold the same high status in the 1970s as it did in the early 2000s. As an example of how these genres employ status distinction in tandem with one another, user Mirror Image said, “As an avid classical and jazz lover, I wouldn't say I prefer progressive rock over these genres (I love them all equally), but when I'm in the mood for rock, I know I can expect rock music without boundaries with prog. For this genre, it's *about* the music and not about image nor does it cater to the lowest common denominator. *This is rock music with an intellect.*”⁷² The implication is that prog, like jazz and classical does not “cater to the lowest common denominator,” meaning lower status individuals incapable of understanding their “intellect.”

Nonetheless, while the prog snob persists, omnivores hold a dominant position in the prog resurgence. For instance, in the discourse that opened this thesis, Mirror Image was greatly outnumbered by the number of omnivores who disagreed with their snobbish position. Mirror Image is also well-aware that the snob is an outdated mode of appreciating progressive rock, as demonstrated by the fact that they designate themselves as an “old fart.” Although there is evidence to suggest that many of these snobs are older based on their forum posts, the anonymity of Prog Archives makes it impossible to know for sure. Thus, even if a snob is part of a younger generation, they may be perceived as older by other members of the fanbase based on their disposition. This creates symbolic exclusions of age, which may not exist as actual representations of age. As I will argue in Chapter 3, this symbolic boundary of age is often a stand-in for other exclusions. Before exploring these symbolic boundaries, in the next chapter I will first demonstrate the conflictual values of the omnivore in the context of the prog resurgence that create these symbolic boundaries of age. As I have demonstrated in this chapter, the

⁷² Mirror Image, “Why Do You Prefer Prog” PA.

“progressive” in progressive rock for snobs is rooted in status distinctions and white male individualist authenticity. But in the prog resurgence a newly-formed prog band, The Mars Volta, along with its omnivorous fanbase, valued a new understanding of progress: that of social progress rooted in diversity.

CHAPTER 2: PERFORMING PROGRESS IN THE MUSIC OF THE MARS VOLTA

In the early 2000s, The Mars Volta's popularity among prog rock fandom was, in many ways, a conundrum. Unlike 1970s prog rock that drew heavily on Western classical music, TMV members Omar Rodriguez-Lopez and Cedric Bixler-Zavala routinely insisted on the integral importance of salsa music to their style and asserted an ambivalent relationship to classic prog rock. "Salsa is everything," said Rodriguez-Lopez in 2003. "Everything I interpret, be it rock music or punk music or whatever stage I'm at, is filtered through hearing the clave."¹ For a so-called progressive rocker, Rodriguez-Lopez's statement is a far cry from the covers of classical compositions by Bach and Mussorgsky by Jethro Tull and Emerson, Lake, and Palmer. Despite this departure from prog rock norms, The Mars Volta were consistently addressed in prog rock discourses since the debut of their first studio album.

In the previous chapter, I argued that the citation of classical music played no small part in the reception of classic prog as progressing toward high art. If this is the case, what role did The Mars Volta's insistence on salsa play in the production and consumption of their music during the prog resurgence? As I will demonstrate in this chapter, salsa was not the only genre cited in their reception, and in fact, openness to a *variety* of genres is integral. Nonetheless, salsa is of primary importance to the progressive rock of The Mars Volta. For Bixler-Zavala and Rodriguez-Lopez, the sonic and visual signifiers of salsa were an important manifestation of their upbringing in El Paso, a city in Texas along the U.S.-Mexican border that shares a

¹ Quoted in "Mars Attacks! The Mars Volta Aren't Playing," *Fader* 17 (July-August 2003).

metropolitan area with the Mexican city of Juarez. For the omnivores in the progressive rock fanbase, the salsa signifiers and Chicano and Puerto Rican heritage of Bixler-Zavala and Rodriguez-Lopez, respectively, marked a progressive departure from the primarily English and white representation of progressive rock in history. As such, the music of The Mars Volta came to represent a new type of progressive that departs from the status progressivism of classic prog and the prog snob: that of *social* progress.

As I demonstrated in Chapter 1, one of the fatal downfalls of classic prog was the perception that it no longer represented the political progressiveness of the young fanbase. In the early 2000s, the reasons for the resurgence of the genre included a critical distance from classic prog and a renewed interest in the idea that prog rock can once again meet the progressive needs of the youth. The primarily younger, more omnivorous fans of prog rock sought new music that did not need to resort to citing classic prog rock and also manifested their idea of *progress*: that of diversity. Ironically, this form of distinction depends on the maintenance of the unmarked white male status of the genre by the same segment of the fanbase. As I will demonstrate in the next chapter, this idea of social progress was often seen as contradictory to the idea of musical progress within the classic prog rock fanbase. Nonetheless, I must first demonstrate the extent to which social progress through diversity is critical to the reception of TMV.

I begin by discussing the emergence of The Mars Volta and their association with the genre of progressive rock. Although the exact origins of this association are unclear, I examine some possible reasons, including some common stylistic features with classic prog which were especially salient during the prog resurgence, their origins from a punk band and a reversal of the “punk killed prog” narrative, as well as increasing investment in omnivorousness among certain members of the prog rock fanbase and beyond. Although The Mars Volta released six studio

albums before their break-up in 2012, in this chapter and the next I focus primarily on the first two: *De-Loused in the Comatorium* (2003) and *Frances the Mute* (2005). This is primarily to investigate the stabilization of progressive rock as a genre descriptor for the band toward the beginning of their formation. For this reason, I also briefly discuss their *Tremulant* EP, released in 2002 one year before *De-Loused*.

Next, I examine the discussions of genre by members of The Mars Volta in describing their own music. While the personnel of The Mars Volta consisted of anywhere from four to nine members at any given time, I will only focus on the core members Cedric Bixler-Zavala and Omar Rodriguez-Lopez, since they were the principle songwriters and the only two consistent members of The Mars Volta during the band's eleven-year existence and whose split signaled the end of the band. I argue that their insistence on the integral importance of salsa to their music was a resistance to the white-washing tendency of progressive rock and rock music more generally. Yet, as I will argue, to Bixler-Zavala and Rodriguez-Lopez salsa is less a static manifestation of Latin American-ness and more of a fluid representation of their border town origins that was continuously negotiated. Like the multicultural beginnings of salsa itself, for The Mars Volta, the integration of both salsa and rock elements into their music is representative of the fluid cultural flows of their upbringing. In an attempt to capture the fluidity of The Mars Volta's musical and ethnic identities not fully captured by commonly-used terms such as American or Latinx, I often refer to them as "border town kids" (or just "border kids" for short), drawn from a retrospective review of *De-Loused* by Elijah C. Watson in Latin music journal

Remezcla.² When referring to the heritage of either Bixler-Zavala or Rodriguez-Lopez, however, I instead use their preferred terms of Chicano and Puerto Rican, respectively.

In examining The Mars Volta's genre discourses beyond salsa, I also demonstrate that a *performance* of omnivorousness, which included their ability to cite a variety of genres, was integral to their brand. In the field of music, this performance of omnivorousness was a position-taking that sought to maintain or elevate their position in the field of progressive rock as it existed in the 2000s—a position that historically would have been disadvantaged on account of their Chicano and Puerto Rican heritage in the genre of progressive rock.

Finally, I examine the discourses of social progressivism by reviewers and members of the TMV-dedicated online forum The Comatorium and argue that performances of omnivorousness enacted multi-cultural capital,³ allowing these participants to achieve or maintain a high status within the 1990s/2000s field of music in which omnivores held the dominant position. While many performances of omnivorousness certainly express legitimate concern for social progress, I also note some of the (unintentional) aesthetic and extra-musical shortcomings of these performances: mainly, that by singling out “diversity” in a historically non-diverse context (progressive rock), such performances actually reinforce new racial disparities by imposing strictures of racialized authenticity. This often has the result of benefitting the individual fans who enact this multi-cultural capital, while disadvantaging the minority artists for whom these racialized strictures come to be expected. For The Mars Volta, their departure from salsa signifiers in their later albums may have led, in part, to their decline in

² Elijah C. Watson, “15 Years On, The Mars Volta's ‘De-Loused in the Comatorium’ Remains a Triumph for Border Town Kids,” *Remezcla*, June 22, 2018, <https://remezcla.com/features/music/the-mars-volta-deloused-in-the-comatorium-15th-anniversary/>.

³ For the concept of multi-cultural capital, see Bryson, “Anything but Heavy Metal.”

popularity. Nonetheless, the social progress that their early music was seen to represent still remains integral to their legacy years after their 2012 breakup.

The Mars Volta: Bringers of New Prog

The Mars Volta formed in 2001 after founding members Cedric Bixler-Zavala (vocals) and Omar Rodriguez-Lopez (guitar) broke away from the post-hardcore punk band At the Drive-In. In a reversal of the punk-killed-prog narrative, one of the primary ways they sought to distance themselves from their former band was to highlight the limits of At the Drive-In's punk musical aesthetic. "In those days we held ourselves back because of punk rock's ethics and rules," said Bixler-Zavala in 2003 regarding their days in At the Drive-In. "Now we want to keep the door open to anywhere we want to evolve."⁴ Fans within both the punk and progressive rock fanbases would have understood exactly what this meant: the restrictions of "punk rock's ethics and rules" referred to an amateur, DIY musical aesthetic (such as primary use of I, IV, and V chords, verse-chorus song structure), which was seen as mutually opposed to progressive rock's values of virtuosity, formal length, and complexity.

While it is difficult to say exactly when The Mars Volta came to be associated with prog rock, the genre was consistently evoked in reviews of the debut LP *De-Loused in the Comatorium* in 2003.⁵ Conversely, prog rock was rarely evoked in reviews of their 2002 debut EP, *Tremulant*.⁶ When asked about their band's genre, Rodriguez-Lopez always seemed to take their association with prog rock as something that was applied to them by someone else,

⁴ The Mars Volta, "The Mars Volta: Planet Rock," interview by Martin Aston, *Q*, April, 2003.

⁵ See, for instance Megan O'Karma, review of *De-Loused in the Comatorium* by The Mars Volta, *Popular Music and Society* 28, no. 2 (May 2005): 262; Brent Dicrescenzo, review of *De-Loused in the Comatorium* by The Mars Volta, *Pitchfork*, June 29, 2003; Noel Murray, review of *De-Loused in the Comatorium* by The Mars Volta, *A.V. Club*, September 8, 2003.

⁶ Eric Carr, review of *Tremulant EP* by The Mars Volta, *Pitchfork*, June 24, 2002; Miranda Iossifidis, review of *Tremulant EP* by The Mars Volta, *Drowned in Sound*, April 18, 2002.

although he was not adverse to this association. In an early 2004 interview, Stevie Chick wrote “The Mars Volta, Cedric and Omar’s polymorphous rock band, have already been tagged as some second-coming of the once-maligned genre, Prog,” while drawing on the following quote from Rodriguez-Lopez: “We choose to *take* the ‘prog’ label literally [emphasis mine]. For us, ‘progressive’ means moving forwards, not sounding like our previous bands or our old records. When you think of it in those terms, it’s a *positive* association [emphasis original].”⁷ Similarly, in a 2006 interview when asked about his stylistic similarities to prog-associated guitarists Frank Zappa and John McLaughlin (of Mahavishnu Orchestra), Rodriguez-Lopez responded, “I definitely love those records, too, but I always forget to mention them.”⁸

If, as Rodriguez-Lopez suggests, the designation of prog rock was applied *to* The Mars Volta, how is it that their music came to be designated as such? As I suggested above, one possibility is the punk-prog dichotomy and the way they sought to distance themselves from their former band. Another possibility is the connection between *De-Loused* and albums such as Genesis’ *Lamb Lies Down on Broadway* and Pink Floyd’s *Dark Side of the Moon* through cover art by Storm Thorgerson.⁹ Additionally, certain sonic signifiers of their music certainly connected them to classic prog, such as long songs with extended forms, albums composed as cohesive conceptual and musical units, and a musical core comprised of drum set, bass, and guitar. Furthermore, Macan notes that the addition of “unusual” instrumentation to this musical core—in the case of The Mars Volta, various keyboards, saxophone and flute, timbales, congas,

⁷ The Mars Volta, interview by Stevie Chick, Mycherieamour, March 20, 2005, <http://mycherieamour.blogspot.com/2005/03/mars-volta.html>. Originally appeared in *Mojo*, 2004.

⁸ Omar Rodriguez-Lopez, “The New Guitar Gods: Mars Volta,” interview by Alan di Perna, *Guitar World*, November 7, 2008. Originally appeared in *Guitar World Magazine*, November 2006.

⁹ The Mars Volta, interview by Aston.

clave, etc. (depending upon album)—is a hallmark of the progressive rock musical style.¹⁰ Most importantly, however, as I demonstrate in the coming sections, their association with progressive rock stems from their embodiment of ideas of *social* progress through omnivorousness.

As I discussed in the last chapter, the *internal* fanbase of the prog rock resurgence continued to grow with many older prog fans returning to their interest in the genre. In the context of this resurgence, the expanding dedicated fanbase eager for the second coming of prog would have heard all the above stylistic traits within the context of progressive rock.¹¹ At the same time, fans coming from *outside* the genre—a younger, more omnivorous generation—increasingly became interested in the viability of progressive rock to once again embody their ideas of social progressivism. As I demonstrate below, for these omnivores progressive rock serves as only one genre among their eclectic musical tastes. Nonetheless, their ideas of social progressivism came to occupy a dominant position within the prog fanbase. One position from which these omnivores draw their cultural capital is the music of The Mars Volta. As such, I begin my analysis of the field with the discussions of social progressivism from the members of TMV themselves.

The Omnivorous Diet of The Mars Volta

In colloquial English, progressivism is typically associated with social progressivism, or the advocacy for social reform. Often mutually opposed with conservatism, progressivism implies social progress to some idealized future that has not been realized in the past. In the United States, this idealized future often evokes inclusivity and equality for cultural and ethnic

¹⁰ Macan, *Rocking the Classics*, 31-32.

¹¹ See, for instance, user Dan Bobrowski's comment in one of the earliest (April 2004) Prog Archives threads dedicated to The Mars Volta: "I felt the Mars Volta disc had a lot of Rush and King Crimson in the music. There are prog elements, just as Radiohead or Elbow." Dan Bobrowski, "Opeth, The Mars Volta," PA, posted April 05, 2004, http://www.progarchives.com/forum/forum_posts.asp?TID=463&KW=the+mars+volta&PID=4991#4991.

minorities. Musical omnivorouness may be understood as one manifestation of social progressivism. Mich  le Ollivier notes that the notion of omnivorousness is an extension of progressive agendas in that it is linked to the “rhetoric of openness to cultural diversity” through music. Importantly, as discussed in greater detail below, this “openness” does not necessarily manifest in the collapse of cultural hierarchies, but rather represents a “new ethos” in which these hierarchies are seen as problematic among high status individuals.¹²

The members of The Mars Volta engage with the idea of social progressivism in their interviews on two levels: openness to diverse musics in their own listening practices and resistance to unmarked white masculinity inherent in prog rock. To the latter point, they are especially insistent on the centrality of their border kid identities to the core of their music, which resists the colonizing tendency of the “rock” in prog rock to serve as the unmarked white backdrop against which their perceived Latin-ness is an exotic other.

Describing his listening habits in 2006, Rodriguez-Lopez said, “I’m just fond of music in general. Salsa, dub and dancehall are all huge influences, along with country, folk, pop music and electronic music like Richard James [*Aphex Twin*] or Roni Size. I love every form of music, with the exception of nu-metal.”¹³ This demonstrates a high level of what I term *performed omnivorousness*. By citing a variety of genres and artists, Rodriguez-Lopez outwardly projects an openness to genre diversity, thus enacting the multi-cultural capital that comes with omnivorousness. Despite this, he still excludes nu metal. Nadine Hubbs notes a similar phenomenon in the “anything but country” phrase, which is often used to symbolically exclude and separate the “Bad Whites”—lower class white people that higher class whites assume to hold

¹² Ollivier, “Modes of Openness,” 121, 143-44.

¹³ Rodriguez-Lopez, interview by Perna.

racist and bigoted views—from the “Good Whites.”¹⁴ Nu metal, one of the most performatively loathed genres of the early 2000s, served a similar function in excluding the racist and sexist white male community it was thought to represent.¹⁵

In addition to their musical tastes, both Bixler-Zavala and Rodriguez-Lopez often discussed the integral influence of cinema on their work. Their taste in cinematic genres, too, demonstrates a high level of omnivorousness, with Bixler-Zavala citing such movies as the 1976 science fiction movie starring David Bowie *The Man Who Fell To Earth*, the original 1960 American Western film *The Magnificent Seven*, psychological drama *The Ninth Configuration* (1984), and the avant-garde movies by Alejandro Jodorowsky and David Lynch, as inspiration for his lyric-writing process.¹⁶

Performed omnivorousness (musical or otherwise) played a key role in how TMV sought to distance themselves from their former band, At the Drive-In. That an eclectic array of genres is appropriate source material for the music they compose is implied in Bixler-Zavala’s contention that, after leaving ATDI, The Mars Volta could “keep the door open to anywhere we want to evolve.”¹⁷ Furthermore, in 2005 Rodriguez-Lopez described The Mars Volta as an opportunity to draw influence from “music the rest of the band [ATDI] didn’t want to or couldn’t understand.”¹⁸ Openness to diverse genres, however, was not the only way TMV sought to

¹⁴ Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music*, 28.

¹⁵ See, for instance, headings “Rap and Metal = Crap,” “Sexism,” and “Desecrating Michael Jackson,” in Lucy Jones, “10 Reasons Why Nu-Metal Was the Worst Genre of All Time,” *NME*, September 20, 2013.

¹⁶ Cedric Bixler-Zavala, “Interview: Cedric Bixler-Zavala of The Mars Volta,” interview by Jeremy Robert Johnson, *Verbicide*, November 7, 2006, <https://www.verbicidemagazine.com/2006/11/07/interview-cedric-bixler-zavala-of-the-mars-volta/>.

¹⁷ The Mars Volta, interview by Aston.

¹⁸ The Mars Volta, interview by Tom Bryant, *Kerrang!*, July 2, 2005.

distance themselves from ATDI. As Rodriguez-Lopez has stated, “He [former ATDI band member Jim Ward] had all these fucked up, conservative, Republican views on gay people and other things. It was completely off the wall to me.”¹⁹ That Rodriguez-Lopez’s former bandmate and fellow El Paso native Jim Ward was seen as an unfit musical collaborator due to both his conservative musical (in terms of genre openness) and political views demonstrates the intimate relationship between rhetoric of musical and human diversity described by Ollivier. This openness to human diversity, especially against the unmarked backdrop of white masculinity in rock music, became a prevalent aspect of TMV’s musical brand. Elsewhere they demonstrated their openness to homosexuality by expressing ambivalence to conjecture that they (Bixler-Zavala and Rodriguez-Lopez) were a gay couple.²⁰

Most important to the early branding of their music, however, Rodriguez-Lopez and Bixler-Zavala were fairly insistent on the role that their border identities play in the style of their music. Reflecting on their El Paso upbringing, Bixler-Zavala and Rodriguez-Lopez were not always nostalgic, but nonetheless admitted the city’s lasting influence on them and their music. “It’s true that there’s no identity here but there’s an underlying theme of violence here too,” said Rodriguez-Lopez in 2005 upon returning to El Paso to perform with The Mars Volta. “The Hispanic culture and the barrenness and the never ending [*sic*] feeling of the desert all blend here.” Picking up on this sentiment, Bixler-Zavala continued, ““El Paso shapes you because it doesn’t have anything to shape you with. . . . You have to figure yourself out because it’s so barren here. It forces you to work out what you want to do with your time and what your influences are.” For the two musicians, their chosen identities and influences were ever-

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ The Mars Volta, interview by Chick.

fluctuating throughout their upbringing. Having run with various gangs, at one point this identity for both was defined by drugs, violence, and intolerance (especially toward “gay . . . and black people”). By the time of this 2005 interview they no longer identified with these gangs, but nonetheless noted that their past remained an important part of their identities. As stated by Bixler-Zavala, being in a gang “was far from cool but I’m not ashamed or embarrassed by it because it helped me change and I wouldn’t be a better person if I hadn’t been a shitty person at some point.”²¹

At the time of The Mars Volta’s early albums, the blend of Hispanic culture in their upbringing described by Rodriguez-Lopez became important to their musical border identities. When asked how music entered his life, Rodriguez-Lopez said, “Being Puerto Rican, music was always such a big part of my upbringing and culture—everyone in my family plays something. Anytime we get together, we’re playing music and singing improvisations about what’s happening in the room or what kind of food we’re eating.”²² He has also cited salsa as his primary influence, especially the music of pianist Larry Harlow.²³ In addition to the sonic manifestations of salsa in their recordings, discussed further below, both Rodriguez-Lopez and Bixler-Zavala have been known to dance using salsa steps during their live performances. Yet, Rodriguez-Lopez was not always so keen on identifying with his Puerto Rican heritage. While he has noted the dominant influence of his father on this aspect of his identity, Rodriguez-Lopez notes that in his younger days, he felt that he needed to rebel against the things his father taught

²¹ The Mars Volta, interview by Bryant.

²² Omar Rodriguez-Lopez, “Q&A: The Mars Volta’s Omar Rodriguez-Lopez: Guitarist Is a Prog-Rock Warrior and a Salsa Fan,” interview by Austin Scraggs, *Rolling Stone*, March 10, 2005.

²³ Ibid. Interestingly, Harlow was also cast as an outsider within the genre of salsa, his nickname being “el Judío Maravilloso,” meaning “the marvelous Jew.”

him.²⁴ This ever-changing and fluid border identity reflects Alejandro L. Madrid's theorization of borderlands as "a space where one becomes" rather than "a space where one is." In other words, Rodriguez-Lopez' identity as Puerto Rican or otherwise reflects a "continuous construction that is endlessly resignified as power struggles change the ways in which borderland individuals relate to each other and to competing ideological discourses."²⁵

Bixler-Zavala, while generally less outspoken about his heritage and its manifestation in their music, has noted that growing up in a bilingual household has had a profound effect on his lyrical writing. "Being Chicano I tend to gravitate towards the 'Spanglish' a lot more, and Spanglish has a lot more English in it, and I want to get away from that [in my lyrical writing] sometimes because I think the sentiment is . . . better felt through Spanish."²⁶ Bixler-Zavala has employed the use of Spanish lyrics most extensively in their 2005 LP *Frances the Mute*, often at prominent points in the album. For instance, the opening song of the album, "Cygnus. . . Vismund Cygnus" features a forty-five second introduction with English lyrics and acoustic guitar, after which the volume increases drastically, the instrumentation changes starkly, and a call-and-response begins between Bixler-Zavala and crowd vocals in Spanish.

Beyond the Spanish lyrics, one of the most common sonic signifiers of The Mars Volta's border identities present in many of their albums is the use of percussion instruments commonly associated with salsa: clave, bongos, congas, and timbales. Despite the fact that these instruments most often appear in conjunction with other typical rock band instruments (guitar, bass, drumset, etc.), Rodriguez-Lopez has been insistent on the fact that these are not a simple token of their Latin-ness, but rather an integral part of the music. His contention that "Everything [he]

²⁴ The Mars Volta, interview by Bryant.

²⁵ Madrid, "Transnational Musical Encounters," 8-9.

²⁶ Bixler-Zavala, interview by Johnson.

interpret[s], be it rock music or punk music . . . is filtered through hearing the clave” seems to indicate that the music he creates is not prog rock with a surface-level hint of salsa, but rather a deep musical hybrid in which the rhythmic-metric grid of the clave is integral to the structure of the music, even if the rhythmic pattern is not always readily apparent.

Some recordings by The Mars Volta actually feature a clave, such as “Drunkship of Lanterns,” but most do not. Even when the clave is sonically present, it is often not prominent in the mix. Based on Rodriguez-Lopez’s statement then, in most of the music he performs, the metric-rhythmic foundation of the clave is implied. Rebecca Simpson-Litke and Chris Stover describe the metric-rhythmic foundation of the clave as “a liminal space that is neither rhythm nor meter, yet interacts essentially with both.”²⁷ For instance, salsa musicians often describe four half notes as a syncopation in relation to the dotted rhythms of the clave. Example 1 provides a transcription of four bars of their song “L’Via L’Viaquez” from *Frances the Mute* along with a 3-2 *son clave* rhythm (not actually present in the song) in order to demonstrate some of the implied rhythmic interactions of the song to the clave. In particular, the kick and snare drum parts of the drum set map fairly consistently onto a bass *tumbao tresillo* rhythm (designated in triangle noteheads in Example 1). While the *tumbao* may not be readily apparent (it is, after all, normally performed on the bass and not a drum set), the use of the *guajira/chacha* groove starting at 2:33, including percussion such as the timbales and congas that are prominent in the mix, clearly demonstrates the influence of salsa on the surface of their song.

²⁷ Rebecca Simpson-Litke and Chris Stover, “Theorizing Fundamental Music/Dance Interactions in Salsa,” *Music Theory Spectrum* 41 (2019), 78.

$\text{♩} = 104$

Vocals

Electric Guitar

Bass Guitar

Keyboard

Drum Set

Son Clave

Tr. Solo

E. Gtr.

Bass

Kbd.

Dr.

Clave

L' vi - a___ Hi - ja de Mi - ran - da___

Tu a - pe - lli - do se___ cam - bió___

Example 1. Four measures (0:51-1:00) of the recording “L’Via L’Viaquez” from *Frances the Mute*, along with an implied, but not present, 3-2 *son clave* rhythm. The triangle noteheads in the drum set part (in the bass and snare drums) denote the bass *tumbao tresillo* rhythm, with some notes added in parentheses to complete the *tumbao*.

Thus, “L’Via L’Viaquez” demonstrates that even within the context of a single song, the sonic manifestations of salsa and the clave are fluid. For Rodriguez-Lopez, his insistence on the integral influence of salsa to his music is an insistence not only of his Puerto Rican heritage, but also the fluidity of this identity in a multicultural border context. César Miguel Rondón notes that salsa as a distinct musical movement has its beginnings in 1960s New York as a result of the comingling of Cuban *son*, Puerto Rican *bomba*, jazz, and other musical styles. Although initially popular primarily among Puerto Ricans living in New York’s highly segregated East Harlem district, also known as *El Barrio*, salsa proved musical hybridity was not only possible, but desirable across this segregated color line. For instance, many important contributors to the genre do not come from Cuban or Puerto Rican descent, including Rodriguez-Lopez’s musical idol Larry Harlow, nicknamed “el Judio Maravilloso” (the marvelous Jew). Additionally, as the genre’s popularity grew, it defied cultural and national boundaries, gaining a wide following back in the Caribbean and among English-speaking populations in the United States.²⁸

For The Mars Volta’s early music, salsa, an already inherently multicultural musical genre, serves as fluid multicultural glue for the various musical genres to which they had been exposed as a result of their El Paso upbringing. Although they made a conscious effort to move beyond the restrictions of “punk rock’s ethics and rules” after leaving At the Drive-In, this does not mean they entirely left punk music behind (as the punk-prog dichotomy in the fanbase may lead one to believe). In fact, even years after forming The Mars Volta, “punk” still remained an important aspect of their border identities, as seen not only in the persistence of rock music

²⁸ César Miguel Rondón, *The Book of Salsa: A Chronicle of Urban Music from the Caribbean to New York City*, trans. Frances R. Aparicio with Jackie White (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 17-39.

instrumentation in their music, but even more explicitly in the self-applied genre designation of “future punk” to their 2012 album *Noctourniquet*.²⁹

Nonetheless, in Rodriguez-Lopez’s discussions of their musical style, he seems attuned to the ways in which rock music in its various guises can subsume all other musical identities as white. As such, a subtle way in which Rodriguez-Lopez has resisted the token representations of his Puerto Rican identity in discourses about his music is by dismissing the “rock” aspect of prog rock. As discussed in the previous chapter with Hamilton’s “myth of the British invasion,” the reception of rock music, and progressive rock in particular, tethered notions of white male individualist authenticity. Thus, when Rodriguez-Lopez dismisses the “rock” aspect of prog rock, he is resisting the colonizing tendency, as noted by Hamilton, of rock to serve as the unmarked backdrop of white authenticity. When he says, “We choose to take the ‘prog’ label literally,” Rodriguez-Lopez noticeably does not employ the use of the word “rock” in the genre label. As another example, even after he states, “we’re definitely electric music, so you could call it rock,” in the same interview when an interviewer explicitly asked if they are rock, Rodriguez-Lopez backpedaled and stated, “I don’t consider ourselves that. Our band is not for me to describe.”³⁰ Elsewhere, Rodriguez-Lopez has noted his disdain for the guitar:

I’ve been angry since the beginning, because I’ve always felt like I just got stuck with the guitar. It was the only instrument where I could relate my ideas to other musicians. So I’ve always tried in one way or another to wrestle it, destroy it, make it really ugly by adding effects, or just try to make it sound like anything besides this thing I hate—the guitar!³¹

²⁹ Quoted in Fernando Scoczynski Filho, “The Mars Volta Surprise SXSW, Debut New Material,” *Antiquiet*, March 20, 2011, <http://antiquiet.com/music/2011/03/mars-volta-sxsw/>.

³⁰ Rodriguez-Lopez, interview by Scraggs.

³¹ Rodriguez-Lopez, interview by Perna.

Later in this interview, Rodriguez-Lopez suggests that by their third album, *Amputechture*, he came to appreciate the guitar more. Nonetheless, this performed disdain once again suggests a critical distance from rock music by resisting the most iconic symbol of the genre: the electric guitar. Rodriguez-Lopez seems to suggest that even though their music prominently features the guitar, this does not mean their music is a manifestation of rock. Rather, their use of the guitar represents a perceived need to relate to their former white bandmates in *At the Drive-In*, and consequently, a white audience. In different circumstances he could have chosen a different instrument and wrote the same music.

One of the primary ways Rodriguez-Lopez sought to “make [the guitar] really ugly” was by adding effects and pedals. Ironically, many of these effects reinforce a strong connection to rock and metal. For instance, in the album recording of “L’Via L’Viaquez,” Rodriguez-Lopez heavily employs distortion and fuzz pedals on the guitar solo from 5:51-6:11. These two effects, while they would sonically distance the instrument from an acoustic guitar, are coded very similarly to what Steve Waksman describes as “sonoric excess” common throughout post-1960 rock and metal.³²

Some of Rodriguez-Lopez’ effects, however, obscure their guitaristic origins, especially by masking the unique timbral pluck attack and decay of guitar. Rodriguez-Lopez has noted, “In the past, a lot of people have mistaken much of the guitar work on our albums for synths and keyboards.”³³ One such occasion can be found in the album recording of “Cicatriz E.S.P.” from *De-Loused in the Comatorium*. At 3:21 begins an extended guitar solo, followed by a long ambient and atmospheric section that ends with the reintroduction of the drum set around nine

³² Steve Waksman, *Instruments of Desire: The Electric Guitar and the Shaping of Musical Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 8.

³³ Rodriguez-Lopez, interview by Perna.

minutes. One sound that recurs throughout the ambient section is a low sweeping and swooshing noise that shifts up and down in pitch at a pulsating frequency ranging between about 140-160 beats per minute. With no semblance of a guitaristic attack or sustain, this noise could easily be mistaken for having been produced by a synthesizer or post-production digital means. However, this effect is produced by Rodriguez-Lopez on the guitar by using a delay pedal and modulating the “time” at regular intervals using an expression pedal. Live performances of this song usually feature an extended jam session that differs significantly from the recorded versions, but in some performances Rodriguez-Lopez can be found creating this same effect live during the jam.³⁴

For The Mars Volta, performing omnivorousness meant defying the exclusively white, masculine identity often associated with rock in their musical style and their performances of socially progressive selfhoods in interviews. That social progressivism is so heavily embedded in their music can be seen in how critics and The Mars Volta’s fanbase also perform omnivorousness in describing and appreciating their music.

Performing Social Progressivism in the Fanbase

“Reviewing this album is like trying to explain what a rainbow looks like to a blind person, but I’ll try my best,” begins reviewer rocksolidaudio in their review of The Mars Volta’s debut LP, *De-Loused in the Comatorium*. “Most bands can be forced into a genre if it comes down to it, at least in description. But to do that with the Mars Volta defeats the very purpose of their existence.”³⁵ That did not stop other reviewers from trying. “The Mars Volta’s second

³⁴ See, for instance, around 14:20 in their live performance at Lowlands Paradise in 2003: The Mars Volta, “The Mars Volta - Cicatriz ESP - Live + Improvisations (Lowlands II),” YouTube video, 24:33, posted May 29, 2013 by alifie from mars, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BAf_deP-E9k.

³⁵ Rocksolidaudio, review of *De-Loused in the Comatorium* by The Mars Volta, *Punknews*, June 27, 2003.

record, *Frances the Mute*, is seventy-seven mind-blowing minutes of . . . what, exactly? Prog-rock salsa? P-Funk emo?” writes another reviewer following the release of their second LP.³⁶

As demonstrated by these two reviewers, performances of omnivorousness by citing a variety of genres was a commonly enacted strategy in the reception of The Mars Volta. As discussed above, performing musical omnivorousness in the heteronomous field of popular music is a performance of social progressivism in that it demonstrates an openness to musical (and thereby cultural) diversity. The reviews discussed here largely fall into this broader field of popular music (of which progressive rock is a subsidiary field), as they are not necessarily geared exclusively to a progressive rock audience—the above two reviews, for instance, being written for *Punknews* and *Rolling Stone*. In the next chapter, however, I focus on the interaction of the snobs and omnivores within the field of progressive rock by honing in on Prog Archives.

In the reception of The Mars Volta in particular, the ability to cite the Latin elements in their music earned one extra cultural capital. Although the cultural capital acquired from citing marked racial signifiers depends on the dominant position of omnivorousness, ironically, the unmarked whiteness of prog rock is also part of what lends racial citation so much capital in the genre. In a 2003 review of *De-Loused in the Comatorium*, reviewer Megan O’Karma’s wrote, “This is straightforward prog(ressive) rock. . . . The Mars Volta . . . take a genre of music that is historically almost embarrassingly white (see prog rock gods Rush) and turn it on its head with unrelenting percussive flair and subtle touches of romantic flamenco that help to perfect *De-Loused*.”³⁷ By acknowledging the “almost embarrassingly white” history of progressive rock, she draws attention to the fact that The Mars Volta bring a much-needed diversity to the genre—but

³⁶ Rodriguez-Lopez, interview by Scraggs.

³⁷ O’Karma, review of *De-Loused in the Comatorium*.

through an ill-informed lens, with “romantic flamenco” serving as an incorrect and stereotypical representation of Spanish-language music.

The citation of Carlos Santana has been a common means of explaining the “Latin” elements in their music.³⁸ The cultural capital attributed to the citation of these elements originates in the canonization of these elements by Santana’s current position within the history of rock. In the era before omnivorousness taste patterns were prevalent in the United States and United Kingdom, Hamilton notes that during Santana’s emergence in the 1960s, reviewers did not know how to cope with this musician that challenged the dichotomous white/black conviction of rock and roll. The result was a rhetoric of “exotic authenticity” in these reviews, such as Ralph Gleason’s suggestion that “some ethnomusicologist” should study Santana’s music to “relate them to traditional Cuban, African, and Haitian music and styles.”³⁹ With the emergence of The Mars Volta it would seem that this dilemma had not yet been resolved, as many reviewers referenced the only other Latin-infused rocker they knew. The racialized history described by Hamilton was repeating itself, but in a different guise. By the early 2000’s, the modernist exoticist tone that permeated the reception of Santana’s music was replaced by a performed omnivorousness that ultimately had a similar effect: the success and authenticity of The Mars Volta was measured, in part, by their ability to adhere to the racialized strictures imposed on their “Latin American” identities. Perhaps it is no coincidence that their later albums, such as *Octahedron* (2009) and *Noctourniquet* (2012), in which the aforementioned Latin

³⁸ See, for instance, Murray, review of *De-Loused in the Comatorium*; Erik Leijon, review of May 12, 2005 The Mars Volta concert in Montreal, Quebec, *Pop Matters*, May 26, 2005.

³⁹ Hamilton, *Just around Midnight*, 240-44.

signifiers such as Spanish lyrics and salsa instrumentation are less present, were their least popular.⁴⁰

If the ability to cite Santana surely afforded reviewers some cultural capital, the ability to call out other reviewers for their inherent prejudices afforded the omnivore even more. “The other band often evoked in The Mars Volta press is Santana,” wrote reviewer Eric Carr in 2002. “That’s just offensive. Omar and Cedric’s last names are Rodriguez-Lopez and Zavala, right? They use bongos? They *must sound* like Santana!” [emphasis original].⁴¹ While Carr acknowledges the potential of racial stereotyping as a result of making this connection, he nonetheless still capitalizes on the fact that by doing so he is also making the connection between the two artists to the reader. Thus, while this corrective of racial stereotyping is likely well-intentioned, it is still a position-taking aimed at elevating one’s status among omnivores. This demonstrates one of the key extramusical limitations of omnivorousness described by Ollivier: that even though omnivorousness may demonstrate a “new ethos” among upper- and middle-class experience in dealing with cultural differences, it does little to flatten social and artistic hierarchies formed by disparities in cultural and economic capital.⁴² In other words, omnivorousness tends to inordinately benefit those social groups that are already in power while doing little to elevate the positions of those racial or cultural groups (such as Latinos or border kids) that this “rhetoric of openness to cultural diversity” seeks to include. Instead, it promotes

⁴⁰ Popularity being based both on these albums’ Billboard chartings and overall song popularity on Spotify as of July 2020. “Chart History: The Mars Volta,” *Billboard*, accessed July 10, 2020, <https://www.billboard.com/music/the-mars-volta/chart-history/billboard-200/song/742279>.

⁴¹ Carr, review of *Tremulant EP*. It may be worth noting that this is an otherwise negative review of the EP.

⁴² Ollivier, “Modes of Openness,” 143-44.

an exceptionalism of a select few (like The Mars Volta), while continuing to hold them to racialized strictures (such as comparing them to Santana).

Beyond reviews, it seems that performance of social progressivism is similarly important to dedicated members of The Mars Volta fanbase. Musical discourses on the The Comatorium, a forum dedicated to The Mars Volta and adjacent discourses, serves as a gauge for this fanbase. A high degree of performed omnivorousness can be found on the forum “Mumbling of Citadels” within The Comatorium, in which users are instructed to “discuss all music besides TMV and their side projects.” While thread topics contain some of the prog classics, including King Crimson and Frank Zappa, artists not typically associated with the genre of prog rock are more prominently featured. One of the threads, which began in April 2005 and received among the highest number of replies is titled “HIP-HOP CONVENTION FOR THE UNINFORMED.”⁴³

In another thread, titled “Pretentious world music thread for the unsophisticated,” user SnkZato1 Ph.D. begins the thread by saying “share your good ‘world’ music so we can play it at parties and claim mental superiority.”⁴⁴ Such a statement is surely satirical, parodying the ways in which omnivores claim cultural capital through performing social progressivism. Nonetheless, it is also demonstrative of how omnivores maintain a dominant position within the forum. In these threads, genre snobbishness is scarce. The most dominant position, then, is the most omnivorous of the omnivores—the user able to cite the highest number of obscure and worthwhile examples of world music. The user who began this post, however, while still accumulating multi-cultural capital by beginning an omnivorous thread, also sought to elevate

⁴³ “Mumbling of Citadels,” The Comatorium, accessed May 12, 2020, <http://forum.thecomatorium.com/forum/index.php?showforum=40>.

⁴⁴ SnkZato1 Ph.D., “Pretentious World Music Thread for the Unsophisticated,” The Comatorium, posted May 16, 2017, <http://forum.thecomatorium.com/forum/index.php?showtopic=128948>.

their position in the broader field of power by pointing out the futility of performative omnivorousness. In a context in which there is less economic capital at stake than the reviews (the users are presumably not being paid for their ability to cite genres), the futility of performed omnivorousness for the status of the musicians in question comes to the fore. By being “woke” to the fact that performative racial allyship may benefit the listener more than the musician, the above user claims “mental superiority” over the “less woke” omnivores in The Comatorium using the trademark humor that characterizes many of the posts in the forum.

Nonetheless, most members of The Comatorium fall into many of the same pitfalls outlined above with respect to performed omnivorousness. In describing the music of The Mars Volta, several such performances of social progressivism can be found in a thread titled “Race/Ethnicity of Each Band Member,” where each comment that offers some insight into the band members’ race/ethnicity in an attempt to elevate one’s status within the forum.⁴⁵ While the thread comprises mostly of quotes from the band members themselves, the mere presence of such a thread demonstrates some of the same limitations of racialized strictures outlined above. Furthermore, in a thread about TMV’s musical influences, one user notes that Santana’s name had been removed because to their knowledge, no single band member has ever mentioned Santana as an influence.⁴⁶ While such a comment is certainly a performance of social progressivism, correcting a common misconception, the fact that this influence had to be

⁴⁵ “Race/Ethnicity of Each Band Member,” The Comatorium, created January 19, 2005, <http://forum.thecomatorium.com/forum/index.php?showtopic=28130>.

⁴⁶ “EDIT: it has been brought to my attention that Santana have never actually been acknowledged as an influence by any of the band members in interviews. So as obvious as the influence might seem to journalists or casual listeners...I’ve removed the entries regarding Santana for now.” Cybrid, “Influences,” The Comatorium, posted March 16, 2005, <http://forum.thecomatorium.com/forum/index.php?showtopic=20371>.

removed demonstrates the expectation that The Mars Volta had adhered to similar Latin American racialized strictures

In general, members of The Comatorium demonstrate a high degree of musical omnivorousness without the substantial faction of prog snobs found in Prog Archives.⁴⁷ One possible reason for a higher degree of omnivorousness is the fact that, unlike Prog Archives, The Comatorium is not necessarily bound to one genre by its title alone. However, as demonstrated in the Introduction, being a fan of The Mars Volta even within Prog Archives was a fairly consistent predictor of a high degree of omnivorousness. These highly omnivorous discourses were also surely picked up, in part, from those performed by the members of TMV themselves. Nonetheless, this performance of social progress is built on distinction within the exclusions of progressive rock: in order for there to be a high amount of cultural capital granted to omnivorousness, this presupposes a white, heteronormative backdrop of the genre.

Postlude

In an early 2019 campaign stop, then 2020 Democratic presidential hopeful Beto O'Rourke was asked if The Mars Volta would play at his inauguration. His response was, "It would be an honor to have The Mars Volta play anything along the campaign or in this presidency. Cedric and Omar, that group is one of the most talented collection of individuals, and I'm really proud that they're from El Paso."⁴⁸ That The Mars Volta was evoked in this scenario was no mere coincidence. For starters, O'Rourke and Bixler-Zavala formerly played in a band

⁴⁷ There is, however, a much higher rate of flaming on The Comatorium. The ratios of omnivores to snobs was determined after factoring out users who demonstrate flaming.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Bonnie Stiernberg, "Beto O'Rourke Wants to Reunite The Mars Volta," *Billboard*, March 21, 2019, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/8503625/beto-orourke-the-mars-volta-inauguration-question>.

together.⁴⁹ But whoever posed this question must have felt comfortable in doing so among a contingent of people who label themselves as progressives. As such, this interaction demonstrates the acceptance by which this band receives among political progressives. The same question about Kid Rock, for instance, may have elicited a different response among this contingent.

The above example demonstrates that, even though The Mars Volta broke up in 2012, their name continues to be evoked as a marker of social progress. By around 2010, interest in the resurgence of progressive rock as a genre seems to have declined. The banner of musical progressivism was taken up by genres such as math rock, math metal, and djent (an offshoot of math metal). In general, bands of these genres focus on formal complexity while performing social progressivism to a significantly lesser extent.⁵⁰

In the last two chapters, I have demonstrated two different understandings of the “progressive” in progressive rock in the classic prog versus Mars Volta fanbases: status progressives and social progressives. While ultimately their results are the same (elevating one’s position within the field of progressive rock), they differ in terms of motive, with the former drawing on a supposedly colorblind universalism of high culture (in terms of classical music) and the latter highlighting the values of diversity. In the final chapter, I examine the symbolic boundaries created when these two sides of the fanbase conflict. Coded as “noise,” the conflictual values of the prog snob in their reception of The Mars Volta seek to reverse the “progress” made by the prog omnivores by reinforcing the values of a white, male, middle- to upper-class classic prog.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Bradley T. Osborn, “Beyond Verse and Chorus: Experimental Formal Structures in Post-Millennial Rock Music” (PhD diss., University of Washington, 2010), 43-58.

CHAPTER 3: NOISE AND THE SYMBOLIC BOUNDARIES OF PROGRESSIVE ROCK

The Mars Volta just make a complete racket and I can't listen to them anymore. I have better things to do with my life than waste time listening to them.¹

The mars volta makes just too much noise, while Tool makes almost perfect noise.²

What is all the hype about these guys? I just listened to their latest album Frances The Mute which I wasted \$10.00 on at HMV. . . . C`mon just nothing there but a few guys and some buddies showed up to make some noise.³

As one of the most controversial bands in ProgArchives, it's no surprise that there are those who critique the quality or progressiveness of The Mars Volta's music. As the above three quotes demonstrate, these critiques often revolve around notions of noisiness or incomprehensibility. However, even among the more controversial new "prog" bands in the Archive—such as Muse and Radiohead—the frequency of these descriptions of The Mars Volta's music as noisy is exceptional. Critiques of Muse, for instance, tend to describe their music as sounding too "poppy," despite being a nearly exact contemporary of TMV.⁴ Ahlqvist makes a similar observation in his study of fan-based prog rock definitions, in which he found

¹ Hercules, "DT vs. Mars Volta," PA, posted July 7, 2008, http://www.progarchives.com/forum/forum_posts.asp?TID=49972&KW=mars+volta&PN=1.

² Dim, "Tool VS The Mars Volta, First 4 Albums," PA, posted October 3, 2008, http://www.progarchives.com/forum/forum_posts.asp?TID=52265&KW=mars+volta&PN=2.

³ Vibrationbaby, "The Mars Volta," PA, posted March 18, 2005, http://www.progarchives.com/forum/forum_posts.asp?TID=4411&KW=the+mars+volta&PID=92640#92640.

⁴ "Unlike Radiohead, Muse are usually more straight forward musically (and lyrically, but that's irrelevant, I suppose). Either way, they have really shifted away from this direction with the poppish 'Absolution' album;" "If anyone thinks Queen were prog then Muse are. Maybe prog thinly veiled as alt pop rock." poetic-killer, "What about Muse???", PA, posted January 18, 2005, http://www.progarchives.com/forum/forum_posts.asp?TID=3077&KW=muse&PN=2; Jools, "Muse-Absolution = Prog???", PA, posted April 29, 2005, http://www.progarchives.com/forum/forum_posts.asp?TID=5610&KW=muse&PID=117566#117566.

that “neo-prog” bands formed in the 1990s like Flower Kings, Spock’s Beard, and Magenta “seek to ‘progress’ by adding more mainstream rock-oriented sounds into the mix.”⁵

In this chapter, I follow these discourses on the noisiness of Mars Volta’s music and, drawing on the work of sociologist Bethany Bryson, analyze their implications for “symbolic exclusions” that construct “symbolic boundaries”:

Whereas social exclusion refers to the monopolization of human interactions, symbolic exclusion depicts the subjective process that orders those social interactions—taste. This process, then, is a form of “boundary-work” . . . that continuously recreates the positive, negative, and neutral attitudes toward cultural cues and that define these cues as more or less acceptable in various situations. . . . Music is one type of cue that can be used to construct symbolic boundaries between groups or individuals. Therefore, I analyze musical exclusion as a type of symbolic exclusion and operationalize it as dislike for various music genres.⁶

As Bryson suggests, an individual’s expression of musical dislikes excludes by creating symbolic boundaries between themselves and those individuals not in their social milieu and associated with the genres they dislike. In *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music*, Nadine Hubbs discusses the dictum “anything but country music” as one common example of symbolic exclusion among U.S. American individuals of high status. By excluding country music from their musical tastes, otherwise omnivorous individuals create symbolic boundaries between themselves and the presumably working class, conservative, white individuals they believe the genre of country represents.⁷

While both Bryson and Hubbs’ studies analyze genre boundaries as the sites of difference along which these symbolic boundaries are enacted, in this chapter I contribute to this research by analyzing the symbolic boundaries *within* a genre. Taking the music of The Mars Volta as my

⁵ Ahlqvist, “What Makes Rock,” 648.

⁶ Bryson, “‘Anything but Heavy Metal,’” 885-886.

⁷ Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music*, 49.

case study, I analyze descriptions of their music as noise and argue that they manifest as symbolic boundaries between snobs and omnivores. Through the lens of border studies, if the genre of progressive rock serves as a border zone in which a spectrum of snobs and omnivores coexist, the symbolic boundaries between polar ends of this spectrum serve as the epistemological manifestation of this border (analogous to epistemological manifestations of the U.S.-Mexican border by symbolic boundaries of national identity).

As discussed in the previous two chapters, the difference between the snobs and omnivores is on the basis of openness to musical, and thereby cultural, diversity. The snobs value a progressive rock rooted in the genre's white, masculine origins, while the omnivores value progress toward increased diversity. Symbolic exclusions between these different in-groups occur in discourses about what constitutes "their" prog rock, which ultimately amounts to degree of openness. Exclusions from each side are position-takings that seek to either maintain (in the case of the omnivore) or increase (in the case of the snob) their position within the field of prog rock during the resurgence.

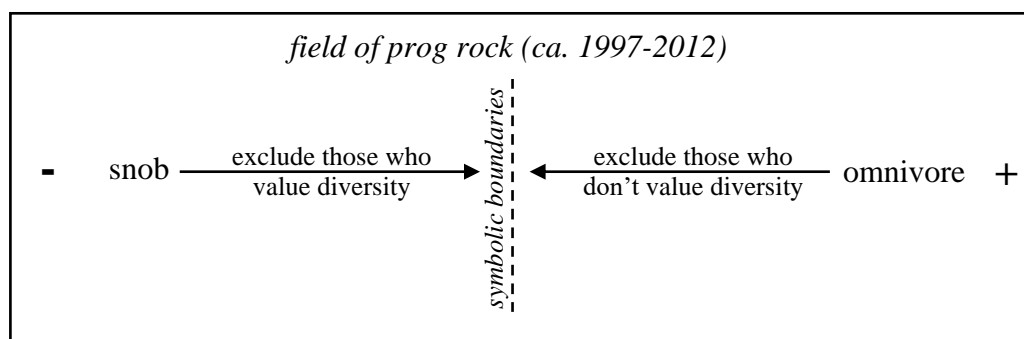


Figure 2. Graphic representation of the symbolic boundaries between snobs and omnivores within the field of prog rock. The “+” and “-” on either end of the field represent the dominant and dominated positions, respectively.

Due to the increasingly dominant position of omnivorousness in the field of class relations, an openness to cultural diversity holds a dominant position within the field of

progressive rock. As such, outright exclusions (of race, class, sexuality, gender, etc.) are rare. Discourses of noise, however, serve as coded moments of symbolic exclusion manifested out of the struggle for dominance between the snobs and omnivores in the field of prog rock. For the snobs, discourses of noise reinforce the “universal” values of “Culture” drawn from classical music while excluding those sounds that are deemed as “other.” Ironically, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, omnivores often reciprocate this othering by celebrating the diversity of a select few musicians in the notoriously non-diverse context of progressive rock. As such, both noise and performed omnivorousness serve as position-takings that contribute to the formation of symbolic boundaries constituted by openness to “diverse” intersectional identities.

Having discussed in the previous chapter how social hierarchies play out in performed omnivorousness, I now turn my attention to the hierarchies and values implicit within discourses of noise. Jacques Attali suggests that “noise” is sound in between music and silence that lacks organization within a specific code.⁸ Drawing on the work of Attali and others, Alex E. Chavez states, “The term noise, while admittedly referring to a generalized material aspect of all sound, operates as an evaluative category for sounds that are, at best, considered culturally incomprehensible or, at worst, deemed to possess unassimilable and alien meanings thought to be of no social value.”⁹ Extending their work to the present study, the “code” against which The Mars Volta is understood as “incomprehensible” or “unassimilable” is classic prog, as represented by the values of the snobs.

⁸ Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 6, 19.

⁹ Alex E. Chavez, *Sounds of Crossing: Music, Migration, and the Aural Poetics of Huapango Arribeño* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 10.

Descriptions of the music of The Mars Volta as noisy or incomprehensible do not comprise the entirety (or even majority) of discourses surrounding them in Prog Archives. Nonetheless, in analyzing prog rock as a field of struggles, I draw out these symbolic exclusions of the genre as one manifestation of these struggles. Based on my textual analyses of these forum posts, I argue that people who describe TMV as noisy tend to demonstrate a more snobbish habitus while prog rock fans of their music exhibit omnivorous tendencies. This is because although disliking The Mars Volta is not a perfect predictor of the definition of snobbism I offered in the Introduction (high status prog rock fans who dislike more genres than they like), dissenters nonetheless tend toward the snobbish end of the spectrum in comparison to fans of The Mars Volta; even if these dissenters are, by my definition, omnivores, they tend to be *less* omnivorous than TMV fans. Additionally, fans tend to perform their musical tastes more similarly to the members of The Mars Volta, who, as I mentioned in the last chapter, perform a high degree of musical omnivorousness.

Considering that race is something “socially constructed” or ascribed in certain historical and social contexts,¹⁰ I argue that the white racial frame of progressive rock results in a construction of The Mars Volta as a generalized “Latin” racial other when the sonic manifestations of their border identities are heard as noise. While I have argued that these border kid identities in reality represent a fluid and hybrid manifestation of ethnicity and nationality for The Mars Volta, to the snobs these sonic manifestations are heard as a site of difference and inferiority informed by the xenophobia toward Mexican migration in the wake of the 1994 North

¹⁰ Aliya Saperstein, Andrew M. Penner and Ryan Light, “Racial Formation in Perspective: Connecting Individuals, Institutions, and Power Relations,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 39 (2013): 359-378.

American Free Trade Agreement and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.¹¹ As I will discuss below, these symbolic exclusions of race intersect with exclusions of class, gender expression, and geographic origin in certain contexts.

Many of these criticisms about noisiness focus on The Mars Volta in generalities, describing them and their music as generally incomprehensible, citing no specific songs or musical attributes. Yet, some claims explicitly or implicitly specify musical elements of noisiness. In the sections that follow, I unpack expressions of what I describe as rhythmic, modal/intervallic, instrumental, ambient, vocal, and visual noise, each of which include one or more implicit exclusions of race, class, gender expression, geography, and age against the unmarked white, masculine backdrop of prog rock. Since the majority of these comments fail to specify examples or tracks, my analyses will focus primarily on the song “L’Via L’Viaquez” from the album *Frances the Mute* (2005). This is because the most commonly referenced (and controversial) album is *Frances the Mute*,¹² and of the five tracks on this album, the third track, “L’Via L’Viaquez,” most exemplifies the various types of noise described by these snobs.

The alternative (and dominant) understanding of The Mars Volta against which these descriptions of noise are expressed is that of social progressivism and omnivorousness, as described in the previous chapter. Given that omnivorousness represents the dominant position and effectively controls the flow of cultural capital in the field of prog rock, position-takings of performed omnivorousness by fans will largely not be represented in this chapter. Instead, as the antithesis to the position-takings of prog snobs, I offer an original interpretation of the music in

¹¹ For more information on these events and their relationship to the social construction of race, see Chavez, *Sounds of Crossing*, 28-30, 198-203.

¹² For example: “The second album was too much into noise and improvs and I never liked that epic.” Zitro, “Favourite Mars Volta Album (Bedlam Included),” PA, posted July 11, 2005, http://www.progarchives.com/forum/forum_posts.asp?TID=45888&KW=mars+volta&PN=2.

De-Loused in the Comatorium and *Frances the Mute* (especially of “L’Via L’Viaquez”) based on The Mars Volta’s position-takings as border kids that I described in the previous chapter. Such an interpretation attempts to provide a corrective to some of the shortcomings of omnivorousness described in the previous chapter. Namely, by focusing on the agency and fluid identities of the band members themselves, I resist the tendency in rock criticism and historiography, as described by Hamilton, to interpret nonwhite rock music according to racialized authenticity.

Through this reading, I suggest that much of the “noise” understood by the prog snobs can best be understood as sonic manifestations of *violence*. Reflecting on their turbulent El Paso upbringing in which discrimination and violence were everyday constants, Rodriguez-Lopez noted in 2005, “It’s true that there’s no identity here [in El Paso] but there’s an underlying theme of violence here too. If you listen to any of our records you can hear that old violence.” In his study of Jimi Hendrix’s musical style, Hamilton has argued that “explorations of violence in his music were ways of audibly remaking the tumult of the world in which he lived,” characterized not only by the War in Vietnam, but also “a discursive landscape increasingly invested in policing the stakes and possibilities of black musical creativity.”¹³ For The Mars Volta, while the policing of racialized musical creativity still holds true, the violence in their music also signifies the violence they both experienced and enacted in El Paso as a result of their fluid and multitudinous identities (see Chapter 2). I argue that this violence manifests itself in their music through sonic excess, by exaggerating or exceeding genre signifiers, whether those be in salsa, punk rock, or progressive rock. This sonic violence only constitutes noise to the extent that it is deemed unassimilable to progressive rock by prog snobs. Ironically, Keister and Smith argue that

¹³ Hamilton, *Just Around Midnight*, 215.

guitar distortion, dissonant harmonies, and dense instrumentation are some of the qualities of “sonic violence” that characterize King Crimson’s *Larks’ Tongues in Aspic* and its critique of war.¹⁴ That some of these same musical characteristics are used to describe The Mars Volta’s music as noisy within the frame established by the prog classics such as King Crimson demonstrates that these exclusions go deeper than critiques of “pure sound.”

I begin by unpacking the symbolic boundaries of rhythmic, modal, and intervallic noise, grouped together here due to their mutual interdependence and similar symbolic exclusions of race. Next, I analyze what I call ambient and instrumental noise and show how these discourses create symbolic exclusions of class and race. Finally, I unpack what I call vocal and visual noise, both of which entail symbolic exclusions of gender expression, with the visual noise also including symbolic exclusions of race. I conclude that, while almost all of these symbolic boundaries are implicit, many are coded as a symbolic boundary of age, due to the fact that this symbolic boundary is seen as less problematic than those of class, gender, and race.

Rhythmic, Modal, and Intervallic Noise

That guitarist reminds me of when I was 15 and had only been playing guitar for 2 weeks sitting in my bedroom trying to play a fast solo. There is such a thing as key that should be regarded.¹⁵

Implicit within this criticism is a contention, following Chavez, of the musical “deficiency” of Rodriguez-Lopez’ abilities on the guitar. In the first part, the user compares Rodriguez-Lopez’s rhythmic style to a beginner guitarist in a criticism I will term *rhythmic* noise. In the second part, by noting Rodriguez-Lopez’ seeming inability to regard a key signature in the context of progressive rock, the user is demonstrating what I term *modal* and *intervallic*

¹⁴ Keister and Smith, “Musical Ambition,” 439-41.

¹⁵ Ragecord, “Tool VS The Mars Volta, First 4 albums,” PA, posted May 30, 2010, http://www.progarchives.com/forum/forum_posts.asp?TID=52265&KW=mars+volta&PN=3.

noise. As demonstrated by this quote, these three types of noise are often lumped together in criticisms about the general incomprehensibility of the solos (primarily guitar and vocal) by members of The Mars Volta.

Rhythmic noise describes the expressive rhythmic microtimings that are not easily transcribed in Western notation. As I noted earlier, progressive rock's relationship to Western art music (and by proxy, notation), was and still is integral to the genre's reception among the prog snobs. Rhythmic noise in this sense can be found in classic prog, such as the rhythmically free guitar solo passages in "Close to the Edge" by Yes. But while rhythmic noise is somewhat of an anomaly in the context of classic prog, it is a key characteristic of Rodriguez-Lopez' solo style. In the reception of TMV, this rhythmic expressivity is often derided as rhythmic deficiency. Example 2, a transcription of Rodriguez-Lopez' solo in "L'Via L'Viaquez," attempts to capture this rhythmic subtlety, but is nonetheless not entirely an adequate representation of these microtimings. Thus, the transcription must be read as noisy against the backdrop of the recording.

Modal and intervallic noise refers to pitch incomprehensibility against the backdrop of Western diatonic modes and scales like Ionian and Aeolian. These two types of noise are inseparable because intervallic dissonances are always heard within their modal context. Although classic prog is exceptional among popular music genres in that it expanded the harmonic and melodic pallet to other less-commonly used scales such as Dorian, Lydian, and whole tone, dissonances were fairly limited within these contexts (with the possible exception of King Crimson). For instance, John Covach notes that the use of A Dorian in Yes' "Close to the Edge" employs Dorian as a "stylistic norm" of rock rather than deviation from classical music,

and the harmonic and melodic material in these contexts adhere fairly strictly to the A Dorian key signature.¹⁶

In the reception of The Mars Volta, the modal and intervallic noise is regarded as their inability to adhere to the frameworks of these diatonic modes. The vast majority of their music is written in minor keys, with Rodriguez-Lopez often emphasizing dissonant intervals such as the tritone in his guitar work. Their modal/intervallic framework is grounded partially in their characteristic repetitive ostinato basslines that emphasize the tonic, as demonstrated in Example 2. More significantly, the backdrop of the field of progressive rock in which they operate emphasizes different values of consonance and dissonance. For instance, in the mere 19 seconds that makes up Rodriguez-Lopez's guitar solo from "L'Via L'Viaquez," every note of the chromatic scale is sounded against the clearly established G minor framework. Especially significant is Rodriguez-Lopez's use of (016), a set-class preferred by twentieth century atonal composers for its maximization of dissonant intervals (see Example 2).

Dissonance of this level is not unheard of in classic prog—Example 3 demonstrates a brief example of the "sonic violence" described by Keister and Smith in "Larks' Tongues in Aspic, Part Two" by King Crimson, which also makes special melodic use of the tritone and the (016) set-class (although in this case the modality based on the pedal G is not yet clearly established). Nonetheless, these excerpts both mark a significant departure from the typical "progressive style" style Covach describes in Yes' "Close to the Edge," which "shares structural features and compositional practices with Western art music of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries," such as "using scalar patterns freely derived from the D-minor scale patterns" in the opening guitar solo (as opposed to the more freely dissonant or even atonal guitar work of

¹⁶ Covach, "Progressive Rock," 10-14.

ca. ♩=200

Son Clave

Electric Guitar

Bass Guitar

Drum Set

5

Clave

E. Gtr.

Bass

Dr.

10

Clave

E. Gtr.

Bass

Dr.

14

Clave

E. Gtr.

Bass

Dr.

Electric Guitar

Bass Guitar

Drum Set

Example 2. Omar Rodriguez-Lopez's guitar solo in "L'Via L'Viaquez" from 5:51-6:10. The 3-2 son clave rhythm is not actually present in the recording, but implied by the kick and snare drum. The dotted rectangles mark instances of the (016) set-class. The second excerpt denotes another possible hearing more reflective of a rock genre framework, in which it is moved over one beat so that the snare drum is on beat 2.

ca. ♩=112

Electric Guitar

Example 3. Guitar excerpt (0:15-0:19) from "Larks' Tongues in Aspic, Part Two" by King Crimson. The dotted rectangles denote an (016) set class. Note also the prominence of the melodic tritone.

Rodriguez-Lopez).¹⁷

Rodriguez-Lopez has suggested that his solo style is best understood through the influence of “hardcore salsa,” otherwise known as salsa *dura*, especially the music of Larry Harlow.¹⁸ Often understood as the antithesis to salsa *romantica*, against which salsa *dura* is understood as more “authentic,” some of the key stylistic features of salsa *dura* include “sonic power and density” accomplished through instrumentation, “climactic energy” and the presence of improvised solos.¹⁹ Example 4 is a transcription of excerpts from Larry Harlow’s clavinet solo in “Quién Lo Tumbe” (“Who Knocks It Down”) from the album *Electric Harlow*, an album that Rodriguez-Lopez has singled out as the single biggest influence on him.²⁰ Both excerpts denote moments of modal and intervallic dissonance within the clearly-established C Major framework. Similarities with Rodriguez-Lopez’ solo seen in Example 2 include the presence of the (016) set class and the emphasis on the tritone. Additionally, like Example 2, the notation in the second excerpt of Example 4 does not fully capture the subtlety of the rhythmic microtimings, in which Harlow slows down the sixteenth notes slightly leading up to the arrival on the high A.

Despite the similarities, such moments of modal/intervallic dissonance and expressive microtimings occur primarily as moments of tension within the solo. For Rodriguez-Lopez, dissonance and microtimings are a constant for the entirety of many of his solos. Referring back to his experiences, these rhythmic, modal and intervallic choices for Rodriguez-Lopez represent

¹⁷ Ibid, 9, 15.

¹⁸ Rodriguez-Lopez also cited Hector Lavoe, Willie Colón, and Johnny Pacheco as other influential musicians from this movement. The Mars Volta, “Nardwuar vs. The Mars Volta pt 1 of 2,” interview by Nardwuar Serviette, YouTube video, 9:59, posted July 7, 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=brdpQN3ACY8&list=FLbfiQ-5CEKjrjx2gcH87Zkg&index=3051>.

¹⁹ David Garcia, *Arsenio Rodríguez and the Transnational Flows of Latin Popular Music* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), 124-25. 133.

²⁰ Rodriguez-Lopez, interview by Scraggs.

moments of sonic violence in that they exaggerate and exceed the genre expectations of his influences. Although expressive microtimings are prominent stylistic features of the piano in salsa,²¹ his rhythmic nuances exceed the genre expectations, enacting sonic violence. Similarly, while modal and intervallic dissonance serve as prominent features in some progressive rock music (most notably, in the music of King Crimson) and moments of tension in the solos style of Larry Harlow (and more broadly, salsa dura), for Rodriguez-Lopez these modal and intervallic choices serve as the basis of his musical language for many of his solos.

ca. ♩=160
3:07-3:10

Clavinet

Double Bass

pizz.

3:41-3:46

Clvt.

Db.

pizz.

Example 4. Excerpts of Larry Harlow’s clavinet solo in “Quién Lo Tumbe” (“Who Knocks It Down”) from *Electric Harlow*. The dotted rectangles denote an (016) set class. As in the case of Example 2, the notation in the second excerpt does not fully capture the subtlety of the expressive microtimings.

²¹ Ives Chor, “Microtiming and Rhythmic Structure in Clave-Based Music: A Quantitative Study,” in *Musical Rhythm in the Age of Digital Reproduction*, ed. Anne Danielsen (New York and London: Routledge, 2010), 46-49.

Reception of TMV's modal/intervallic and rhythmic "noise" demonstrates that some of the same stylistic features hailed as "progressive" in the prog classics creates symbolic boundaries of race. Following Hamilton, for snobs, just as *nonwhite* musical genius is associated with racial and *non*-individual criteria, so too is *non*-musical progress associated with Latinx and other nonwhite musicians. In other words, as a result of their racialized othering, their musical choices are deemed musically deficient rather than progressive, even though many of these choices are stylistically consistent with classic prog. Nevertheless, I have demonstrated that their use of rhythmic, modal and intervallic dissonance often exceeds the genre expectations of progressive rock through sonic violence representative of the actual violence experienced and enacted by Bixler-Zavala and Rodriguez-Lopez along the border. The unwillingness to contend with this violence thus represents a position of privilege contingent on class and geographic location. Just as the El Paso police ignore the violence against hundreds of missing Mexican women (an issue mentioned specifically by TMV in an interview),²² so too do the prog snobs dismiss the sonic manifestations of this violence in the music of The Mars Volta. This violence is persistent throughout the music of The Mars Volta, as I will demonstrate next in their instrumental and ambient stylistic choices.

Instrumental and Ambient Noise

MV could be amazing, but they're just too cluttered. They've got a complete dedication to making sure that . . . absolutely every empty space gets filled with some sort of noise.²³

This description of The Mars Volta's music as "cluttered" implies a sense of bounded physical space that is filled to a capacity beyond that which is aesthetically pleasing. Such a

²² The Mars Volta, interview by Bryant.

²³ Majikthise, "Porcupine Tree vs. The Mars Volta," PA, posted August 29, 2010, http://www.progarchives.com/forum/forum_posts.asp?TID=74104&KW=mars+volta&PN=2.

sense of physical space is not inherent to recordings in and of themselves and may imply an audio-spatial synesthetic relationship on a *vertical* or *horizontal* orientation. In the vertical orientation, the spectrum of audible pitch frequencies, or a smaller subsection of these frequencies, is cluttered in that there are too many independent soundings of close frequencies. The more cluttered a range of frequencies is, the closer a sound comes to the audio engineer's definition of noise, which is every possible frequency sounding at once (such as in white noise, pink noise, brown noise, etc., depending on the relative amplitude of a range of frequencies). In the music of The Mars Volta, this vertical "clutter"—what I refer to as instrumental noise—can be created in preproduction by the choice of instruments sounding at any given time, or postproduction, with aspects such as EQ and different effects applied to the instruments—both of which are controlled significantly by the artistic decisions of the band. With horizontal clutter, on the other hand, the "space" is the passage of time and the "clutter" is the presumably monotonous musical formal choices that prevent this space from being aesthetically pleasing. As I will discuss below, one of the most commonly-cited instantiations of this horizontal clutter is what I call ambient noise, or sound that challenges perceptions of what music is or should be.

Preproduction instrumental noise includes all those aspects of The Mars Volta's music that they are capable of performing live and that are deemed incomprehensible in the context of classic prog. One of the most obvious examples of instrumental noise in their music is the extended use of salsa percussion instruments (timbales, congas, clave, etc.). Such "exotic" instrumentation is not unheard of in classic prog, but The Mars Volta's persistent use of Latin percussion is unprecedented. Vertically, these instruments often appear in conjunction with the other instruments of the band, unlike the "talking drum" and kalimba in *Larks' Tongues in Aspic* that appear among sparse instrumentation. Horizontally, these instruments are persistently

present throughout much of TMV's music. For instance, half of the songs in *De-Loused in the Comatorium* feature these instruments prominently, as does about half of the song "L'Via L'Viaquez." Although the above user's criticism does not explicitly reference these instruments as the source of clutter, one possible reason is that to do so would cause their position to fall in the omnivore-dominated field. To say that one does not enjoy the sound of timbales or congas would be to say that they are presumably not open to this music and thus to the culture that produces and enjoys this music. Nonetheless, implicit criticisms of the salsa instrumentation persist.

Another aspect of this instrumental noise is Omar Rodriguez-Lopez' heavy use of guitar effects. Many of the effects he uses actually reinforce an association with progressive rock, which also famously stretched the limitations of guitar effects and technology. But some effects, including those unavailable to guitarists in the 1970s, problematize this relationship, sounding noisy in the context of the genre. For instance, in the previous chapter, I provided the example of the modulating delay using an expression pedal in "Cicatriz E.S.P." Real-time modulation, which allows the expression pedal to modulate the delay live, did not become possible until the introduction of MIDI (Musical Instrument Digital Interface) input to guitar pedals in the early 1990s.²⁴

Although real-time modulation can be reproduced in live settings, many of the effects applied to the guitar and other instruments in The Mars Volta's music, are required in post-production. For instance, the sound of a guitar playing a note in reverse is a prominent feature in the slower sections of "L'Via L'Viaquez," but this effect is impossible to perform live. Not all these post-production effects in TMV's music are exclusive to the guitar. For example, the first

²⁴ Art Thompson, "5 New Guitar Effects Processors," *Guitar Player* 27, no. 7 (July 1995).

forty seconds of “L’Via L’Viaquez” takes a 4-beat drum groove, applies a high-pass filter, adds static, and loops it as if to sound like a broken record. Nonetheless, I still consider these post-production effects extensions of Rodriguez-Lopez’s resistance to the colonizing tendency of rock in that they impede the recognizability of the “rock” instrumentation, especially since Rodriguez-Lopez controlled much of the album’s production himself (being credited on the album as the producer and an audio engineer).

All of these aspects of instrumental excess once again demonstrate instances of sonic violence both within and against rock music. While Waksman notes that “sonoric excess” is common to the history of the electric guitar in rock music,²⁵ Rodriguez-Lopez’ sonoric excess through his notoriously large pedal setup exaggerates even these genre expectations. The presence of salsa percussion, while not unprecedented in rock music (as seen in Santana), enacts sonic violence in its persistent presence. For instance, in the song “Drunkship of Lanterns,” although the congas, clave, and bongos are not high in the mix, their presence is audible throughout nearly the entirety of the song, despite the fact that they appear in conjunction with the drum set, bass guitar, guitar, keyboard, and vocals. This is one of the key differences between The Mars Volta and Santana’s use of salsa percussion, in that for Santana this percussion normally appears among sparse instrumentation, while for The Mars Volta it often does not. This instrumental excess may be best understood in terms of the expectations of “sonic power and density” in salsa dura. In this context, however, The Mars Volta exaggerates and exceeds genre expectations through timbral excess accomplished by his various guitar effects.

One of the most controversial aspects of Rodriguez-Lopez’ vision as producer are the long ambient interludes that occur intermittently between songs on both *De-Loused* and *Frances*

²⁵ Waksman, *Instruments of Desire*, 8.

the Mute. These ambient sections are distinguishable by the atmospheric sounds and lack of discernable pulse. Some of these interludes are instrumental and therefore likely preproduction sounds, such as in the middle of “Cicatriz E.S.P.” discussed above, part of which has been reproduced in their live jams. Many other ambient sounds, especially on *Frances the Mute*, include sounds that must be added post-production. For instance, the very end of “L’Via” and the first two minutes of the subsequent track, “Miranda That Ghost Just Isn’t Holy Anymore,” feature a four-minute recording of coquí frogs drawn from recordings Rodriguez-Lopez made in Puerto Rico.

Long ambient sections such as the extended ambient instrumental jams that King Crimson were famous for (heard in “Moonchild Including the Dream and the Illusion”) are not unheard of in classic prog. Nevertheless, ambience is much more present in the music of The Mars Volta. Many of the found sounds, such as the coquí frogs in “Miranda,” are heard as especially noisy. Objections to their use of ambient noise are quite possibly the most cited complaint about their music, even among those who generally enjoy their music. For instance, one Prog Archives user states, “I think Amputecture is their best and most underrated album. They didn't bore the listener with endless noise interludes (which are only cool to a point, then they become annoying).”²⁶ In this reading, the ambience becomes noise when it occupies too much horizontal space.

Perhaps due to this widely evoked notion of incomprehensibility, performed understanding or enjoyment of these ambient sections by fans is often invoked as a manifestation of omnivorousness or intellectual prowess. Rodriguez-Lopez and Bixler-Zavala have cited the

²⁶ jmcDaniel_ee, “The Mars Volta appreciation thread,” posted January 30, 2008, http://www.progarchives.com/forum/forum_posts.asp?TID=44409&KW=mars+volta&PN=2.

influence of cinema, such as the works of Werner Herzog, Federico Fellini, and Alejandro Jodorowsky, in creating this ambience. Inspired by these film directors, The Mars Volta use ambience to create tension and flow in constructing the concept of their albums: “one big piece of literature,” as Rodriguez-Lopez describes it.²⁷ In The Comatorium, a poll titled “opinions on ‘ambience’” (with ambience defined by the user who started the thread as “quieter inbetweeney bits on the albums / live shows like the noises before l'via etc.”) found that only 5.56% of the 108 “dislike it,” with 34.26% saying they “like it” and 60.19% saying they “love it.”²⁸ Many of those fans who “like it” or “love it” assert a dominant position by describing how the ambience is integral to an album’s conceptual unity, as seen in the following user’s comment:

An album is like a film or a book or any other work of art. It can have action, melody, dialogue, the meat of the story or album that is the plot...the centerpiece. But the fact is, it needs character development, it needs attitude, it needs something to make the song feel right on the album. The ambience not only sets up for the songs, but for the contrast that we all love so much. It's the ambience that makes it an album.²⁹

Thus, even within The Mars Volta’s most dedicated fanbase, the ambient sections serve as a symbolic boundary between the dominant and dominated positions. Those who “get it” assert intellectual superiority over those who do not. In Prog Archives, where The Mars Volta is more controversial, the ambient sections similarly serve as a symbolic boundary between snobs and omnivores. The omnivores demonstrate their openness by understanding the ambience as an integral aspect of TMV’s albums and concepts, while the snobs refuse to acknowledge the comprehensibility of the ambient “noise” within the field of prog rock. As in the quote above,

²⁷ Omar Rodriguez-Lopez, “Secrets of the Sun,” interview by Sorina Dianoscú, *La Weekly*, June 26, 2003, <https://www.laweekly.com/music/secrets-of-the-sun-2136602>; Bixler-Zavala, interview by Johnson.

²⁸ Aathron, “opinions on ‘ambience’,” The Comatorium, posted July 29, 2009, <http://forum.thecomatorium.com/forum/index.php?showtopic=116873&hl=%2Bfrances+%2Bthe+%2Bmute+%2Bambiance#entry3265692>.

²⁹ 90adZAP, “opinions on ‘ambience’.”

many omnivores perform their understanding by citing the relationship of these sounds to different musical genres or even other artistic media (film, literature, etc.).

In the cases in which The Mars Volta's ambient sounds are created by applying effects to rock instrumentation, the ambient "noise" creates symbolic boundaries, like instrumental noise, within prog rock by subverting the white, middle- to upper-class values inscribed in the uses of rock instrumentation in the genre. The found sounds, especially on *Frances the Mute*, also create symbolic boundaries, but for different reasons. Many of these sounds Rodriguez-Lopez recorded himself from his home soundscapes. For instance, the end of "Cygnus... Vismund Cygnus," the opening song from *Frances the Mute*, features over three minutes of street sounds Rodriguez-Lopez recorded outside of his El Paso home.³⁰ These sounds seem to approximate cars passing and people arguing in Spanish. Jennifer Stoeber-Ackerman has developed the term "sonic color-line" to describe "the relationship between listening and bodily codes of race." Through dominant modes of representation, sounds such as "accents, dialects, 'slang,' . . . extraverbal utterances, as well as ambient domestic and street sounds" become coded as other.³¹ As such, the El Paso street sounds and Puerto Rican coquí frogs heard on *Frances the Mute* heard as ambient "noise" create symbolic boundaries of race in the field of prog rock. Although ambient found sounds can be found in classic prog—such as the bird chirping at the beginning of "Close to the Edge" by Yes or the famous yelling teacher at the end of Pink Floyd's "Another Brick in the Wall (Part 2)" ("How can you have any pudding if you don't eat your meat?!")—the snobs who refuse to comprehend TMV's ambient "noise" construct symbolic boundaries of race along the

³⁰ The Mars Volta, interview by 91x FM, 2005, audio file.

³¹ Jennifer Stoeber-Ackerman, "Splicing the Sonic Color-Line: Tony Schwartz Remixes Postwar Nueva York," *Social Text* 28, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 65.

“sonic color-line” through a lack of openness to sonic diversity against the “dominant representation” of prog rock authenticity: a white, middle- to upper-class, European authenticity.

However, another significant difference between the ambience in the music of The Mars Volta and that found in classic prog is between the vertical space that they occupy. For instance, while the bird ambience at the beginning “Close to the Edge” is audible for not quite a minute, the coquí heard on *Frances the Mute* lasts for about two-and-a-half minutes before becoming inaudible. This too represents an example of The Mars Volta’s sonic violence in that, through its temporal excess within the context of rock music, it resists the colonizing and whitewashing tendency of rock music. For starters, these ambient sounds often denote the absence of rock instrumentation, thus thwarting rock music expectations. More importantly, the sounds themselves signify elements of resistance or violence. For instance, the discomfiting sound of the woman shrieking at the end of “Cygnus... Vismund Cygnus” reminds one of the violence against women (mentioned above) present in their lives in El Paso. Additionally, the coquí is a strong signifier of pride among Puerto Ricans of the island. For Rodriguez-Lopez, this serves, in part, as an insistence on his Puerto Rican identity and its influence on their music—the coquí are even credited as an “artist” in the liner notes to the album as “The Coquí of Puerto Rico.” Moreover, just as the coquí serves as a resistance to Puerto Rico’s status as a U.S. colonial possession, the coquí ambience in *Frances the Mute* resists the colonizing tendency of rock music through its sonic violence. As such, understanding this ambience as noise constructs symbolic boundaries of race in that it expects passive assimilation into the stylistic norms coded as white in progressive rock.

Vocal and Visual Noise

I have tried so hard to get in to TMV but I can't stand the noise and lack of coherence. The vocalist irritates me even more.³²

Criticisms of lead singer Cedric Bixler-Zavala's vocal ability are common in the context of progressive rock. While Bixler-Zavala's lyrics are notoriously unintelligible, they are actually most often heard as congruent with classic prog's values. For instance, The Mars Volta is often cited in threads like "How important are lyrics in prog?" or "Storytelling or illustrative component of Prog," and often compared to the famously cryptic lyrics of Yes' Jon Anderson.³³ Rather, criticisms of Bixler-Zavala's vocal ability tend to revolve around his *range* and vocal *quality*. Against the context of classic prog, in which baritone-tenor male vocalists prevail, Bixler-Zavala's famously high belting and falsetto are often heard as irritating or noisy.

Nina Eidsheim, in her study of jazz vocalist Jimmy Scott, has noted that vocal range is often used to question the gender and sexuality of male vocalists.³⁴ In the case of progressive rock, this difference is compounded by the snobs who value the heteronormative masculine authenticity around baritone-tenor voices. To the snobs, Bixler-Zavala's vocals are too effeminate, creating symbolic boundaries of gender expression. Covert homophobia manifests in Prog Archives in jokes that Bixler-Zavala was in a homosexual relationship with Rodriguez-

³² valravennz, "The Mars Volta," posted March 26, 2005, http://www.progarchives.com/forum/forum_posts.asp?TID=4411&KW=the+mars+volta&PN=5.

³³ "How important are lyrics in prog?" created June 21, 2008, https://www.progarchives.com/Forum/forum_posts.asp?TID=49618&KW=prog+lyrics&PN=1; "Storytelling or illustrative component of Prog," created December 24, 2012, https://www.progarchives.com/Forum/forum_posts.asp?TID=91185&KW=mars+volta+lyrics&PID=4688015#4688015.

³⁴ Nina Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 91-92.

Lopez, despite both actually identifying as heterosexual.³⁵ It is no coincidence that Bixler-Zavala's high vocal range is often compared to Geddy Lee, lead vocalist of prog band Rush, whose heterosexuality has also been questioned.³⁶ Nonetheless, the quality of Bixler-Zavala's voice is evaluated negatively in comparison to Lee, as in the following user who found that "There is a difference, to me at least, between the banshee screeching of TMV and Geddy's cultured falsetto."³⁷

Criticisms regarding vocal noise, then, are not limited to Bixler-Zavala's range, but also his vocal quality and style. While the above comment demonstrates symbolic boundaries of race, in which whiteness (in the case of Geddy Lee) is equated to "culture," these criticisms, too, create symbolic boundaries of gender expression. Bixler-Zavala has cited Björk as his main inspiration as a singer, even training with the same vocal coach.³⁸ The influence of Björk can be heard in some of Bixler-Zavala's vocal delivery, such as the "unstable whisper" heard in the slower, softer English-language sections of "L'Via L'Viaquez," beginning with the lyrics "Blackmailed she fell off every mountain / The ones they tightly wrapped in tape." Nicola Dibben singles out this whispery delivery as one of the famously intimate aspects in Björk's 2001 *Vespertine*, an album that Dibben notes for its "emotional extremes" that sustain Björk's

³⁵ E.g. "Omar and Cedric are such a cute couple. I'm having trouble figuring out who the uke is, but I have a feeling it might be Omar." Harry Hood, "The Mars Volta appreciation thread," posted December 15, 2007.

³⁶ E.g. "How about a gay supergroup.....Geddy Lee (Bass), George Michael (Guitar), Boy George (Vocals), Elton John (Keyboards), Jon Moss (drums).....anyone with a sense of humour?" Guests, "Create Your Own 70s Supergroup..." PA, posted July 8, 2005, https://www.progarchives.com/Forum/forum_posts.asp?TID=6904&KW=geddy+lee+gay&PID=678200#678200.

³⁷ Reed Lover, "The Mars Volta," posted July 16, 2004.

³⁸ The Mars Volta, interview by David Goggin, Mix, updated November 15, 2017, <https://www.mixonline.com/recording/mars-volta-365208>; Cedric Bixler-Zavala, "Wonky Talk with Cedric Bixler-Zavala," interview by Mikey More or Less, *The Cosmic Clash*, August 27, 2012, <https://thecosmicclash.com/2012/08/27/wonky-talk-with-cedric-bixler-zavala-by-mikey-more-or-less/>.

image of “emotional authenticity.”³⁹ Similar extremes in vocal affect can be heard in Bixler-Zavala’s vocal work, such as the transition to the quiet sections of “L’Via L’Viaquez”: a mere fourteen seconds before the breathy G3 on which Bixler-Zavala begins the lyric “Blackmailed,” he reaches a piercing F5 in his falsetto. Such extremes in affect surely contribute to the symbolic boundaries of gender expression in prog rock, with the “mood swings” of Bixler-Zavala’s style being heard as too feminine in comparison to the more straight-ahead delivery and limited range of the classic prog vocalists.

Following David Garcia’s description of “the body as epistemological border,” in which “performing and racialized bodies . . . become the sites where the imperative to define, embrace and resist the border is played out,”⁴⁰ Bixler-Zavala’s vocal affect constitutes a sonic violence representative of his own performed border identity. The extremes in vocal range, by placing a physical toll on his own body that ultimately resulted in the development of vocal nodules,⁴¹ Bixler-Zavala “defines” the border in terms of violence. On the other hand, his vocal affect also “resists” the border in that it thwarts expectations of gender comportment in what Ramón H. Rivera-Servera describes as “mainstreaming” for a racialized other, or behaving according to the codes and conventions of the white hegemony of the United States.⁴² This definition and resistance of the border through bodily violence also holds true for both Bixler-Zavala and Rodriguez-Lopez in certain aspects of their visual aesthetic. Contrary to the “relatively static and

³⁹ Nicola Dibben, *Björk* (London: Equinox, 2009), 147-50.

⁴⁰ David F. Garcia, review of *Transnational Encounters: Music and Performance at the US-Mexico Border*, ed. Alejandro L. Madrid, *Latino Studies* 11, no. 4 (Winter 2013): 610-12.

⁴¹ Greg Moskovitch, “At the Drive-In Cancel Tour One Month out from Splendour,” *Tone Deaf*, June 20, 2016, <https://tonedeaf.thebrag.com/at-the-drive-in-cancel-tour-one-month-out-from-splendour/>.

⁴² Ramón H. Rivera-Servera, “Dancing Reggaetón with Cowboy Boots,” in *Transnational Encounters: Music and Performance at the US-Mexico Border*, ed. Alejandro L. Madrid (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 376-77.

motionless” stage presence of classic prog musicians, due to values of instrumental virtuosity,⁴³ Bixler-Zavala and Rodriguez-Lopez are known for their active, dancing stage antics (which Bixler-Zavala has noted is also influenced by Björk) that are not only physically exhausting, but have resulted in numerous stage injuries.⁴⁴

In addition to symbolic boundaries of gender expression, performances of The Mars Volta’s visual aesthetic, have also resulted in symbolic boundaries of race among prog snobs in what I call *visual* noise:

I have several girl friends that love the movements of the two afros Cedric and Omar from the Mars Volta, and that “exciting sexy dancing” (which i think it’s quiet [*sic*] gay 🙄) turns them on.⁴⁵

While this user is likely comparing the swooning effect of their dancing to contemporary boy bands (which they find “quite gay”), they are also covertly resisting racial diversity by referencing the visual noisiness of the “two afros Cedric and Omar.” As a remnant of psychedelia, long, unruly hair was quite common among classic prog musicians.⁴⁶ The long, curly afros worn by Bixler-Zavala and Rodriguez-Lopez, however, became marked characteristics of their Mexican and Puerto Rican heritages in a genre dominated by white European musicians. When asked in an interview, “How annoying is it that every story about you guys involves a remark about your hair?” Rodriguez-Lopez responded, “It’s a nightmare.

⁴³ Macan, *Rocking the Classics*, 64.

⁴⁴ The Mars Volta, interview by Goggin; Rodriguez-Lopez, interview by Scraggs.

⁴⁵ Tholomyes, “is prog. sexy??” PA, posted December 23, 2005, https://www.progarchives.com/forum/forum_posts.asp?TID=16241&KW=mars+volta+dancing&PID=1797268#1797268.

⁴⁶ Macan, *Rocking the Classics*, 64.

My clothes or my hair or how skinny I am has nothing at all to do with my music. Let me put it this way: it's worse than dealing with record labels."⁴⁷

Despite the visual noisiness of their hair in the context of prog rock (or perhaps even rock in general), both musicians maintained this hairstyle for the majority of their career together. Like their integration of salsa and excessive guitar effects, their hair served as a resistance to the tendency of rock (and prog rock in particular) to exoticizing their identities. As I hoped to have demonstrated throughout this thesis, their visual and aural manifestations of their border kid identities served as an integral aspect of their individualist authenticity, a type of authenticity historically only afforded to white, European progressive rock musicians. These manifestations of sonic violence create symbolic boundaries of race, class, geography and gender expression between prog snobs and omnivores when they conflict with dominant representations of identity in classic prog. Even among omnivores, who positioning them as “diverse” against the white, heteronormative history of progressive rock, they are implicitly reinforcing this white heteronormativity. Thus, the border kid identities of The Mars Volta are best understood as manifested sonically and visually as an expression of violence that both participates in and exceeds a variety of racial, national, and genre identities.

Conclusion: Prog Rock of Ages?

The symbolic boundaries I discussed in this chapter may seem to imply differences in the identities of the various actors I have discussed, but in truth the only verifiable identities are those of The Mars Volta. By their anonymous nature, the fan forums that I draw on obscure direct instantiations of racism, homophobia, classism, and ageism between one fan to another. It may very well be the case that the majority of the defenders of The Mars Volta's music and its

⁴⁷ Rodriguez-Lopez, interview by Scraggs.

implications for nonwhite, non-heteronormativity are, in fact, straight, white, cis-gender males. Nonetheless, such boundaries are used in service of exclusionary purposes and in interest of advancing one's status with respect to a particular group. As in Nadine Hubbs' study of the dictum "anything but country music," which suggests that those who use it are attempting to separate the "good whites" from the "bad whites," the symbolic boundaries between the snobs and omnivores separate the "benevolent" high status individuals from the exclusionary ones.

What I have described as rhythmic noise, modal/intervallic noise, ambient noise, instrumental noise, vocal noise, and visual noise all serve as coded language for the symbolic exclusions of The Mars Volta. In the field of prog rock, where the omnivore holds a dominant position, such coded language allows snobs to maintain their exclusionary understanding of the genre without further sacrificing their position. As for the symbolic boundaries themselves, often the boundaries of race, class, geography and gender expression that I have described are coded within symbolic boundaries of *age*. As demonstrated at the very beginning of this thesis, when it became apparent that Mirror Image had less omnivorous tastes than Thatfabulousalien, they immediately identified themselves as an "old fart." Perhaps this is because age is a less problematic explanation for these opinions than racism, homophobia, xenophobia, or classism. Yet all these symbolic boundaries are implicit within the symbolic boundary of age, in that a lack of inclusivity is a stereotype of older generations. This notion is further supported by the empirical research on omnivorousness, since the trend toward omnivorousness increased over time.⁴⁸

The stereotypes of cultural exclusion reinforce the symbolic boundaries of age just as the symbolic boundaries of age reinforce these cultural exclusions in progressive rock. The difference between the snob and the omnivores in the prog rock fanbase that has pervaded

⁴⁸ Peterson and Kern, "Changing Highbrow Taste," 900.

throughout this thesis is predicated on this symbolic boundary of age, since the snob is, in fact, a remnant of classic prog fandom. Yet there is also evidence that not all snobs and omnivores fall cleanly into actual categories of old and young age, respectively. For instance, Mirror Image, the “old fart,” claims to have been born in 1982, which would have made them 35 during their exchange with Thatfabulousalien in 2017—far younger than the fans alive during the classic prog era.⁴⁹

That symbolic age does not correspond directly with actual age once again demonstrates that symbolic exclusions do not necessarily correspond to actual ageism, but rather serve as boundary work in which users group themselves according to understandings of taste and age. The snob or omnivore habitus of these fans is certainly influenced by actual age, but is also learned by other members of the prog fanbase. While both sides are high status (high cultural, social, and/or economic capital), the omnivores hold a slightly higher position in the field of prog rock. And while the omnivores maintain this position by asserting openness to cultural diversity through their musical tastes (drawing heteronomously on capital from the broader field of power), the snobs’ habitus tell them to seek high cultural capital by exerting snobbish exclusion against everything that is not classic prog. That the prog snob persisted for so long (despite trends in the surrounding fields) after the genre’s death in the late 1970s suggests that as long as there is prog, there will always be the prog snob.

⁴⁹ “Rush’s Signals [1982] came out the year I was born.” Mirror Image, “A great album that came out the year you were born,” PA, posted June 4, 2018, https://www.progarchives.com/forum/forum_posts.asp?TID=106893&KW=year&PID=5571180#5571180.

CONCLUSION

How do conflictual values within a given fanbase construct genre identity? In the Introduction to this thesis, I began with an exchange between an “old fart” and a fan of The Mars Volta as a demonstration of seemingly insurmountable differences in values, or habitus, between two members of Prog Archives. In reality, each habitus is necessary not only for the maintenance of the other, but the sustenance of the genre as well. For the snob, a remnant of the classic prog era (1969-78), the younger fanbase that The Mars Volta attracted helped to resurge progressive rock, inclusive of the classic era bands. For the omnivore (the fan of TMV), their values of diversity ironically depend on the maintenance of the unmarked white male status of the progressive rock by the snobs. The resultant struggle between these two sides of the fanbase is part of what allowed for the genre to once again form its own distinct field during the prog rock resurgence, but with dominant values gravitating toward the omnivore.

The research on the progressive rock fanbase presented in this thesis contributes to three bodies of scholarship: genre theory, omnivorousness, progressive rock. Following the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Richard A. Peterson, I have suggested through the genre of progressive rock that musical taste can serve as a means of distinguishing oneself from others. In the classic era, progressive rock measured against “lower” popular musics served the purpose of distinguishing one’s high status. Other scholars, such as Brackett, Hubbs, and Ewoodzie, have made similar observations on how genre categories or subcategories are employed relationally in maintaining one’s identity. My research, however, offers a fresh perspective by also describing the processes of distinction *within* a genre. By analyzing progressive rock through Bourdieu’s theorization of

fields of cultural production as a “field of struggles,” I have demonstrated that the struggle of distinction between snobs and omnivores is part of what maintained the prog rock resurgence. Additionally, in the classic prog era, the struggles that maintained the genre included a dialectic between the fields of rock and classical music, as progressive rock sought to move ever closer to a position as a high art. Finally, by theorizing genre as an epistemological border, I have argued that the center/margin understanding of the prog canon versus prog-related subgenres serves as a process of symbolic exclusion.

This thesis also contributes qualitative nuance to existing research on omnivorous taste patterns. Most significantly, contrary to Peterson’s contention that the omnivore had largely supplanted the snob by the 1990s, evidence within the prog rock fanbase suggests that the snob persists as a remnant of the 1970s classic prog fanbase. A comparison of evidence from the classic prog fanbase to the prog resurgence, however, supports Peterson’s observation of the general rise in prominence of the omnivore throughout this four-decade timespan. Significantly, in the field of progressive rock during the resurgence, the omnivore held a dominant position, which often made it difficult to trace the presence of the snobs, who may be hesitant to display their snobbish values depending on the context. Nonetheless, as demonstrated by my evidence from within Prog Archives, the prog snobs are still observable through assumptions about the purity of classic prog and its superiority over other genres (aside from jazz and classical). The perfect snob, who derides all genres other than prog, classical, and jazz, is rare, which led me to theorize a spectrum between snobs and omnivores, and instead focus on the tendencies of dispositions through language, rather than focusing on static identities. For the snobs, this language often manifested in terms of “noise” deemed incompatible with classic prog values,

while omnivores identified themselves through what I termed *performed omnivorousness*, or the ability to cite a variety of genres.

In existing progressive rock literature, many studies have noted the unequal representations of race, gender expression, and class among prog rock performers and the fanbase. Extending these observations through the work of Jack Hamilton and his “myth of the British invasion,” in this thesis I have suggested that progressive rock authenticity came to be coded as white, European, heteronormative, masculine, and middle- to upper-class. Taking their cue from the influence of classical music heard in prog rock music, critics and fans adapted snobbish language from the field of classical music in seeking to *progress* the status of rock toward high art. Contrary to existing literature on progressive rock that suggests a heavy influence from jazz, I have argued that this association was largely not legible to 1970s progressive rock musicians and critics. Rather, the association only became apparent during the prog rock resurgence, after jazz had accomplished its own progression toward high art. Furthermore, unlike some scholars (Roman, Burns, Hegarty and Halliwell) who suggest a continuity between these two eras, I have suggested that the “death of prog” in the late 1970s was not only legible to contemporaneous audiences, but was a narrative that helped stabilize the genre in the prog rock resurgence two decades later.

While other scholars have studied the progressive rock resurgence, most tend to focus their analyses on fans’ relationship to classic prog bands. The present study hopes to contribute to this literature by focusing on Mars Volta, a band formed in 2001, as a case study into what makes newly written rock music “progressive” during the prog rock resurgence. In contrast to the upward status progress that characterized much of the classic prog music and fanbase, the music of The Mars Volta, in its conception and reception, represented a *social* progress that

valued an increase in diversity. In particular, the members of The Mars Volta resisted the aforementioned white, individualist notions of authenticity in classic prog rock by insisting on the importance of their identities as border kids, represented most strongly through the integral influence of salsa music. The influence of salsa, among other genres, created aural and visual inconsistencies with the values of classic prog and the prog snob, made known through descriptions of “noise.” By unpacking the symbolic boundaries of race, class, geography (in terms of a cultural center/periphery), and gender expression implicit in these discourses of noise, I sought to demonstrate that processes of symbolic exclusion are actually integral to the maintenance of the progressive rock genre. These symbolic exclusions flow both ways, with the omnivores excluding the snobs for lack of socially progressive values, and the snobs excluding the omnivores for lacking classic prog values. Nonetheless, in an attempt to resist the essentializing of The Mars Volta’s identities that occur as a result of these symbolic exclusions, I presented an interpretation of their music and brand focused around *violence*, in which The Mars Volta both participate in and exceed the stylistic expectations of a number of genres.

Even though my research on the prog rock resurgence is inclusive of 1997-2017, there is evidence to suggest the resurgence fizzled out around 2012, the same year that The Mars Volta broke up. Although as of 2020 activity on Prog Archives has not totally, the activity in the forums is concentrated largely within the years 2005-2010. Furthermore, Bradley T. Osborn has suggested that many of the musical values of progressive rock have moved into closely related subgenres such as math rock, math metal, and post rock.¹ While Osborn’s work focuses on musical analyses (in particular, form) of these genres, the stylistic proclivities to prog rock (such as long song forms and mixed meter) may suggest similar social values to those described in this

¹ Osborn, “Beyond Verse and Chorus,” 43-54.

thesis. Preliminary research and my own personal observations may suggest that the bands and fanbases of these genres perform concern for status progressivism without social progressivism, but further research would be necessary to draw these conclusions.²

While the genre case study of the present thesis was progressive rock, the model for studying genre and/as distinction I have presented here is adaptable to other genres. For instance, while the “jazz snob” is an oft-noted phenomenon in jazz literature and common parlance, to date no such study has examined the symbolic boundaries between the snob and omnivore within the genre of jazz.³ Similarly, Bourdieu’s fields of cultural production may provide an excellent model for studying symbolic boundaries within other genres as well, but not necessarily between snobs and omnivores.

My research has also revealed future avenues of research into the prog rock resurgence. While my study focused primarily on the meaning of “progressive” in relation to The Mars Volta and its particular fanbase, bands such as Radiohead, Muse, and Spock’s Beard are also commonly cited as newly formed bands that wrote progressive rock music. In Chapter 3 I briefly surveyed these bands’ presence on Prog Archives (in particular, Muse) and found that snobs are generally more hesitant to describe them as noisy or incomprehensible. But how do omnivores relate to their music? Do these bands and their fans also value a social progress rooted in diversity? And why is it that these bands, too, came to be associated with progressive rock in the first place?

² This would be consistent with the most recent quantitative research on omnivorous taste patterns at large, which suggests omnivorousness declined between 2002 and 2008. See Rossman and Peterson, “Instability of Omnivorous,” 139.

³ The closest existing study, by Roderick Graham, found that African Americans that consume jazz are typically middle-class omnivores who reject rap. Graham, “Jazz Consumption Among African Americans,” 993.

Regardless of any similarities between The Mars Volta and other new prog bands, it is evident that The Mars Volta occupies a unique position within the prog rock fanbase and beyond. Even five years after their disbandment, the exchange quoted at the beginning of this paper demonstrates that their name is still invoked in creating distinction within the prog rock fanbase. In 2019, pop artist Lizzo described her early experimental work with a rock group, stating “Okay, reel it in. This is not The Mars Volta.”⁴ Both examples demonstrate that, even after their days of making music together are over, their name still functions as a signifier of “progressive” in genre (as) distinction.

⁴ Lizzo, “Extended interview: Lizzo on her flute and being a ‘band geek,’” interview by Tracy Smith, *CBS News*, October 6, 2019, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/extended-interview-lizzo-on-her-flute-and-being-a-band-geek/>.

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