

# JIMI HENDRIX: Creolization and the Re-Imagined Black Authentic

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While Jimi Hendrix understood himself as a person of both Native American and African-American heritage, he was well aware of his being perceived as a black person and a black artist, both in England and in the United States. This tension seems to have been formative in his understanding of race, his relationship to blackness, and, consequently, the formation of his own identity. In accordance with his refusal to treat race as consisting of fixed singularities with respective essences, Hendrix, I argue, styled himself not as a crossover artist, but rather as a hybrid, creolized artist.<sup>1</sup> Towards this end, I analyze two opposed models of cultural and ethnic “Relation”<sup>2</sup> proposed by Édouard Glissant, the baroque and the *métissage*, and argue that Hendrix thought and acted in a manner closer to the latter.<sup>3</sup> Then, I will analyze Hendrix’s relationship with race (blackness in particular), which shifted dramatically towards the end of his life, and I will explore how this relationship should be evaluated. Finally, I will examine his song, “Voodoo Child (Slight Return),” as a demonstration of his reflexive stylization as a creolized musician.<sup>4</sup>

1 That is to say, Hendrix did not style himself to be a successful black artist in a white musical scene, but rather to be an artist who rejects such a divide altogether.

2 Relation, to clarify, is Glissant’s term for the interaction and change that occurs in cultural contact.

3 Édouard Glissant, *The Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), pp. 26-27.

4 The terms ‘creole’ and ‘creolized’ appear throughout the paper and should be understood as analogous to ‘hybrid’ and ‘hybridized,’ where two or more ethnicities or cultures come into contact and yield something distinctive, rather than as a reference to Creole culture specifically.

## THE BAROQUE AND THE *MÉTISSAGE*

Glissant introduces the baroque as an ideological model that regards ethnicity and culture as existing in a network of coming together and scattering, which entails that cultural contact can be untangled and that the respective cultures can thus be ‘restored’ to whatever state they were in prior to the contact. Beneath this treatment is an assumption that cultures have essences that can remain pure or become tainted and diluted through cultural contact, and that because cultural contact compromises a culture’s essence, “no culture [is] rightfully impeded in the baroque; none [rightfully] imposes its tradition, even if there are some that export their generalizing products everywhere.”<sup>5</sup> Glissant claims that this ideology is a “derangement,” or a violent delusion, though a key confounding issue with eradicating such a derangement is that it has become concealed through its naturalization.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the baroque should be regarded as both a conceptually and ethically problematic ideological framework.

Conceptually, the baroque presumes cultural stability and continuity through an essence, which disregards the vast histories of cultural exchange and contact that have formed what we recognize as definite and unique cultures. Moreover, this essentialist claim of fixedness depends on regarding culture ontologically, as some metaphysical entity that individuals participate in—perhaps in a Platonic fashion wherein the ‘Form’ of the culture never changes, but its instantiations may become ‘corrupted’—or as something natural within individuals that becomes corrupted through ‘mixing.’ The metaphysical, Platonist model is ahistorical and lacks the explanatory power for the ways in which culture operates at both individual and group levels, while the natural model does not account for cultural learning and serves as a slippery slope towards racial tropes that justify oppression and violence. Whichever model we may find more appropriately describes the presuppositions of the baroque (which, if we follow Glissant, appears to be the second), it is clear that a model of cultural and ethnic Relation, centered on essentializing and abstracting cultural identities from the lives of people who frequently exist at cultural crossroads, leads to either “intolerant exclusions” or “the manifest and integrating violence of contaminations,” both of which involve the relegation of individuals, groups, and cultures.<sup>7</sup>

This is to say that the baroque is not merely an abstracted, ideological model of ethnic and cultural interaction, but an ideology of said interaction that *interpellates* subjects into living in a manner that is consistent with much of the ideology’s principles and presuppositions. As a concept, interpellation refers to the phenomenon that, in receiving labels and legitimating them through response, we find ourselves implicated in, and governed by, the ideological frameworks that accompany these labels; to use a quotidian example, if a restaurant employee is treated by a patron as a waitress, and responds in a manner that demonstrates such a treatment to be appropriate (such

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

as asking what the patron would like to drink), the employee is interpellated into a framework that governs how she ought to behave and how she will be treated by both the patron and those around her—namely, in accordance with her identification as a waitress. If we follow Fanon, who discusses interpellation with particular attention towards blackness (which is, of course, pertinent towards the analysis of Hendrix), we see that being designated as black is especially troubling insofar as it “connotes... a certain manner of not-being, [and] of being defective,” rather than being a proper subject who simply happens to be black.<sup>8</sup> Thus, through interpellation, the baroque enters into daily life by subjugating the labeled through the labeler, such that the black subject in particular becomes sub-subject in the interaction. Because the baroque has exercised, and continues to exercise, much oppression in a manner through which its very ‘being an ideology’ or framework gets hidden, we should understand how crucial Glissant’s project is in exposing the baroque as *ideology*, while offering a new ideology—more firmly grounded in historical realities—that combats the ethical and theoretical pitfalls of the baroque.

Glissant offers the *métissage* as a more truthful and more ethical ideology of cultural and ethnic interaction. Rather than treating cultures as essential singularities, entailing that cultural contact is either inconsequential or ‘tainting’ to all cultures involved, the *métissage* treats cultures as fluid and worldly phenomena. Accordingly, Glissant regards the structure of Relation as a “turbulent confluence” that is “neither fusion nor confusion... neither the uniform blend—a ravenous integration—nor muddled nothingness.”<sup>9</sup> That is, cultures are fluid and worldly phenomena, which continually interact with one another in a number of ways, including, but not limited to, the exchange of goods and encounters between people. The hybridization that results from these forms of Relation is not indiscriminate muddiness—as the baroque may characterize it—but is actually the *formative process by which distinctive cultures come to be*. By placing hybridity, diversification, and fluidity at the center of this process, the *métissage* inverts the baroque idea that cultural interaction taints and homogenizes cultures. Rather than treating cultural contact as a phenomenon by which distinctive cultures become uniform, the *métissage* treats hybridization or *creolization* as a generative process by which cultures develop and emerge; this process of Relation “senses, assumes, opens, gathers, scatters, continues, and transforms the thought of these elements, these forms, and this motion.”<sup>10</sup> What is important to note in Glissant’s view is that he *humanizes* Relation between cultures by placing these *imaginative and creative* processes as central to it. Thus, if we follow Glissant, it is the case that, as cultures collide and take from one another, they become more complex and diversified, prompting and resulting from imaginative development.

The ethical dimension of the *métissage* is, of course, made possible by its consistency with history and with living culture, but for our purposes, it is crucial to note how

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8 Pierre Macherey, “Figures of Interpellation in Althusser and Fanon,” *Radical Philosophy*, 173.9 (2012): p. 16.

9 Glissant, *The Poetics of Relation*, p. 94.

10 *Ibid.*, pp. 94-95.

it challenges the tenability and the ethics of using the notion of authenticity *qua* legitimacy, which signifies something's really having a particular identity, to describe cultures and individuals.<sup>11</sup> By revising the understanding of cultures and individuals, the *métissage* model makes this sort of authenticity a given for all cultures and individuals, rendering it as a superfluous notion in this universe of discourse. As Glissant describes this revision:

The aesthetics of the *chaos-monde*... embraces all the elements and forms of expression of this totality within us; it is totality's act and its fluidity, totality's reflection and agent in motion... Destructure these facts, declare them void, replace them, reinvent their music: totality's imagination is inexhaustible and always, in every form, wholly legitimate—that is, free of all legitimacy.<sup>12</sup>

At least two points emerge from this passage. First, by treating the totality of a person's identity as creative and imaginative *in-itself*, Glissant's model makes wholly compatible—if not necessarily entangled—imaginative stylization and authenticity, in both senses of the latter term. Thus, for Glissant, to be authentic does not entail that one need search for some deep-rooted essence that has become obscured or limit oneself to a supposedly fixed 'essence,' but instead allows for the freedom to explore and imagine what she could be. The imaginative totality of the self, for Glissant, is constantly developing, and this development is always legitimate or 'real'; this is to say that the legitimate components of one's identity are not limited to one's inherited identity, but include our decisions to involve ourselves in projects or to take on roles. To use a simple example, one is not born a doctor, but if one decides to become a doctor and goes through the process, then she becomes a legitimate doctor, as well as a legitimate member of whatever ethnicity and culture that she is born into. Second, because Glissant understands the individual as a creative agent and cultures as creolized and interacting, he readily accepts that there are innumerable permutations and idiosyncrasies of cultural possibilities. These manifold developing forms are inadequately, and all-too-often oppressively, generalized into categories that serve as the standards for authenticity in the baroque ideology. Such categories cannot, however, be realistic guides for applying authenticity, as they deny the hybridity and imagination of cultures and agents while mischaracterizing the cultures they purport to encapsulate. That is, if we maintain authenticity as signifying legitimacy or 'realness,' then the notion becomes superfluous, and perhaps senseless, for judging cultures and cultural agents, because both are essentially condemned to this form of authenticity. If, however, authenticity signifies a way of relating to oneself and the

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11 I acknowledge that content of the term 'authenticity *qua* legitimacy' is often expressed simply with the term, 'authenticity'; however, the distinction that I am developing here is between using authenticity to denote membership in a certain type or identity (i.e., being a 'real American' as opposed being to an immigrant living in America), and to denote an honest or responsible relation to a certain type or identity (i.e., being an engaged American as opposed to being an apathetic American).

12 Ibid.

components of one's identity, it can be used to examine and evaluate cultures and individuals in a more pluralistic manner.

Pragmatist philosopher Paul Taylor has recently written an insightful book on the notion of black aesthetics, which I have found to complement Glissant's discussion of cultural hybridity and his rejection of authenticity *qua* legitimacy as a relevant notion for describing people as members of given races, ethnicities, or cultures. Of course, authenticity *qua* legitimacy has appropriate and valid uses (i.e., is this an authentic bank note, or a fake?), but to use this notion to describe individuals' identities is superfluous under the *métissage* framework, and, under the baroque framework, it designates individuals who are at cultural or ethnic crossroads as 'fake' or illegitimate members of a given race, ethnicity, or culture of which they are in fact a part. So, after discarding four permutations of this notion of authenticity, which are all quite similar to the notion that Glissant seeks to discard, Taylor offers a somewhat new notion that he calls, following the existential and phenomenological traditions, "experiential authenticity."<sup>13</sup> This form of authenticity complements Glissant's account in a manner similar to that of Fanon's, namely by emphasizing the contingency and context under which individual agents, such as Jimi Hendrix, undertake commitments and creative projects. For Taylor, experiential authenticity is primarily "a heuristic device for action-guidance... to seek the right balance between facticity and transcendence."<sup>14</sup> He thus emphasizes the importance of responsibly engaging with one's factual commitments in light of the possibility of moving beyond them through "creativity and choice," which is to say that we are bound to both our chosen and non-chosen commitments.<sup>15</sup> Experiential authenticity ultimately deals with the ethical issues that become prevalent in light of cultural and ethnic hybridity. Because we live "in a world of ceaseless cultural exchange," where our roots often appear more nonexistent than rhizomatic, we need, for ethics, a notion of authenticity that allows us to take the facticity of our non-chosen roots seriously as we relate to and enmesh ourselves with others.<sup>16</sup> While Glissant demonstrates that cultural hybridity undermines many applications of authenticity *qua* legitimacy, Taylor's experiential authenticity helps us to ethically evaluate chosen entanglements in light of those non-chosen, while maintaining the hybridity of cultures.

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13 Paul C. Taylor, *Black is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics*. (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), p. 147.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 148.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 147.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 152. In describing our roots as rhizomatic, I mean that Glissant, borrowing from the work of Deleuze and Guattari, understands that our 'roots' are multifarious, constantly developing, intertwined, and resistant to teleological readings, rather than as singular, mono-rooted or, otherwise, arborescent in nature. The main point here is that the force of cultural exchange today certainly exposes our constant development and our entanglement with others, but it often obscures the fact that we are rooted to anything at all (Not sure what that means). Rhizomatic roots thus accord with Glissant's insistence that one's identity is hybridized, that is, not stemming from or being predicated by, a single root, which is inevitably entangled among the cultures and commitments with which one becomes involved. Cf. Darbinski, John E., *Levinas and the Postcolonial: Race, Nation, Other* (Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, U.K., 2011), pp. 170-178.

What Glissant and Taylor make clear is that we should not judge whether Jimi Hendrix, who had clearly made commitments far beyond those into which he was thrown, was legitimately or illegitimately black, but whether or not he responsibly engaged with his commitments, which include his own blackness. Together with Glissant's notion of the *métissage*, this Taylorian notion of authenticity allows us to embrace and judge creativity, not as a spirited-away, Romantic ideal, but rather as a very real activity that entangles one in real, consequential commitments.

## JIMI HENDRIX'S PHILOSOPHY OF RACE

I argue that interpreting Hendrix's shifting negotiations between 1), a coldness towards his blackness, and 2), an embrace of it as simply a shift between not wanting and wanting to be black, does not go far enough in considering Hendrix's own view of what race *is*, among other factors. By *coldness*, I refer to Hendrix's 'turning away' from his blackness and his commitment to it, which I will demonstrate in the examples that follow. In light of Taylor's experiential authenticity, moreover, this coldness should be considered inauthentic, because Hendrix did not responsibly engage with his own blackness, precisely by treating it as something to which he was not bound. Hendrix's philosophy of race, what Paul Gilroy somewhat misleadingly terms "the nomadic ideology of the gypsy," could be understood as a way for him to rationalize his cold turning away from blackness, especially in the way that Gilroy represents Hendrix's view<sup>17</sup> As will be demonstrated, however, Hendrix's view of race should also be understood as allowing him to authentically embrace his blackness without reducing himself to it or ignoring his other commitments. Thus, before proposing what Hendrix's view was and how it should be considered, it is necessary to substantiate the biographical claim that Hendrix did in fact shift between avoidant rejection and authentic embrace of his blackness.

To begin, Hendrix has been quoted on multiple occasions making remarks that indicate his avoidance of blackness and his dismissal of the plights of African Americans in the United States. Hendrix once supposedly told a producer: "Negros think they really have it bad, but Indians [(Native Americans)] have it just as bad if not worse."<sup>18</sup> This remark touches on both indications noted above; Hendrix identified with both his Native American heritage and his African-American heritage, which set the grounds for him to distance himself from blackness and the ethical causes undertaken by African-Americans. Hendrix's understanding of himself as multi-ethnic seems to have made him confused over his ethnic identity, a proposition supported by the testimony of Linda Keith, a girlfriend of Keith Richards and a close friend of

17 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 94. What is misleading about Gilroy's terminology is that it suggests rootlessness rather than rhizomatic roots. Such a misunderstanding, however, may have been precisely what led Hendrix to turn away from his blackness (though I make no claim that this is necessarily what happened).

18 Charles Gower Price, "Got My Own World to Look Through: Jimi Hendrix and the Blues Aesthetic," *Journal of American & Comparative Cultures*, 25.3-4 (2002): p. 442.

Hendrix.<sup>19</sup> That is to say, Hendrix's self-understanding was incompatible with "[the law of] the excluded middle of the American racial imagination," not to mention that Hendrix's identity drew from outside the black-white binary altogether.<sup>20</sup> Thus, it is plausible that his distancing himself from blackness early in his career had more to do with do with the contrariety between the dominant structure of racial and ethnic interpellation (the baroque framework), which was 'naturalized' within the public sphere, and Hendrix's own understanding of race and ethnicity, which was informed by his *experience* of the contrariety of his double-consciousness.

What I argue for here is that Hendrix's multi-ethnic self-conception and, consequently, the contrariety of his double-consciousness (seeing-himself-being-seen-as-black involving blackness as an over-simplified mislabel *and* an oppressive label) made it rather difficult, but not impossible, for him to develop a philosophy of race through which he could embrace his blackness without reducing himself to it. Contrary to, and perhaps in explicit opposition to, the interpellating baroque essentialism that was diffuse in both white society and the Black Aesthetic movement, Hendrix refused to "describe his music in race-specific terms."<sup>21</sup> That is, Hendrix did not essentialize musical style to race, did not assert race-based ownership of style, nor did he see as valid the application of racial standards to music. Case in point: as opposed to critics like Amiri Baraka who located the blues specifically in blackness, Hendrix said that "everybody has some kind of blues to offer," and heard 'funkiness' in both Irish and African-American folk music alike.<sup>22</sup> Terms such as 'funk' and 'blues' have historically been associated so closely with African-American music-making that these remarks cannot but reveal Hendrix's refusal to valorize an ideology of race that seemed to limit his artistic endeavors, oppress his subjecthood, and misrepresent his identity.

Later in his career, there is evidence that Hendrix came to more closely identify with his blackness and embrace the related responsibility that he had been avoiding, though the topic of race still appears to have been uncomfortable for him to talk about. Three biographical facts elucidate this point. First, during a trip to Morocco, Hendrix was comforted by the fact that his race was not causing him to be interpellated as sub-subject, and that his fame did not subsume how others perceived him: he immersed himself in the music and mysticism of the Moroccan culture around him without the active presence of double-consciousness that had been infringing on his identity.<sup>23</sup>

Second, shortly after the Woodstock Festival, Hendrix had agreed to perform a benefit concert in Harlem for the United Block Association (UBA). He was nervous

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19 Ibid., p. 443; Charles R. Cross, *Room Full of Mirrors: A Biography of Jimi Hendrix*. (New York: Hyperion, 2005).

20 Christopher Waterman, "Race Music: Bo Chatmon, "Corrine Corrina," and the Excluded Middle," *Music and the Racial Imagination*, Ronald Radano and Philip V. Bohlman, eds. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 198.

21 Steve Waksman, "Black Sound, Black Body: Jimi Hendrix, the Electric Guitar, and the Meanings of Blackness," *Popular Music and Society*, 23.1 (1999): p. 86.

22 Ibid., 87.

23 Charles R. Cross, *Room Full of Mirrors: A Biography of Jimi Hendrix*, pp. 264-265.

about recognizing that his fan-base was largely white and that he had minimal, if any, presence on black radio stations, but, nevertheless, was rather optimistic about the event: he was moved by “the nonviolent nature of Woodstock and hoped the UBA show would bring that same sense of unity to Harlem.”<sup>24</sup> Even though Hendrix was shying away from talking about race in a follow-up interview, there is a clear sense that he wanted to responsibly engage with the African-American community, typified by his emphasis on: non-violence, providing opportunities for the underprivileged, and his avoidance of reducing musical forms to essentialized race-music; here his remarks on musical style are basically consistent with his earlier remarks on both the blues and funk.<sup>25</sup>

Lastly, although Hendrix’s strong advocacy for non-violence had led him to distance himself from the Black Panthers throughout his career, by 1970 he had gone so far as to call “Voodoo Child (Slight Return)” “our anthem,” which he then dedicated to “the People’s Park and *especially* the Black Panthers [second emphasis added].”<sup>26</sup> Thus, despite his refusal to speak of music in racial terms, it appears that he felt obligated to reach out to the African-American community; although he had knowingly alienated himself from this community, his commitment to the ideals of the Rainbow movement—such as peace, open-mindedness, and diversity—would be a sham—a mere act of posturing—had he not seriously engaged with the African-American community, at the very least because the Rainbow movement was heavily implicated in the Civil Rights movement. Accordingly, Hendrix’s view of himself as ‘black-but-not-only-black’ along with his Rainbow ethics should be understood as critical for his turn towards positively engaging with the African-American community. Further, by 1970, racial politics had reached a point at which one could not be flippant about one’s identity; accordingly, Hendrix was berated by many members of the African-American community for his history of turning-away from his blackness and his responsibility to it. However, it is clear that Hendrix had, by this time and for a manifold of reasons, come to recognize that he had an ethical responsibility to engage with his blackness. In light of experiential authenticity, one might say that Hendrix came to realize that he had a commitment to the African-American community that no amount of branching out could eliminate. Although he was far from an exemplary representative of the African-American community and an activist for their causes, he came to face and take seriously his responsibility to the African-American community, in addition to his other, chosen responsibilities, both related and unrelated.

My argument thus builds upon Steve Waksman’s argument that “musical and racial boundaries (which intersect in the division, say, between “real” blues and “white” blues, or between blues and rock) appeared to Hendrix to be similarly artificial constructs” by emphasizing the *boundaries* as illegitimate, and the standard modes of judging

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 274.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 274-75. In an interview with the *New York Times* before the event, Hendrix said that he “want[ed] to show them that music is universal—that there is no white rock or black rock.”

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 296.

authenticity—and of using authenticity *qua* legitimacy as an evaluative tool—as antagonistic towards his artistic proclivities.<sup>27</sup> Through his ethnic identification and imaginative stylization, Jimi Hendrix reveals himself as something of a Glissantian, whose identity and authenticity-grounds are ill-suited for, and misrepresented by, the essentialist presuppositions of the baroque ideology. Accordingly, Hendrix—the person and the artist—should be studied through the *métissage* framework.

## JIMI'S CREOLE IMAGINATION AND EXPERIENTIAL AUTHENTICITY

By adopting the *métissage* framework of cultural Relation to analyze Jimi Hendrix as a reflexively hybrid artist rather than a 'crossover' artist, we can better understand his creative development and evaluate his cultural agency. The *métissage* holds that cultures and cultural agents have rhizomatic roots, such that they are hybrid and multi-rooted rather than rootless; further, cultures and cultural agents can expand their roots by relating to others. This process of Relation is generative and imaginative whilst also being contingent to prior roots, both chosen and non-chosen. Thus, when Glissant treats imagination as "inexhaustible," he is referring to the fact that relation is something of an extropy, wherein cultures and cultural agents become more diverse and more complex, along with their imaginative potentials.<sup>28</sup> I hold that this cultural extropy increases the contingencies of a given imagination as well as its possibilities. In light of the cultural extropy and rhizomatic contingencies that are revealed through the *métissage*, the phenomenon of Jimi Hendrix—as both man and artist—becomes much more coherent. Here we have a black musician with a multi-ethnic heritage who took an active role in his subject formation. Although he was interpellated as black in manners that were at times advantageous (in London) and at times disadvantageous (in the U.S.), his active subject formation was fueled and conditioned by the interaction between the multifarious experimentation of the Rainbow movement and his self-understanding as culturally and ethnically hybrid.

Hendrix's 'creole imagination', as I have termed it, should thus not be understood as "free play of the imagination," as Waksman puts it, à la Kant, which implies that the imagination is an autonomous, non-contingent form of freedom.<sup>29</sup> Here I strongly disagree with Waksman, and instead suggest an understanding of creole imagination as a contingent form of imagination that increases its contingencies and expands its possibilities as it entangles itself with the manifold set of possibilities that it discovers and engages with. To apply Waksman's notion to Hendrix, we see that Hendrix began his musical development with the blues tradition, which is entangled with African-

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27 Waksman, "Black Sound, Black Body: Jimi Hendrix, the Electric Guitar, and the Meanings of Blackness," p. 88.

I have omitted Waksman's appeal to the "free play of the imagination," which I reject as an antiquated appeal to the arts and imagination as autonomous and non-contingent. I briefly argue against it and offer my alternative understanding of imagination in the following section.

28 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, p. 95.

29 Waksman, "Black Sound, Black Body: Jimi Hendrix, the Electric Guitar, and the Meanings of Blackness," p. 88.

American culture, but throughout his career, he engaged with a number of other musical styles and cultural movements, which, in turn, expanded his imaginative horizon while entangling him in further commitments and contingencies. For example, once Hendrix aligned himself with the Rainbow movement and the hippie counterculture, his subsequent actions became entangled with these commitments, and could then be evaluated on this basis. Nevertheless, both his ethnic hybridity and his blackness were contingencies for him both prior to and after these commitments, and should thus be understood as conditions in which he engaged in his reflexive stylization. From the aforementioned biographical points, it is clear that Hendrix did not responsibly consider his blackness as a contingent commitment until the near-end of his life, though the responsibility was there to be considered and acted upon all along. When he did responsibly engage with his blackness, however, he did so in a way that was simultaneously both responsible for and considerate of his Rainbow commitments; when he was in Harlem to help the UBA, he championed nonviolence and also refused to essentialize music as race-music, all while working to positively influence the local youth, who were systematically impoverished and racially-targeted. At this point, by coherently and responsibly negotiating with his commitments, Hendrix had come to exhibit an experiential authenticity that he had not demonstrated beforehand. Perhaps a sort of crowning-jewel with which we can conclude this analysis of Jimi Hendrix's relationship to blackness is a separate analysis of his song, "Voodoo Child (Slight Return)," in light of his dedication of a performance of the song to the Black Panthers, which marks a consummation of his hybrid, reflexive stylization with his turn towards experiential authenticity.

"Voodoo Child (Slight Return)" demonstrates how Hendrix's style has its basis in the blues, but stretches far beyond this basis. Even before Hendrix began to relate authentically to his blackness, he used the term 'Voodoo' as homage to a spiritual tradition found in a number of African and Afro-Diasporic cultures. Additionally, the lyrics of the song follow the traditional blues, AAB form. Following the song's lyrics, Hendrix proclaims himself a 'voodoo child' with masculine, spiritual power that extends from this world to 'the next'; the voodoo child chops down mountains with his hand, reassembles these mountains to create an island, and erects sand from beneath the ocean (though this last line could also be read as expressing a sort of 'shaking things up'). After lyrically expressing his power, Hendrix "plays a searing solo on the upper registers of his instrument" that wails with pitch bends and disorientingly swells with 'wah' sounds and automated panning<sup>30</sup> In the following verse, Hendrix's lyrics come quite closer to those of a traditional blues, where he apologizes for taking up somebody's time (perhaps a woman's), and promises to make it up to this person; his manner of reparation, however, returns to the spiritual and the mystical by evoking an otherworldly meeting. In professing his intention to return the time in the 'next' world, Hendrix makes it an imperative to not be late,

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

which may be to signify his persuasive power as a voodoo child, though the reason for the imperative admittedly remains unclear. On a number of grounds, however, the song captures the multiplicity of Hendrix's hybrid style. It is bluesy, but not only so. It exploits both the material and the ephemeral possibilities afforded by the electric guitar. It incorporates both chaotic noise and articulate musical phrasing. Ultimately, by non-reductively fusing these elements without attention to false contradictions, misattributed incoherencies, and the law of the excluded racial-middle that had linked race and music by essentializing black and white cultural production, Hendrix demonstrates his commitment to exposing boundaries as altogether illegitimate and as oppressive to those at the crossroads. Only after re-aligning himself with the African-American cause, however, does he demonstrate an understanding that the essentialism and boundary-forging of the baroque are oppressive to those on the 'wrong side' of the boundary as well. Ultimately, it is at this point, and not beforehand, that Hendrix could be considered experientially authentic.

## CONCLUSION

By dedicating a hybrid, experimental blues song to the Black Panthers, Hendrix shows us that his commitment to and identification with creolization could be compatible with a commitment to the African-American community, and that hybridity and blackness need not be mutually exclusive. The cultural and political climate of the early-1960's allowed Hendrix to experiment while downplaying his identity, but there were clear changes on a number of fronts as the decade came to a close. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X were both assassinated, Nixon had set his sights on the Black Panthers in his 'law and order' campaign, and there were riots, by both blacks and whites, over race relations across the country. Racial identification had become a much more serious matter that could no longer be 'escaped'. Hendrix clearly had to face this reality and, consequently, had come to the side of black America. Following Taylor, I hold that Hendrix had come to relate authentically to his blackness at this point, which he did not seem to do in the early 1960's. The rapid cultural change during the Rainbow movement had covered up the contingency of one's roots, however rhizomatic they may be. Knowing that Hendrix was, for most of his life, far from a moral exemplar in his engagement with blackness, it is critical that we consider his philosophy of race not to justify his irresponsibility, but to understand it as deeply woven *between* his worldview and the historical situation in which he was thrown. I do not believe there can be a moral justification for Hendrix's cold neglect of his responsibilities as an African-American, but by probing into his views on race, his involvement in the Rainbow movement, and his turn towards authentically engaging with his commitment to blackness, we can begin to see why his relation to blackness was as enigmatic, complex, and shifting as it was. ♦

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