‘Got my own world to live through’: Race and Categorisation in Jimi Hendrix’s Music.

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Abstract

Jimi Hendrix and his music have been continuously subjected to racial classification by critics who have chosen not to look at Hendrix's own views on race in sufficient detail or context. Given that Hendrix himself rejected the framework of racial classification, this thesis explores the strengths and weaknesses of a racial analysis of his music by looking at it from the perspective of two relatively recent critical-aesthetic discourses, Afrofuturism and Afrosurrealism. While they are interesting and productive in some ways, these approaches do not fully account for Hendrix's thematic concerns and unique aesthetic approach which demonstrates how sound in particular is not reducible to race.

Introduction

I would under no circumstances call my music psychedelic. We had guys ten years ago in the States playing what they're now calling psychedelic...all they're really doing is flashing lights on them and playing Johnny B. Goode with the wrong chords.[1]

- Jimi Hendrix.

For much of the 1960s, LSD was legal and merely required a licence to use, but it was fully outlawed in 1968. Jimi Hendrix claimed that during his first LSD trip in 1966, he looked in the mirror and saw Marilyn Monroe staring back at him. He was in an extravagant London apartment with red velvet walls and an opulent decor with Keith Richards' girlfriend, Linda Keith. Steven Roby and Rob Schreiber claim that this psychedelic experience influenced Hendrix's classic electric blues song 'Red House' (1966).[2] Stories like this one play into the image of Hendrix as an 'organic' musician in search of a higher state of consciousness who, having never been formally taught how to read or write music, drew on his experiences with drugs and sex for inspiration. Yet how is it possible to know that 'Red House' resulted from Hendrix's trip in this lavish setting? These neatly packaged anecdotes have applied a psychedelic veneer around Hendrix, constructing a persona that does not fully account for him as a musician and artist. While he was certainly interested in the effects of hallucinogenic drugs, the notion that Hendrix's aesthetic credibility is derived from their use adds to his image and persona as a figure of rebellion and

[1] Hendrix, Jimi. *Starting at Zero: His Own Story* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014): 47.
[2] Roby, Steven and Schreiber, Brad. *Becoming Jimi Hendrix: From Southern Crossroads to Psychedelic London, the Untold Story of a Musical Genius* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2010): 148.

otherness within America's largely white counterculture. Hendrix's experimentation with drugs coincided with a broader search for liberation among young Americans who sought to break from existing musical genres – namely pop and rock and roll – by viewing musicians as artists and spokespeople for their own ideas of community and used psychedelic experience to push beyond the boundaries of their parents' generation.

Hendrix was chosen as one of the central figureheads for this movement largely because of his outlandish image and exotic persona rather than his musical artistry and unique aesthetic approach. Hendrix's blackness was a sign of his authenticity as a countercultural artist because he was seen as a "psychedelic superspade", an exceptionally gifted African American whose exotic image was highly unconventional and therefore 'anti-establishment'.[3] The phrase 'psychedelic superspade' was first used by Tony Glover in his review of *Electric Ladyland* (1968). Glover questions his use of the term and asks whether Hendrix is just "a damn good musician/producer," depending on "whether you want to believe the image or your ears."[4] This demonstrates an awareness that Hendrix's image eclipsed the focus on his sound, and therefore that the myth could interfere with a deeper appreciation of his music. Hendrix's artistic freedom later on in his life afforded him a more nuanced expression of his sound that may have caused critics to think twice about the validity of the 'psychedelic superspade' persona assigned to him early on in his career.

Hendrix became deeply uncomfortable with his public and stage persona, which became increasingly rehearsed towards the end of his life, and stated in a

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[3] Glover, Tony. 'Electric Ladyland', *Rolling Stone*, November 1968, https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-album-reviews/electric-ladyland-183197/ (accessed 04/04/19). 'Superspade' is a term used since the early twentieth century to describe exceptionally gifted African Americans, mainly black athletes and entertainers, and the expectation that they had to be sensational to receive attention.

[4] Ibid.

1969 interview with Sheila Weller that he did not want to be "a clown anymore."[5] Hendrix was expected to flaunt a hyper sexuality that he initially took advantage of as his career took off but was something he later came to resent. A key example of the way Hendrix was primed and visualised to his young, white counterculture audience was the cover art for his final album *Electric Ladyland*. His UK record label Track Records rejected Hendrix's own ideas for the front cover and chose to use this photo of 19 naked women:

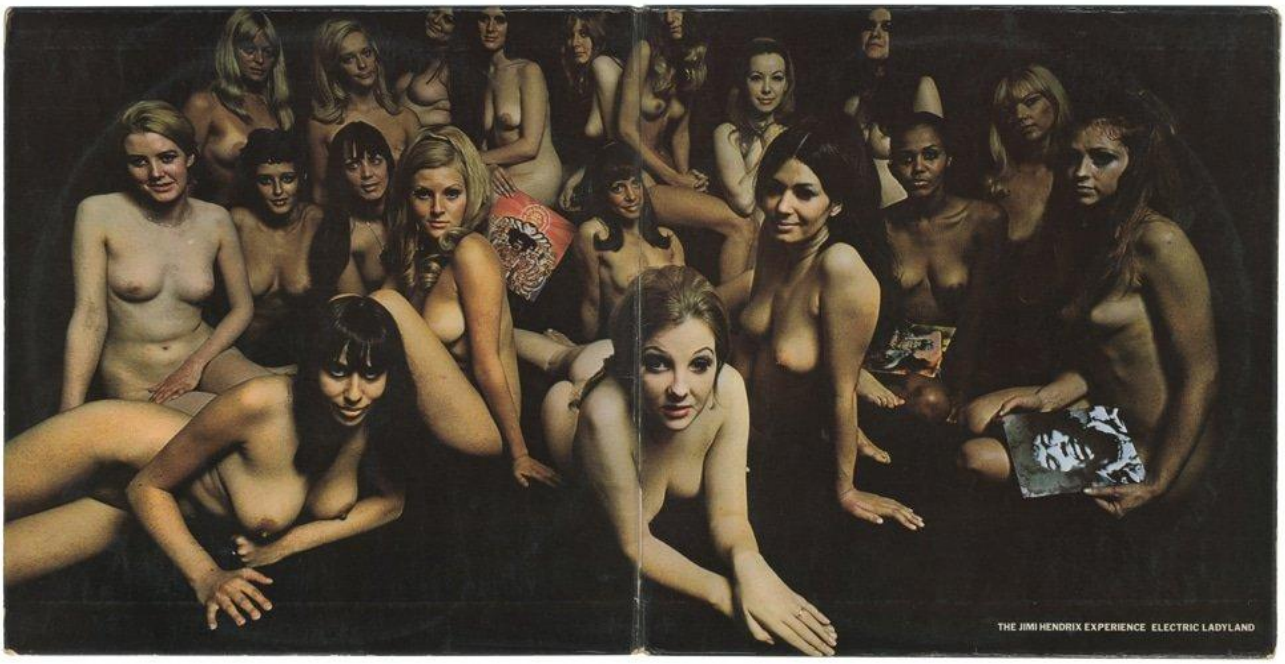


Fig. 1: The UK album cover for *Electric Ladyland* (1968).

An image of Hendrix shrouded in 'dope smoke' was also featured in the album artwork to emphasise an exotic, experimental persona, sexualise him as a primal subject and ultimately make him a psychedelic icon whose music was like a drug.

[5] Weller, Sheila. 'Jimi Hendrix: I Don't Want to Be a Clown Anymore', *Rolling Stone*, November 1969. https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/jimi-hendrix-i-dont-want-to-be-a-clown-anymore-81451/ (accessed 04/04/19).



Fig. 2: The inside-cover album artwork included in the UK release.

This was at the request of his manager Michael Jeffrey who wanted Hendrix to appeal to a young counterculture audience. Hendrix was furious at this publicity stunt and voiced his discomfort with the nude photo. Because the nude photo would have been banned from major US retail stores, the US album cover, in contrast, featured a close up of Hendrix's face, shaded in red and yellow, mouth open and eyes closed with his head arched.

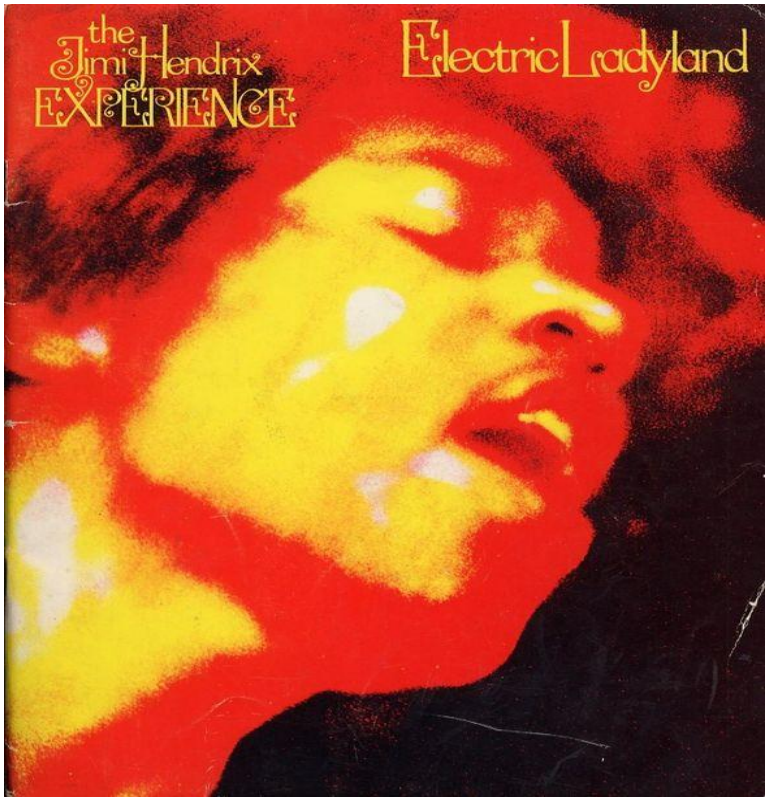


Fig. 3: The US album cover for *Electric Ladyland* (1968).

This image still has psychedelic connotations and is another attempt to brand Hendrix as a 'psychedelic superspade.' This highlights the visual Hendrix that the counterculture was sold: a freakish, sexualised symbol who could be framed and safely consumed by a white audience without the need to consider the relationship between Hendrix and the music he created.

A residual sense of mythology continues to surround Hendrix. As a figurehead for the youth rebellion of the 1960s, his image, persona and black heritage offered the counterculture a sense of authenticity. The following quotes from reporters and correspondents of the 1960s are prime examples of the way that Hendrix's image and persona were mythologised:

The 'Black Bob Dylan,' as some call him, is a curiosity on its own. Jimi has an overwhelming amount of dark hair, which semicarelessly waves around his head. He has a fantastic, almost picturesque, primitive head. His white-as-a-sheet teeth pierce as a battery of ready-to-fire field guns through his wide lips. Between his friendly dog eyes lies a nose like a trampled-down rubber horse. And if he feared in spite of all this he would remain unnoticed, Jimi wears cracking-red trousers and a fantastic military dress coat.[6]

- Jan Waldrop for *HUMO*, March 1967.

The Experience experience is harrowing. But it's fabulous spectacle. It relies entirely on Hendrix's virtuosity, his erotic athletics and exotic pyrotechnics. It may be a bunch of good tricks, but good tricks done well are what magic is all about, and Hendrix pulls them off, if you'll forgive the phrase, like a true magician, or, more accurately, like a witch doctor. Theater should be a show, and Hendrix is a fabulous showman.[7]

- Michael Thomas for *Eye*, July 1968.

Hendrix – The sullen, sneering, wild-haired John Cage of Cock Rock?
Hendrix – X marking the spot where pants bulge meets guitar cunt?
Hendrix – The searching, violent, sloe-eyed voyager through shrieking glades of puffed-up electronics?

[6] Roby, Steven. *Hendrix on Hendrix: Interviews and Encounters with Jimi Hendrix* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2012): 17.
[7] Roby (2012): 100-101.

> Hendrix – The tri-decibel masturbator of phallic amps?
>
> Hendrix – The black Nero who burned the amplified vox of Rome?
>
> Hendrix – All these things on stage. But off – Hendrix is a beautiful cat.[8]

- Bob Garcia for *Open City*, August 1967.

The concern with his appearance, his body and his blackness illustrates an idealisation of youth and rebellion that functions as a spectacle for the audience Hendrix performed to. This construction of a mythic Hendrix meant that his largely white audience was distracted from developing a deeper consideration of Hendrix as an artist and musician. This sense of mythology has persisted since the 1960s and the collapse of the counterculture. Pete Townshend recalled the first time he saw Hendrix play:

> It's the most psychedelic experience I ever had, going to see Hendrix play...I remember flames and water dripping out of the ends of his hands. I remember him playing...and doing something with his tongue and things happening around him in the air. He was such a manipulator, such a magician to me.[9]

Tom Morello, guitarist and one of the founding members of Rage Against The Machine, described Hendrix's playing to *Rolling Stone* in similar terms: "his riffs were a pre-metal bulldozer, and his lead lines were an electric LSD trip down to the

[8] Roby (2012): 49.
[9] Flavell, Liz. *Biographic Hendrix* (Ammonite Press 2018: Lewes): 12-13.

crossroads, where he pimp-slapped the devil."[10] It is clear from these examples that the mythology surrounding Hendrix has prevented serious consideration of his music and the implications of his creativity.

Just as the counterculture mythologised Hendrix as a hypersexual 'psychedelic superspade', black cultural theorists and political militants also imposed their own restrictive agenda on him. The rise of black cultural nationalism alongside the Black Power movement and Black Liberation Struggle of the 1960s was in response to the socio-political turmoil of the period, persistent racial inequality, every day violence and intimidation at a local level and the assassination of key leaders of the black community such as Medgar Evers, Malcom X and Martin Luther King Jr. African-American scholar Larry Neal summarised the meaning of the Black Aesthetic as the core of black cultural nationalism:

> The Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community. Black Art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. As such, it envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America. In order to perform this task, the Black Arts Movement proposes a radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic. It proposes a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology.[11]

[10] Wenner, Jann S. *Rolling Stone 50 Years of Covers: A History of the Most Influential Magazine in Popular Culture* (New York: Abrams, 2018): 648.
[11] Neal, Larry. 'The Black Arts Movement'. *The Drama Review*, Black Theatre, Vol. 12, No. 4, Summer 1968: 29.

This call for a cultural revolution was predicated on a nationalist form of self-determination which aimed to create politically-engaged art that would challenge and reconstruct the representation of African Americans in literature and the arts. Amiri Baraka (formerly Le Roi Jones), whose opening of the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School in Harlem in 1965 is widely seen as the birth of the Black Arts Movement, laid the foundations for this cultural nationalism in his landmark study of African-American music entitled *Blues People* (1963). Baraka argued that music was the cultural lifeline of African Americans and had remained the essential key to their survival through slavery, racist violence and the struggle for civil rights:

> I cite the beginning of the blues as one beginning of American Negroes...When America became important enough to the African to be passed on, in those formal renditions, to the young, those renditions were in some kind of Afro-American language.[12]

Baraka makes an intrinsic connection between the blues and blackness which runs as a thread throughout the African-American experience, from slavery to the Harlem Renaissance, the Free Jazz movement and rock n' roll of the 1950s. Jazz in particular was viewed by many black intellectuals as "the height of a specifically black artistic impulse" because of its historical significance as a black musical form and its use of improvisation to convey struggles in the 1950s and 1960s.[13] Hendrix

[12] Baraka, Amiri. *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*. (New York: William Morrow, 1963): 12. Baraka italicised 'his' and 'conscious' in his text.

[13] Waksman, Steve. 'Black Sound, Black Body: Jimi Hendrix, the electric guitar, and the meanings of blackness', *Popular Music and Society*, Vol. 23, No. 1, 1999: 83.

was certainly not viewed in the same way by these black intellectuals; for Baraka and other proselytisers of free jazz such as A. B. Spellman, Hendrix's inability or refusal to speak an Afro-American language and his subversion of the only constitutive medium for black expression – music itself – made him an outsider to the black cultural nationalism they hoped to foster. Baraka disapproved of Hendrix's perceived betrayal of the Black Aesthetic as did Spellman, who once compared free jazz musician Albert Ayler's 'beautiful' music with Hendrix's 'ugly' tone.[14]

Hendrix's aesthetic approach, which combined the blues, free jazz, soul and psychedelic rock, centred on his use of electricity, sound and the physical sensations they elicit. His choice to use the electric guitar to play psychedelic rock is significant because it ran counter to the views of black cultural nationalists of the 1960s such as Ron Wellburn, who argued that "white rock is a technology, not a real music. It is an affectation, not a felt experience. It is parasitic, not symbiotic, to black culture and life-styles."[15] Wellburn would have rather heard Hendrix play jazz, soul or traditional delta blues within the safe confines of the Black Aesthetic.

This aesthetic was defined by a spiritual and emotional connection to the lived experiences of African Americans rather than a perceived 'science' carefully constructed by technological intrusion. Playwright and Professor Paul Carter Harrison thought Hendrix was a great bluesman, but he made his feelings about his music as a whole clear shortly after Hendrix's death:

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[14] Tate, Greg. *Midnight Lightning: Jimi Hendrix and the Black Experience* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2003): 132.

[15] Wellburn, Ron. 'The Black Aesthetic Imperative.' *The Black Aesthetic*. Ed. Addison Gayle (New York: Anchor, 1972): 149.

> those who listened attentively could hear the lingering intimations of traditional ethos, yet it could not penetrate the excessive electronic manipulations which obscured the subtlety of intonation which emanates from a black experience.[16]

Hendrix's psychedelic rock therefore did not conform to the racial essentialism espoused by Wellburn, Baraka and Harrison. Moreover, it is significant because Hendrix's dismissal of race as an indicator of authenticity sets out his view that the source of the blues comes from "genuine emotional content" rather than racial identity or a fixed historical experience.[17] His discomfort with racial categorisation was clear in a 1968 interview with Jay Ruby:

> You can have your own blues. It doesn't necessarily mean that folk blues is the only type of blues in the world...The Bloomfield Band [a white blues band] is really out of sight and you can feel what they're doing no matter what colour the eyes or armpits might be.[18]

Hendrix had a complicated relationship with black R&B performers he had played with during his musical apprenticeship and black cultural nationalists throughout his life and musical career. Shortly before he was discovered by Chas Chandler in Greenwich Village, Harlem club owners and musicians routinely rejected his

[16] Harrison, Paul Carter. *The Drama of Nommo: Black Theater in the African Continuum* (New York: Grove, 1972): 59.
[17] Waksman (1999): 87.
[18] Ruby, Jay. 'Jimi Hendrix.' *Jazz & Pop*, 7 (July 1968): 15-17.

groundbreaking use of the guitar; this, in his own words, affected Hendrix's approach to music:

> In the Village, people were more friendly than in Harlem, where it's all cold and mean. Your own people hurt you more. I always wanted a more open and integrated sound.[19]

Hendrix scholar and cultural critic Greg Tate fittingly sums up this dynamic: "irony of ironies: in London and the East Village, Hendrix was The Man. In Harlem, he was The Invisible Man."[20]

Hendrix's refusal to adhere to the strict artistic conventions of the R&B bands he played with prior to his breakthrough caused him to be fired by groups and artists, including Hank Ballard & The Midnighters, Little Richard and The Isley Brothers. Hendrix persistently searched for new employment in other groups as a result of his creative experimentation. Hendrix's frustration with the restrictive expectations imposed on him is clear in his description of his time playing in Wilson Pickett's backing group: "I had my hair slicked back and my mind combed out."[21] As Little Richard's guitarist, Hendrix was frequently chastised by him for his sonic experimentations on stage, playing the guitar with his teeth and wearing flamboyant shirts that Little Richard perceived as eclipsing his own stage persona. Fellow musician in the band, Buddy Travis, claimed that Richard would fine his players $50

[19] Roby & Schreiber (2010): 158.
[20] Tate (2003): 19.
[21] Hendrix (2014): 52.

if they didn't call him 'King.'[22] Hendrix was once even fined for his extravagant hairstyle.[23] This limited Hendrix's ability to develop his artistic creativity, yet helped to build confidence in his own wildly flamboyant showmanship that would become so central later on in his career.

More broadly, black artists were expected to adhere to a certain 'black' sound and were thus forced to navigate the testing waters of racial and political categorisation. Stevie Wonder's Motown version of Bob Dylan's 'Blowin' In the Wind' (1966), for example, earned him a backlash from black audiences and friends; his associate Lee Garrett recollected the response:

> It was as if singing black music wasn't good enough for that bastard anymore; as if he would rather be white than one of them niggers; as if money could obviously buy everything and Stevie would betray the black people with what he was doing.[24]

The reaction to the first Motown hit written by a white artist underlines the stakes of the racial and political context at work in the mid-1960s.[25] Otis Redding's decision to cover The Beatles and The Rolling Stones and his interest in cutting Dylan's 'Just Like A Woman' (1966) did not elicit the reaction Stevie Wonder had received, revealing a double standard within the Black Arts Movement. Yet the overall message from black cultural nationalists to black artists was clear: know your place.

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[22] Roby & Schreiber (2010): 110.
[23] Roby & Schreiber (2010): 108.
[24] Doggett, Peter. *There's A Riot Going On: Revolutionaries, rock stars and the rise and fall of '60s counter-culture* (London: Canongate Books, 2007): 77.
[25] Doggett (2007): 76.

Amiri Baraka's view of James Brown, whom he saw as a spokesperson for the anger, frustrations and energy of the black community through his shrieking voice and propulsive rhythms, is a case in point. Brown's music came to represent an approved kind of blackness – Baraka stated his belief that Brown's screams were "more 'radical' than most jazz musicians sound."[26] His 1967 hit 'Don't Be A Drop Out' was written in response to Vice-President Hubert Humphrey's 'stay in school' campaign to support education in black communities and was performed by the King of Soul himself at the White House. Yet Brown did not escape pressure from black cultural nationalists; he recalled arguing with H. Rap Brown of SNCC & the Black Panthers about his refusal to support black nationalism, was scolded by black nationalists and militants for his visit to Vietnam to entertain American troops in June 1968, and was criticised for his endorsement of Humphrey for the 1968 election.[27] He was pressured to fire his white bass player, Tim Drummond, and was berated for his "America Is My Home" single from 1968.[28] It's no surprise, then, that his next single was 'Say It Loud—I'm Black and I'm Proud' (1968). This illustrates the way that black cultural nationalists patrolled the borders of black creativity and the consequences for artists who strayed from its territory.

By 1967, Hendrix had developed his own sound in London, a rarefied musical environment where he operated in a predominantly white rock domain yet in a less racially loaded context than America. However, Hendrix still faced accusations of deserting his race as he pioneered his new sound in front of largely white countercultural audiences. His decision to choose Noel Redding and Mitch Mitchell as his sidemen – two white British musicians – angered black militants who pressed

[26] Doggett (2007): 80.
[27] Brown, James and Tucker, Bruce. *James Brown: The Godfather of Soul* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson Ltd, 1987): 174-175.
[28] Brown and Tucker (1987): 196.

him to fire both, which he did for a time. There were at least two reports of Hendrix being confronted by members of the Black Panther Party for money backstage.[29] He was largely ignored by black US radio stations and was branded a "psychedelic Uncle Tom" who couldn't sing by music critic Robert Christgau.[30] These tensions were exacerbated by the music press when Hendrix donated $6,000 to a scholarship fund for students in poverty in New York, which *TEENSET* took as a sign of guilt at "the lack of black faces in his audience."[31] Concert promoters saw little financial gain in booking Hendrix to play in poorer black communities and instead organised performances in more white, middle class areas which made Hendrix appear more susceptible to such accusations. In a 1969 interview with Jacoba Atlas, Hendrix had this to say on racial and aesthetic classification:

> People are too hung up on musical categories, they won't listen to something because it sounds completely alien to what they've been used to or something. So therefore it takes twice as long, three times as long...We have to be ten times good for the soul people to even notice us. Not fakey good, I mean actually, naturally good.[32]

The 'racially conscious' approach to Hendrix is both reductive and mythologising, while Hendrix's discomfort with these competing ideological brands –

[29] Tate (2003): 47.
[30] Christgau, Robert. 'Anatomy of a Love Festival', 1968, https://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/music/monterey-69.php (accessed 05/11/18).
[31] Atlas, Jacoba (1969) 'Jimi Hendrix, Black Power and Money', *TEENSET* https://1960smusicmagazines.com/2017/12/01/jimi-hendrix-black-power-and-money-teenset-january-1969/ (accessed 01/11/18).
[32] Ibid.

as a 'psychedelic superspade' and Black Power poster boy – remains clear. Hendrix's place within this period of competing ideas about race offers the opportunity to explore what his music can illuminate that historical and ideological narratives about race cannot, particularly in relation to his own aesthetic approach and his use of technology to create new soundscapes. His ability to draw from different genres and express multifaceted sounds makes his music critically reflexive because it transcends the ideological apparatus that classified artists like Hendrix according to race and music in the 1960s. Hendrix's use of sound is characterised by his sonic portraits of the ideals and contradictions of race and culture and fundamentally problematised binary notions of whiteness and blackness in the process. This reveals a complex dynamic rich in its power to destabilise the binary 'logic' of race.

The mythology that surrounds Hendrix and his music has separated the artist from his aesthetic approach, and means that a deconstruction of this mythology is required in order to attempt to bridge the gap between Hendrix the cultural icon and his sound as a critique of the ideological apparatus of race. The overwhelming intensity of Hendrix's sound exposes and attempts to dismantle these notions of race by "derailing the conscious, analytical mind" and emptying the categories it constructs as part of this ideological framework of race.[33]

A deeper examination of Hendrix's music is needed in order to highlight and explore the tensions between his own aesthetic approach – which combined the blues, free jazz, soul and psychedelic rock – and the view that the historical tradition of black music seeks principally to represent the collective experience of African Americans. The rise of the Black Aesthetic in the 1960s illustrated a 'positive' effort

[33] Toop, David. *Ocean of Sound: Ambient sound and radical listening in the age of communication* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2018): 271.

to categorise music according to race, one in which blackness was associated with pride and empowerment. Yet in this context, Hendrix's music was decried as an ugly betrayal of African-American music by black cultural nationalists of his day. His largely white audience meant that he was perceived as failing to represent "the spiritual and cultural needs of Black people."[34] Hendrix certainly had a black fan base that enjoyed his new sound, but an ideological discourse of race was imposed on his music to determine its meaning and evaluate its worth. It is important to critically explore Hendrix's relationship with this discourse because debates about race, music and identity that surrounded Hendrix during his career have only intensified since, particularly with the rise of hip hop.

Hendrix's unique aesthetic approach, defined by his own skill, his fusion of genres and subversion of the expectations of his listeners, reveals his capacity to reconstitute both white and black tropes by showing that blackness and whiteness are fluid categories in consistent ideological tension with each other. His music affirms this as a tension between discursive constructs rather than real entities. Discovery therefore forms the core of his musical approach which is guided not by a fixed, tangible end but rather an impulse to make himself a part of his music.

Hendrix's music and the response to it cut to the heart of debates around authenticity, race and culture. It forces a reconsideration of terms such as 'black music' and 'white music' so central to the vocabulary of discussing popular music, and raises questions about how helpful they are in analysing it. This is why Hendrix's music might usefully be viewed as a dialectical transcendence of whiteness and blackness which affirms them as ideological constructs that exist in a state of tension. As I seek to argue in the chapters that follow, Hendrix's aesthetic is best and

[34] Neal (1968): 29.

most productively understood as a product of the dynamic tension between these classifying categories of race and culture.

Philip Tagg argues there should be scepticism towards terms such as 'black music' and 'European music' because they have no clear definition and are ideological constructs. In his view, the false dichotomy between 'black music' and 'white' or 'European music' serves to pre-determine "certain sets of feeling and behaviour for one race and deny them to the other."[35] He highlights the historical characterisation of black artists as spontaneous musicians, reducing them to "absurd court jester positions," while 'European music' is presented as rigid and mechanical.[36] Deconstructing three common associations with 'black' music – rhythm, call-and-response and improvisation – he argues that it is unclear whether "the birhythmic character of much North American popular music should be traced back to Europe or Africa" given that the reverse of the ordinary dotted rhythm is evident in Scottish folk music, 17th Century English music and early minstrel songs, if the sheet music available to show this is reliable.[37] He argues that the call and response features associated with 'black' music "are as African as they are European as they are Indian or Jewish," citing antiphonal psalm singing and the "responsoria between priest and choir or congregation" which have been common over the past two centuries in the Middle East and Europe.[38] He also points out that many classical composers were in fact improvisational musicians.[39] Tagg's argument that musical patterns, structures and techniques cannot be racially categorised forms

[35] Tagg, Philip. 'Open Letter: 'Black Music', 'Afro-American Music' and 'European Music'', *Popular Music*, Vol. 8, No. 3, 1989: 295.
[36] Tagg (1989): 294.
[37] Tagg (1989): 290.
[38] Tagg (1989): 289.
[39] Tagg (1989): 290.

an important cornerstone in re-thinking Hendrix's music as a critique of racial ideology.

Similarly, Brian Ward reconsiders the history of rhythm and blues according to the context of changing race relations of the 1950s and 1960s. Ward asserts that certain styles and genres cannot be considered essentially or intrinsically 'black'; rather, he argues, such styles become associated with and nurtured by racial groups as a result of the racially segregated nature of American society and the popular music marketplace.[40] Ward says that the quest for 'authentic' black music has produced an ideological apparatus, including "a crude form of Afrocentrism" that fails to acknowledge "any kind of cross-racial cultural exchange".[41] He critiques another cornerstone of this ideological approach to authenticity in black music – the reinforcement of racial stereotypes about black culture by white audiences. Ward wants to avoid racialising musical sounds but recognises that these associations often take place:

> White enthusiasts routinely reduced the diverse sounds and lyrical perspectives of Rhythm and Blues to a set of stock characteristics which they had always – sometimes correctly, sometimes incorrectly, but invariably in deep ignorance of the realities of black life – associated with the unremittingly physical, passionate, ecstatic, emotional and above all, sexually liberated black world of their imaginations. Paradoxically, in so doing, white fans of black music neatly fitted black music, style and culture into much the same

[40] Ward, Brian. *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (London: University of California Press, 1998): 5-6.
[41] Ward (1998): 11.

> normative categories so dear to the most bigoted opponents of black music and black equality.[42]

Ronald Radano supports this critique by arguing that 'black music' is heavily mythologised and critiquing binary notions of racial territory within music. Radano calls for a reconstruction rather than a deconstruction of "musical blackness" to acknowledge its interracial history, while recognising that black music itself is almost impossible to trace historically.[43] He points to the fact that the first recordings of black music appeared in the early 1890s and became more widely available in the 1910s and 1920s, highlighting "a sonically absent history" of slave songs.[44] He questions how we can legitimately identify the rhythmic, soulful traits of early black music and its key characteristics today, such as "collective engagements of call and response" and "multiple levels of feeling and desire."[45] The result of ideas about 'black' music, Radano says, is that they have been used as political constructs and disconnected from the actual history of music made by African Americans:

> ...given the historical and situational complexities of any culture's legacy, the experience and meaning of African-American musical practices had to vary enormously depending on time, place, and circumstance but our historical record provides only the most scattered documentation of events.[46]

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[42] Ward (1998): 12.
[43] Radano, Ronald. *Lying Up A Nation* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2003): 4.
[44] Radano (2003): 5.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid.

Nonetheless, music continues to be central to racial theories of culture. This is evident in the recent emergence of two new critical and aesthetic approaches, Afrofuturism and Afrosurrealism. Both of these perspectives seek to critique existing ideas of race and culture by reconstituting the past and present, while Afrofuturism in particular attempts to construct new spaces in the future.

Afrofuturism attempts to re-order myths from the past and explore black possibilities in the future through a fusion of blackness, fantasy, technology and science fiction. Originally coined by critic Mark Dery, its themes of resistance and black liberation seek to use music, visual art, literature and comics to subvert white-dominated narratives of history, re-write this past and construct futuristic black cultures. As a new and emerging cultural aesthetic, its ideological elasticity seeks to accommodate a broad range of individual representations, but it remains a slippery concept in terms of its overall definition. However, Afrofuturism has been applied to Hendrix not least because his interest in science fiction and new technologies of sound lead him to write songs that he called "science fiction rock and roll."[47]

Some of Hendrix's songs offer potential examples of Afrofuturism and an impulse to subvert existing realities and create new ones using fantasy in his sonic landscapes. These songs include '1983 (A Merman I Should Turn To Be)' (1968), 'Up From the Skies' (1968) and 'Third Stone from the Sun' (1967) and have led to him being classified as an Afrofuturist. Whether Hendrix's use of these aesthetic features suit existing Afrofuturist tropes, offer his own individual sense of Afrofuturism or subverts the aesthetic itself is an important question in thinking about the possible links between Afrofuturism and his music. These are questions I will explore in chapter two.

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[47] Charles R. Cross. *Room Full of Mirrors: A Biography of Jimi Hendrix* (New York: Hyperion, 2005): 205.

Afrosurrealism, on the other hand, is a growing intellectual and artistic movement that seeks to provide new insights into the connections between the Afro-American past and contemporary cultural expression. It suggests that art and the black aesthetic might be formed in the present but are fundamentally informed by a past which in many ways defies rational explanation. In this sense, Afrosurrealism attempts to represent what it sees as the absurdity of black life. D. Scot Miller provides this description of its focus in his *Afrosurreal Manifesto: Black is the New Black*:

> Afro-Surreal presupposes that beyond this visible world, there is an invisible world striving to manifest, and it is our job to uncover it. Like the African Surrealists, Afro-Surrealists recognize that nature, particularly blackness, generates more surreal experiences than any other process could hope to produce.[48]

Miller associates Hendrix's use of music to unearth lived, hidden realities with Afrosurrealism. He references Hendrix's 'House Burning Down' (1968) as a song that "opens the dialogue even further beyond the typical" about the Watts riots.[49] Hendrix's use of magical realism and the often surreal nature of his sound in other songs such as 'Voodoo Chile' (1968) and 'Voodoo Child (Slight Return)' (1968) invite analysis from an Afrosurrealist perspective. This is to question whether Hendrix is better understood as an Afrosurrealist than an Afrofuturist, whether he constructs his

[48] Miller, D. Scot. *Afrosurreal Manifesto: Black is the New Black—A 21st century manifesto*, 20 May 2009, http://dscotmiller.blogspot.com/2009/05/afrosurreal.html (accessed 02/08/17).
[49] Miller, D. Scot. 'Panther Cry', March 2012, http://dscotmiller.blogspot.com/2012/03/culturesfbg.html (accessed 25/03/19).

own kind of Afrosurrealism, or whether Afrosurrealism can sufficiently account for Hendrix's music. What, for instance, are the key differences between Afrosurrealism and surrealism, and what might this distinction be able to reveal about Hendrix's music?

Given that Hendrix has been associated with both Afrofuturism and Afrosurrealism and that there has been no sustained analysis of Hendrix from either of these perspectives, we might ask whether these critical insights offer new ways of accounting for Hendrix. Do they mythologise and categorise him in new ways or do they help to deconstruct the competing representations of him? In chapters two and three I ask what these critical discourses can tell us about Hendrix but also what Hendrix can tell us about the strengths and limitations of their approaches.

However, before these questions can be explored, a more detailed analysis of the mythology surrounding Hendrix is required in order to illustrate the problematic nature of the categories into which Hendrix has been fitted by fans and critics and the ways in which Hendrix's music complicates not only these categories but all competing claims of classification.

Chapter One

The Hendrix Construct Problem.

> Music doesn't lie. I agree it can be misinterpreted, but it cannot lie.[1]
>
> A musician, if he's a messenger, is like a child who hasn't been handled too many times by man, hasn't had too many fingerprints across his brain. That's why music is so much heavier than anything you ever felt.[2]
>
> - Jimi Hendrix.

The connection between the man himself and the music he made has rarely been made effectively in much of the literature on Hendrix, as it seldom was during his brief but bold ascension in the late 1960s. Writers and critics have tried to stake their claim about who Hendrix was and what his music represents with varying success, but it is clear he has been handled one too many times. Hendrix biographers Caesar Glebbeek and Harry Shapiro sum this up fittingly: "Jimi Hendrix was treated as superhuman, subhuman, but rarely just human."[3] The dense population of multiple versions of Jimi Hendrix requires a deconstruction of the way he has been mapped by authors and critics in order to allow a new line of analysis centred on his aesthetic approach.

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[1] Roby, Steven. *Hendrix on Hendrix: Interviews and Encounters with Jimi Hendrix* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2012): 286. This quote is from a 1970 interview.
[2] Roby (2012): 328. This quote is from a 1969 interview.
[3] Glebbeek, Caesar, and Shapiro, Harry. *Jimi Hendrix: Electric Gypsy* (New York: St. Martin's, 1990): 293.

Charles Shaar Murray draws connections between Hendrix's biographical experiences and musical influences by relating his sound to the multitude of genres that he drew inspiration from. This is an essential task because it contextualises Hendrix's transnational and interracial roots as an artist whose use of folk blues, urban blues, R&B, Southern soul and free jazz fundamentally shaped his musical repertoire and resulting aesthetic. His detailed analysis of how his knowledge of black musical traditions allowed Hendrix to 'walk the colour line' is unmatched in the scholarship on him as an artist. Murray documents Hendrix's experience of pigeonholing in the context of the racial and cultural dimensions of the 1960s in detail and skilfully sheds light on the roots of the counterculture which became so enthralled by Hendrix. He argues that Hendrix pushed the boundaries of the blues in a way no other artist has done since, revising and updating its aesthetic qualities while maintaining its tortured and cathartic spirit.

Murray traces the history of the blues as a means for working-class black males to reclaim a sense of purpose by asserting their "need to be treated like the head of his household, and the efforts he makes to function as a good provider."[4] Murray contrasts what he calls the "tough, knowing sexuality of the blues"[5] with "the sugar-coated romantic stereotypes of conventional pop."[6] The explosion of white blues artists (driven by the 'British invasion') paved the way for audiences to enjoy the more visceral musical experiences that Hendrix offered. Links such as these are crucial to any analysis of Hendrix's music in the 1960s but the tracing of these genres and musical histories sometimes results in Hendrix orbiting the world of post-war pop rather than being a centralised, subjective artist. Murray occasionally gives

[4] Murray, Charles Shaar. *Crosstown Traffic: Jimi Hendrix and Post-War Pop* (London: Canongate Books, 2012): 77.
[5] Murray (2012): 79.
[6] Ibid.

the impression that the title of the book should have been *Crosstown Traffic: Post-War Pop and Jimi Hendrix* rather than the other way around. He frequently strays into prolonged analyses and discussions about numerous musical genres – most notably jazz – that he rightly links to Hendrix's sound but sometimes causes a historical spectrum to detract from a closer analysis of his music through different critical perspectives. Hendrix is therefore more of an historical figure situated within a dynamic timeline of cultural traditions; yet what his aesthetic can reveal that history cannot remains a key question that this research aims to explore Hendrix's music through new critical perspectives rather than the musical genres that Murray sets out as his critical framework.

Steve Waksman's contribution to this discussion is crucial in relation to Murray's analysis because he sees Hendrix as an innovator of a personalised sense of blackness. Waksman argues that Hendrix was a crossover artist who created a hybridity of cultural traditions in his aesthetic achievements, but who could not control the expectations set by competing forces of classification. He finds Hendrix an important figure to study because his disavowal of racial and aesthetic categories forces a reconsideration of the value of these strict cultural traditions. His two key assertions are that Hendrix's view of race and music are integral to each other and that his technological manipulation must be understood as the source of his aesthetic innovation. These are useful ideas because they underpin the way that Hendrix's vibrant new sound challenged existing cultural traditions. Waksman concludes by reflecting that Hendrix's imagined alternatives – precisely what he believes these were remains unclear – were unfulfilled in his own life but that his music represents a hybridity of cultural traditions.

While Murray argues that Hendrix *articulates* a revisionist tradition of blackness, Waksman argues that through the jarring and destructive nature of songs such as 'Voodoo Child (Slight Return)' Hendrix *disarticulates* blackness to render it "an empty category" that allows him to occupy it on his own terms.[7] This leads him to conclude that "blackness therefore becomes a matter of individuality rather than a social condition."[8] This is a significant line of analysis that Waksman fails to elaborate on more closely in relation to Hendrix's songs; rather, he offers a prolonged discussion about Hendrix's performance style and the extent to which it challenged the problem of the sexualised black male stereotype. Waksman closes this discussion by focusing on Hendrix's desire for an invisibility that could "remove [him] from the demands of his public into a realm of pure music" where sound is pre-eminent.[9] This returns us to the question of Hendrix's individuality and the extent to which it reinvented a new kind of blackness, but Waksman provides no sustained analysis of this line of thought. Waksman therefore leaves more questions than answers. He says that "Hendrix's use of electronic sound significantly expanded the musical vocabulary of rock", but fails to demonstrate how his use of electronic sound expanded the vocabulary of self-discovery, undermined categorisation and enabled a new kind of self-expression.[10]

Greg Tate has a remarkably similar view to Murray's; he argues that Hendrix is a reinterpreter of black cultural traditions whose music is firmly rooted in African-American genres. He discusses the influence artists like Hendrix had on Miles Davis:

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[7] Waksman, Steve. 'Black Sound, Black Body: Jimi Hendrix, the electric guitar, and the meanings of blackness', *Popular Music and Society*, Vol. 23, No. 1, 1999: 92.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Waksman (1999): 109.
[10] Waksman (1999): 89.

> What Miles heard in the musics of P-Funk progenitors, James Brown, Jimi Hendrix, and Sly Stone, was the blues impulse transferred, masked, and retooled for the Space Age through a low-down act of possession.... Where J. B. and especially Jimi and Sly took music isn't something that can be summed up in a few quotidian riffs any more than a Marquez novel can be experienced through synopses. It's at once a thought process, a textural language, and a way of reordering tradition and myth unto itself.[11]

This view of Hendrix's music contends that historical cultural traditions are organic and can be re-moulded but still draw aesthetic inspiration from the past. Tate's theory of Hendrix's music is persuasive as Hendrix's fusion of black cultural genres is evident in his sound, as we have seen above. But a cornerstone of his aesthetic approach is the novelty of the direction in which he took his music once these genres and traditions were combined. We might therefore ask of Tate's analysis, how can tradition and myth be *reordered* when many of Hendrix's songs, particularly as performed live, frequently descend and eventually decay into an absorbing black hole of feedback fuzz, wailing and distortion? Hendrix's imagination is so vivid and the visceral nature of his music so intense that tradition and myth are radically complicated in much of his repertoire.

In *Midnight Lightning: Jimi Hendrix and the Black Experience*, Tate argues that as a black cultural warrior Hendrix navigated away from the revolt against

[11] Tate, Greg. *Flyboy in the Buttermilk: Essays on Contemporary America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992): 73-74.

whiteness and the tradition of minstrelsy, the "self-denying corridor of the soul",[12] and instead:

> Hendrix ultimately found a third option, more slippery and elastic, more trickster-like in its inversions of racial stereotyping. It allowed him to court white people without pandering to them and to intimidate them without raising the spectre of violence except by flashing his superlative, supernatural, musical chops.[13]

In Tate's opinion, Hendrix's aesthetic sophistication is key to his ability to 'walk the colour line' and this underpins much of his take on Hendrix as a means of reclaiming him as a black icon, while also documenting how his mythologisation has prevented this reclamation from happening. He closes the book, fittingly, by emphasising that "the unwillingness to accept boundaries between the music he heard in his head and the high and low forms of the day" is what makes Hendrix's aesthetic unique.[14] This is important because Hendrix's approach to music went against prescribed ideals of authenticity, but Tate's outline of Hendrix's third way ultimately tells us more about a blueprint for his own ideas about race than Hendrix's music itself. He opens his book with a self-proclaimed agenda:

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[12] Tate, Greg. *Midnight Lightning: Jimi Hendrix and the Black Experience* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2003): 51.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Tate (2003): 132.

> This is a Jimi Hendrix book with A Racial Agenda. A Jimi book with plantation baggage, darkskin biases, and Black Power axes to grind. Even more pompously, it purports to be a book of ideas about Hendrix.[15]

In no uncertain terms, Tate's depiction of Hendrix is as a "supersignifier of Post-Liberated Black Consciousness" whose genius is overtly black.[16] He expressly states what his book is designed to be:

> A user-friendly introduction for all of My People who don't get that Hendrix was a Black man who came from several Black worlds to make extraterrestrial Black music for all God's children whether they got rhythm or not.[17]

Tate's introduction is bold and has potential, but his agenda means that his take on Hendrix is predisposed to his own ideology and therefore inconsistent. As a founding member of the Black Rock Coalition in the 1980s, Tate has a vested interest in his attempted reclamation of Hendrix as a black icon. Above all, Tate's approach lacks the vital focus on the music itself and suffers from a lack of biographical context. He even states that the individuals he relies on throughout much of the book, who were more present in Hendrix's later life as he began to re-engage with black audiences, were chosen "because they best suit our Racial Agenda."[18] Tate goes on to link Hendrix to Afrofuturism, a cultural aesthetic that explores the links between the

[15] Tate (2003): 8.
[16] Tate (2003): 30.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Tate (2003): 74.

African Diaspora, technology and science fiction. Thus, Tate constructs a Jimi Hendrix that is once again subjected to a racial agenda that obscures a deeper analysis of his own approach to music.

Sheila Whiteley's analysis of Hendrix focuses on the musical components of his songs in an attempt to understand the dynamic between Hendrix's use of blues and psychedelic rock. It is both intricate and useful in tracing the aesthetic components of the blues and psychedelia within his music, but it does not consider in more detail why Hendrix used disorienting sound to reflect psychedelic ways of experiencing one's surroundings. Her focus on Hendrix's music as a product of the blues and the counterculture's interest in psychedelic experience is important and useful. She rightly mentions the influence of Muddy Waters, B. B. King, Willie Dixon and Little Walter, and Hendrix's temporary encounters with the flurry of R&B artists he accompanied (Little Richard, Jackie Wilson, Wilson Pickett, Curtis Knight and The Isley Brothers). However, she does not give enough weight to the racial and cultural dimensions of the period, such as the counterculture's problematic labelling of Hendrix as a 'superspade' and its inherent contradictions as a movement, as well as the double standards of the Black Aesthetic and its prescriptive ideal of authenticity. She also does not consider the his rejection by Harlem R&B players later on in his life as part and parcel of his experience of categorisation and the effects this had on his approach to music. This skews her analysis towards Hendrix as a psychedelic, countercultural icon who reflected the joyful nihilism of the hippie revolt against authority.

In her analysis of 'psychedelic coding' within his music, Whiteley makes this conclusion about Hendrix's development of the blues:

> The blues, then, is a growth focal point rather than a working barrier and Hendrix's guitar style, while reflecting the influence of B. B. King, John Lee Hooker and Albert King, demonstrates his own physical feeling for sound, not only in the virtuosity of technique but also in the use of electronic effects which enhance the feeling of raw energy which characterises all his songs.[19]

She cites his use of electronic effects and muttered voices in 'Purple Haze', 'Foxy Lady' and 'Long Hot Summer Night' (1968) to claim that these sounds and words amplify the sensual experience of the songs in order to immerse the listener in their mood of intoxication. Hendrix here is a caretaker of the blues who uses the resources of this black cultural tradition to revise and update it. Thus Whiteley's argument is similar to Murray's and Tate's view but with the added dimension of 'psychedelic codes', a term that Whiteley uses to explore the connections between the titillating physicality of Hendrix's music and the "counter-culture's emphasis on the immediacy of the experiential here and now of psychedelic experience."[20]

This is useful because it highlights the psychedelic dimensions of Hendrix's music which was in search of new modes of being, but her analysis does not extend beyond his status as a countercultural icon. She argues that 'Are You Experienced' and 'Spanish Castle Magic' both reflect Hendrix's invitation to drown individual consciousness in a pandemonium of noise; the question in the title of the former song, in her view, "points to the need for guidance by a trained, trusted person for the first-time user of LSD" while the latter song's description of floating on cotton-

[19] Whiteley, Sheila. "Progressive Rock and Psychedelic Coding in the Work of Jimi Hendrix." *Popular Music*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 1990: 58.
[20] Whiteley (1990): 38.

candy clouds tries to capture the drug's physical sensations.[21] She assigns the softer tones of 'The Wind Cries Mary' to the effects of marijuana because of its gentle means of self-reflection: "the wind can blow anywhere, and the marijuana experience is universal."[22] This analysis of Hendrix shows the way in which sound offers new modes of expression and states of being, but risks placing Hendrix between the competing ideals of authenticity that he was forced to contend with as an assigned countercultural icon. Whiteley seems to suggest that the mirroring of psychedelic drugs in his music gives him aesthetic credibility as a blues revisionist, but this risks externalising Hendrix from his music as a counterculture figure.

More recently, Aaron Leftkovitz has argued that Hendrix's racialised image and flamboyant, often sexualised performance style has linked him to a tradition of visual-cultural racial representations that are transnational and that promote exoticised 'freak-shows.' This places Hendrix within "a legacy of ways popular media and the power and politics of the image contribute to widespread myths and misunderstandings about race."[23] He believes that visual culture was fundamental in constructing Hendrix as a 'racialised freak' for his largely white audience, making Hendrix therefore part of a legacy of ways popular culture and media build fixed racial ideologies.[24] Leftkovitz characterises this by describing Hendrix as "an exotic racial pariah who could be safely consumed from a distance by a white audience" in accordance with the counterculture's emphasis on the term 'freak' as a badge of honour to demarcate itself from 'the establishment' and musical traditions.[25] He links Hendrix to the nineteenth century tradition of minstrelsy "not only as a racialised rock

[21] Whiteley (1990): 55.
[22] Whiteley (1990): 49.
[23] Leftkovitz, Aaron. *Jimi Hendrix and the Cultural Politics of Popular Music* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018): 34.
[24] Leftkovitz (2018): 34.
[25] Leftkovitz (2018): 29.

anomaly, but as a type of sideshow figure" who enabled his countercultural audience to set boundaries between what was acceptable and abnormal.[26] This view of Hendrix parallels Tate's argument that Hendrix was a trickster who was capable of bridging rock's black-transnational roots with white blues artists of the period, at the price of being racially categorised by his audience.

While Leftkovitz's analysis rightly speaks to Hendrix's stated discomfort with being hypervisible to a largely white counterculture, it risks dwelling on rock's coded whiteness and the ideal of authenticity it assigned Hendrix as a black performer more than on the relationship between Hendrix as a musician and his aesthetic itself. Much like Hendrix's orbit of the post-war pop planet in Murray's analysis, Leftkovitz is preoccupied with the reception of Hendrix's performance style and his on-stage antics to the extent that they eclipse a sustained analysis of his aesthetic approach. Leftkovitz's view is important to understanding the intersection of popular culture, race and visual culture, but it strays into a mapping of this history rather than a consistent focus on Hendrix himself.

Leftkovitz argues that Hendrix's subversion of rock's macho-ego image through more mellow pieces such as 'The Wind Cries Mary', 'Little Wing', 'Angel' and 'Castles Made of Sand' exhibit links to "male black-transnational popular musicians' global gender and sexual representational struggles."[27] He goes on to describe, rather than link to Hendrix himself, artists who had similar struggles in the form of Charlie Christian, Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Wilson Pickett, Solomon Burke, Sam Cooke, Otis Redding, Donny Hathaway, Percy Mayfield, Gil Scott-Heron, and Curtis Mayfield. The examination of this dizzying line of musicians results in a jarring loss of

[26] Leftkovitz (2018): 28.
[27] Leftkovitz (2018): 68.

focus on Hendrix in favour of black-transnational perspectives concerning popular music's global gender and sexualised histories. Leftkovitz does not engage with the biographical context of Hendrix's early experiences of racial and aesthetic categorisation in line with the racial and cultural dimensions of the 1960s; rather, his focus on Hendrix as a visual-spectacle precludes a closer analysis of his actual music. While Leftkovitz's ideas are interesting, they are more of an outline for a different subject matter; Hendrix is used to introduce it and ultimately acts as a spectator to its history.

David Henderson's '*Scuse Me While I Kiss The Sky: The Life of Jimi Hendrix* continues to be the most authoritative biographical account of Hendrix's life. He goes back to basics by considering the possibility that Hendrix's immersion in music came from contemplation of his mother's death, who herself loved the magic of the music he became lost in.[28] Tate's consideration of Hendrix's life comes into more focus in his agreement on this point when he argues that Hendrix's music created a sense of order from "the chaos of a sublime interior monologue"[29] which paints new worlds in which he has sad and lonely conversations with his dead mother. Death is a frequent theme in Hendrix's music and Henderson argues it is represented most clearly in his creation of other worlds, most notably in 'Voodoo Child (Slight Return)' (1968) with the lines 'If I don't meet you no more in this world / I'll meet you in the next one, and don't be late.' This theme highlights what Hendrix was concerned with and how his music attempted to deal with subject matters in a cascading world of sound. Henderson makes a more nuanced connection between Hendrix's music and life that begins to disrupt the well-versed dynamic between Hendrix's music as an aesthetic

[28] Henderson, David. *'Scuse Me While I Kiss The Sky: The Life of Jimi Hendrix* (London: Omnibus Press, 2002): 446.
[29] Tate (2003): 68.

product kicked around by competing perceptions of authenticity, and Hendrix himself as a figure caught up in conflict-ridden arguments about race and culture.

While Murray's primary focus is on the historical links between Hendrix and post-war pop, Henderson lends valuable insight into the major events of Hendrix's life and the figures that helped to fulfil his music's potential and control his creativity. Henderson's focus on Hendrix's producer and sound engineer Eddie Kramer is particularly useful because unlike much of the literature on Hendrix, he emphasises how indispensable Kramer was as someone who "could optimise the sounds in Jimi's way-out head" and appropriately calls him the fourth member of the Jimi Hendrix Experience.[30] Kramer is barely mentioned, if at all, by Hendrix biographers Steven Roby and Brad Schreiber in their more contemporary account of his life. Their focus is on Hendrix's early years, but Kramer deserves attention when considering Hendrix's move to London. Kramer's creative contributions and constructive criticism opened up new worlds of sound for Jimi: Kramer was able to gain the deepest effects of the bass guitar on the five-inch speaker of an AM radio without distortion to be able to make the essence of the Experience's music accessible to a wider audience, while his ability to line up guitar overdubs – up to four – gave Hendrix's guitar playing the creative capabilities it required.[31] He enabled Hendrix's comprehensive use of distortion, phase shifts, feedback, fuzz and double-tracking to make the studio the place that Hendrix loved the most, a creative workshop and escape from the outside world. Henderson rightly gives credit to Kramer's talents, which he acknowledges formed a cornerstone of The Experience's aesthetic. Henderson was the first to write a comprehensive biography of Hendrix (his book was first published in 1978) and was therefore the first to outline an

[30] Henderson (2002): 99.
[31] Henderson (2002): 99.

important figure in Hendrix's creative life and procedure that subsequent writers have failed to develop.

Despite their focus on his earlier years, it is surprising that Steven Roby and Brad Schreiber fail to acknowledge Kramer's influence to the same extent. However, given their focus, they are right to emphasise the importance of Hendrix's early experiences playing with a fleeting series of R&B and soul artists in Nashville and on the Chitlin' Circuit and the way this helped Hendrix to learn his craft before he took his own approach to it. They document these experiences in detail and offer useful insight into the influence of African-American music traditions as a foundational source of education for Hendrix that imposed cultural boundaries he was forced to grapple with, alongside the intolerance of the army towards his incessant guitar playing, the harsh experience of touring and playing venues in the segregated South and being let go from numerous R&B acts.

Henderson's focus on the role of Hendrix's management, Chas Chandler and Michael Jeffrey, is the second point of value because it highlights the financial exploitation and coercive control Hendrix was subject to. Henderson outlines the full extent of Hendrix's financial situation to illustrate the hurt and anger he felt towards the end of his life which Henderson argues he took out in songs such as 'Machine Gun', 'Who Knows', 'Power of Soul' and 'Message To Love' which all embody a clear sense of frustration in their ferocious soundscapes. Roby and Schreiber offer some useful context on his financial woes; they began with Ed Chaplin of PPX Productions whom Hendrix owed a significant amount of money to as a result of a stipulation in a single-page contract Hendrix had carelessly signed in 1965 stating that he would play exclusively for PPX Productions for three years (1965-1968). The contract deprived Hendrix of control over the release of his recordings and gave him

minimum scale for any musical arrangements he produced. He would, however, receive a 1% royalty on the retail price of records sold only after studio costs were recouped by PPX.[32] While Roby and Schreiber offer useful insight into the early turmoil of Hendrix's early years, Henderson goes a step further by outlining in more detail the financial exploitation of Chandler and Jeffery to clearly demonstrate the constraints Hendrix was under:

> They – Chandler and Jeffery – had received 30 per cent of all of Hendrix's earnings. In addition, they had received 7 per cent of his record royalties. Hendrix controlled 3 per cent, he kept 1 per cent and split the remaining 2 per cent between Mitch Mitchell and Noel Redding. Hendrix's management had received 30 per cent of his 1 per cent record royalty earnings as well. For live concerts, after management had deducted their 30 per cent off the top, Hendrix had received 50 per cent of the remainder and Mitch Mitchell and Noel Redding received 20 per cent. All expenses were, of course, deducted from earnings.[33]

This outlines the bind that Hendrix was caught in and is even more significant with Henderson's emphasis on Michael Jeffery's controlling nature which made Hendrix deeply uncomfortable. Jeffery was adamant that Hendrix continue to play to white audiences and desperately tried to get him to publicly retract his passive support for the black liberation movement much later in his life.

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[32] Roby, Steven and Schreiber, Brad. *Becoming Jimi Hendrix: From Southern Crossroads to Psychedelic London, The Untold Story of a Musical Genius* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2010): 125.
[33] Henderson (2002): 334.

Henderson concludes that Hendrix should be seen as someone who "documented his life through his verse and through his oral improvisation on the interview,"[34] a risk-taker who infused a philosophical message about love, sex and 'the mysteries of the universe' throughout his music.[35] Henderson takes a more personal approach to Hendrix's music than Murray by consistently placing its development in the context of his life, providing a more holistic view of Hendrix. Roby and Schreiber offer a detailed and useful account of Hendrix's rise to stardom by documenting his early experiences in the army, the Chitlin' Circuit, Harlem clubs and London, but do not sufficiently link his music to these experiences through a closer reading of his songs themselves as a reflection of his subjectivity. Whereas Tate embraces Hendrix as a black icon so strongly that his biographical past is largely obscured, Henderson understands that Hendrix's approach to music was highly personal and reflected his desire to process the events in his life through his guitar and lyrics. Henderson's approach is ultimately more useful because it recognises the need to bridge the gap between Hendrix as a person with an individual approach shaped by his experiences and his music as an imaginative reflection of this.

This is important because it recognises that music gave Hendrix a safe space to express himself where much of his life did not. The studio especially was a creative workshop free from the fear and desires of the outside world. This allowed him to dissolve the line between truth and fiction in his songs – much like Bob Dylan, whose lyrics he greatly admired – to ultimately try and find out who he was. Hendrix's aesthetic centred more on self-exploration than a message he needed to impart to his listeners. While Henderson admits to liberally quoting his songs and interviews to paint a broad picture of Hendrix's life, his argument that Hendrix's

[34] Henderson (2002): 446.
[35] Henderson (2002): 447.

music is a creative tool for his own subjectivity requires more sustained analysis through new critical perspectives, namely Afrofuturism and Afrosurrealism.

The above summary of the literature presents the essence of the Hendrix construct problem as there are multiple versions of him to grapple with: Hendrix the revisionist of black cultural traditions (Murray and Tate); Hendrix the black icon and Afrofuturist (Tate); Hendrix the hypervisible crossover artist and architect of an undefined, individual sense of blackness (Waksman); Hendrix the weaver of complex psychedelic codes rooted in the blues that replicated hallucinogenic experiences (Whiteley); Hendrix 'the racialised freak' who fits within a transatlantic tradition of exoticised black performers (Leftkovitz); Hendrix the risk-taker and tormented genius who lived through his guitar, caught between creative empowerment and financial exploitation by the major figures in his life (Henderson). The multiple constructs of Hendrix that populate the literature too often obscure his own individual approach to music and therefore require new questions to be asked about his unique aesthetic and to what extent it both disrupts and rewrites ideas about race, identity and cultural revolution.

Chapter two

Science Fiction Rock 'n' Roll: Hendrix and Afrofuturism.

The physical embodiment of Hendrix's interest in science fiction came in the form of Electric Lady, a futuristic 32-track recording studio designed and financed by Hendrix located in New York. Its entrance was shaped like a flying saucer and the studio as a whole was defined by its futuristic features:

> A low, round cubicled mini-office was encircled by a soft, low couch. Passageways led to the first studio and, curving around a bend, to the second. Curving passageways disappear in muted lights, spacey spectrum colors gave the effect of endlessness. A sound-buffered, upholstered, cozy underground lab.[1]

Despite financial pressures, it was completed in 1970 and gave Hendrix "a degree of artistic control inaccessible to most African-American musicians of the time."[2] Electric Lady represented what every recording studio had long been to Hendrix, a creative workshop to express his own sound and a sort of refuge from the expectations he faced as a black musician with a largely white counterculture audience. Hendrix would obsess over a single sound for hours to match his own expectations and Electric Lady provided a protective space for him to fulfil these sonic desires away from his performative on-stage style that was deliberately designed to shock and awe. Electric Lady offered an aesthetic freedom that live performances – in which

[1] Henderson, David. *'Scuse Me While I Kiss the Sky: Jimi Hendrix: Voodoo Child* (New York: Atria Books, Simon & Schuster, 2009): 374-375.
[2] Waksman, Steve. 'Black Sound, Black Body: Jimi Hendrix, the electric guitar, and the meanings of blackness', *Popular Music and Society*, Vol. 23, No. 1, 1999: 76.

the mythologised Hendrix was reproduced for the entertainment of others – could not.

Hendrix's interest in science fiction and his use of technology to create new sounds is critical to understanding why he has been identified as an Afrofuturist. Science fiction became a significant cultural outlet in the 1950s, reflecting society's fears and anxieties about the threat of infiltration and invasion from external forces. This escalated in the 1960s to representations of the fall of civilisation and the horrifying effects of mankind's embrace of technology. Sci-fi films such as *Invaders from Mars* (1956), *It Conquered the World* (1956) and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) contained themes of invasion and infiltration by alien forces that could control human beings in their domination of the planet. Each of these films used science fiction to communicate anti-Communist and anti-totalitarian Cold War messages.

The 1960s saw more dystopian works such as *Planet of the Apes* (1968) depicting the end of humanity, represented in the final scene which showed the Statue of Liberty destroyed and buried in sand. Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), one of the most iconic sci-fi films of all time, brought science fiction from being a minority genre into the mainstream. It showcased the collapse of civilisations and the birth of new ones, the pitfalls of humanity's curiosity and the consequences of its own enslavement to technology. Peter Krämer argues that Kubrick's film not only told an obscure and mysterious story of "the transformation of hominids and humans", but achieved "a transformative power over its audience."[3] Its distinctive iconography and majestic use of sound had an unprecedented impact at the time of its release. This was partly accomplished by Kubrick's decision to remove

[3] Krämer, Peter. *2001: A Space Odyssey* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018): 101.

voice-overs and other elements to deepen its sense of ambiguity and to stimulate the audience.[4] Krämer argues that one of the main reasons for the enthusiastic response to *2001* was a shared and growing belief in "the possibility of fundamental personal, cultural and social change" during the 1960s, and this was reflected in the growth of science fiction as a genre after its release.[5]

These themes of science fiction, destruction, technological pursuit, discovery, escape and fantasy feature in some of Hendrix's music; he referred to these particular songs as "science-fiction rock and roll,"[6] while describing his songs more generally as "sound paintings" borne out of the studio.[7] These features of Hendrix's music have led some to identify him as an Afrofuturist because he uses science fiction and technology to create soundscapes which relate to and comment on real world issues of racism, social division and conflict. Afrofuturism is a contemporary aesthetic movement and critical perspective that claims the existence of a black cultural continuum that connects black artists from different periods of time through their use of themes of race and science fiction. Afrofuturism is found in various art forms but in the case of Hendrix, it is argued that his use of technology offers a space for Afro-diasporic encounters, exchange and empowerment and that this makes him an Afrofuturist. This mix of science fiction themes, the experimental use of technology and the presence of race as a central factor is a key feature of Afrofuturism as defined by critics who have retrospectively recruited black artists of the past to this aesthetic and critical framework. There are competing definitions of Afrofuturism, but its proponents generally incorporate within their accounts such themes as the intersection of technology with notions of blackness as an identity,

[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Cross, Charles R. *Room Full of Mirrors: A Biography of Jimi Hendrix* (New York: Hyperion, 2005): 205.
[7] McDermott, John with Billy Cox and Eddie Kramer, *Jimi Hendrix Sessions: The Complete Studio Recording Sessions, 1963–1970* (New York: Little Brown, 1995): 67.

imagination, liberation and depictions of futures which encompass these themes in an alternative reality.

Mark Dery offered an early working definition of Afrofuturism as cultural texts that centred on an Afrocentric technoculture that allowed African-American voices to both tell their own stories and to imagine their own future through speculative works of art. Dery argued that:

> Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth century technoculture - and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of tech and prosthetically enhanced future - might for want of a better term, be called 'Afrofuturism.'[8]

Ytasha Womack's definition of Afrofuturism is centred on the use of art to redefine blackness through a combination of fictional forms with an Afro-centric impulse:

> Whether through literature, visual arts, music, or grassroots organising, Afrofuturists redefine culture and notions of blackness for today and the future. Both an artistic aesthetic and a framework for critical theory, Afrofuturism combines elements of science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-

[8] Dery, Mark. 'Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose' in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994): 180.

> Western beliefs. In some cases, it's a total reenvisoning of the past and speculation about the future rife with cultural critiques.[9]

Kodwo Eshun views Afrofuturism as an aesthetic that "studies the appeals that black artists, musicians, critics, and writers have made to the future, in moments where any future was made difficult for them to imagine."[10] Alondra Nelson argues that Afrofuturism empowers and updates the African diaspora, reimagining black cultures and identities in ways that to go against the historical grain of blackness being excluded from technological development. In conventional "politics of the future", she argues, "supposedly novel paradigms for understanding tech smack of old racial ideologies. In each scenario, racial identity, and blackness in particular, is the anti-avatar of digital life."[11] Afrofuturism, then, seeks to challenge the notion that blackness is incompatible with or the antithesis of technology.

A common thread that draws these fairly broad definitions together seems to be the disruption of old racial ideologies through new paradigms in order to redefine notions of race. This is why Afrofuturism is especially interesting to apply to the case of Hendrix because, as I argued in the previous chapter, he eschewed racial categories and the expectations they imposed upon artists. Looking at the claims that have been made about Hendrix in relation to Afrofuturism will test how far this framework can account for his music and aesthetic approach but also show what Hendrix's music might reveal about Afrofuturism in the context of its emergence as a critical movement.

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[9] Womack, Ytasha. *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2013): 9.
[10] Eshun, Kodwo. 'Further Considerations on Afrofuturism.' *CR: The New Centennial Review*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 2003: 294.
[11] Nelson, Alondra. 'Introduction: Future Texts.' *Social Text 71*, Vol. 20, No. 2, Summer 2002: 1.

Hendrix The Aquaman: Race and Science Fiction in Hendrix's '1983 (A Merman I Should Turn To Be)'

Will Fulton argues that Hendrix is an Afrofuturist because his music uses sci-fi themes and imagery to make sub-textual allusions to ongoing events in American society, asserting that some of his songs illustrate "social science fiction."[12] Fulton argues that '1983 (A Merman I Should Turn To Be)' (1968) is "an allegory for late–1960s America."[13] It was mixed in the studio by Hendrix and Eddie Kramer for eighteen hours straight and is over fourteen minutes long in total. Its slow tempo is driven by the rise and fall of the guitar melody, ascending and descending like ocean waves. It opens by depicting a protagonist who departs a war-torn planet Earth for Atlantis, building machines to breathe underwater and eventually live as a merman away from the earthly devastation and turmoil:

> Hurray I awake from yesterday / Alive but the war is here to stay / So my love Catherina and me / Decide to take our last walk through the noise to the sea / Not to die but to be reborn / Away from the lands so battered and torn / Forever Oh say can you see it's really such a mess / Every inch of earth is a fighting nest / Giant pencil and lipstick-tube shaped things / Continue to rain and cause screaming pain / And the arctic stains from silver blue to bloody red / As our feet find the sand / And the sea is straight ahead[14]

[12] Fulton, Will. 'Science-Fiction Rock and Roll': Sound Painting and Social Subtext in Jimi Hendrix's "1983…(A Merman I Should Turn To Be)"', *American Music Review*, Vol. 41, No. 1, Fall 2011: 2.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Hendrix, Jimi. '1983 (A Merman I Should Turn to Be)', rec. 1968, *Electric Ladyland* (New York: Reprise, 1968).

Fulton argues that the “giant pencil and lipstick-tube shaped things” Hendrix refers to are missiles, intended to reference the domestic and international conflicts of the 1960s.[15] Fulton speculates that the line “alive but the war is here to stay” describes the Vietnam War, civil rights unrest and police violence in US cities.[16] The second verse of ‘1983’ even subverts the US national anthem with the line "Oh, say can you see it's really such a mess.” Fulton notes that it is significant that Hendrix cited ‘1983’ as an example of social commentary in his work, referencing it in an interview: “That's something to keep your mind off of what's happening today, but not necessarily completely hiding away from it like some people might do.”[17] This somewhat vague answer from Hendrix was not uncommon, but it points to an awareness of possible links between his music and social and political unrest. Fulton takes this further by arguing that the final line in the second verse, “the sea is straight ahead,” draws a connection to the Black Power slogan ‘Straight Ahead.’[18] His evidence for this is Hendrix’s recording of a song with this title on 8th May 1968, two weeks after the recording of ‘1983’. As the song continues into the bridge, the lyrics describe the resistance to the protagonists’ plan and the sadness they feel at leaving others behind for Atlantis:

> Well, it's too bad that our friends can't be with us today, the machine that we built would never save us that's what they say... anyway... it would be beyond the will of god, and the grace of the king.

[15] Fulton (2011): 4.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.

The final lyric of this section is repeated and followed by “a repeating and harmonized figure set to a march-tempo military snare”, which Fulton posits is a possible expression of grief for Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination.[19] However, he concedes that the king is most likely a fictional character in the fantasy of the song. The song draws to an uncomfortable, disconcerting close through numerous “fades, pans and effects” in which Hendrix uses the guitar to recreate the call of seagulls before the studio mixing creates the effect of gradual submersion beneath the waves.[20] Fulton rightly notes that unlike other artists such as The Beatles and Pink Floyd, who used actual bird calls in their recordings, Hendrix used echo to manipulate his guitar and vocals to create new sounds as part of his aesthetic approach which he described as seeking to combine "my instrument, my sound, my body...all in one action with my mind."[21]

Fulton’s reading of ‘1983’ through the lens of Afrofuturism succeeds in illuminating many aspects of the song and persuasively links Hendrix to other black artists who use science fiction themes in their work. However, it overlooks some key elements of the song that, when considered in detail, problematise an Afrofuturist interpretation. Most significant among these is the fact that the song’s science fiction elements derive from and reaffirm a counterculture worldview and a hippie ethos—ideological stances that Hendrix explicitly endorsed throughout his adult life.

The song follows the story of a protagonist and his partner and lover Catherina who is not mentioned in Fulton’s analysis. This is significant because it is only the two of them that escape the wars on dry land and flee “away from a life so battered and torn.” This makes the narrative of the song an individualistic one rather

[19] Fulton (2011): 5.
[20] Fulton (2011): 6.
[21] Ibid.

than a story of escape through the solidarity of a group or collective. The fact that the couple choose to traverse the depths of the ocean alone, despite their friends' doubt that the machine they built would ever be able to safely take them to Atlantis, demonstrates that the narrative is as much about personal liberation and self-expression as it is a racial allegory. Moreover, even if the king referred to in the lyrics is Martin Luther King Jr., as Fulton speculates, the protagonists defy his 'grace' and leave the group behind; thus it seems mistaken to read this as an image of racial identification and solidarity.

Indeed, while Fulton reads the song as a kind of affirmative connection to the racial politics of the day, the individualistic nature of the song can equally be read as an expression of countercultural philosophy. The dystopian world that the couple escape in '1983' reflects a recurrent science fiction trope employed by the counterculture that featured hippies building their own sailing ships or even spacecraft to leave behind a world devastated by violence, war and ecological collapse. Songs such as 'Wooden Ships' recorded by both Crosby, Stills & Nash and Jefferson Airplane in 1969, and 'After the Gold Rush' (1970) by Neil Young, as well as concept albums like Paul Kanter and Jefferson Starship's *Blows Against the Empire* (1970) are built around this trope. Moreover, the critique of war in '1983' and the lengths needed to escape it, as well as the fact that the protagonists' 'friends' choose to stay behind, celebrate a message of both love and anti-conformity central to the hippie philosophy that Hendrix certainly had an affinity for and used to his advantage to promote himself when he arrived in London. The fact that the protagonist and his companion "make love in the sand" and "take a last look at the killing noise of the out of style" before they depart in their machine reiterates just how individualistic their escape is and highlights the pleasure that can be found in a form

of self-imposed exile. The 'out of style' refrain at the end of the song appears less of a statement of black resistance and more of a hippie denunciation of the present, seen as a conformist society indifferent to the destruction it creates. This conclusion is more reflective of the denunciation of war in the earlier verses rather than a lyric with explicitly racial overtones.

'1983' engages with the complexity of escape and liberation in a similar way to counterculture artists such as Bob Dylan. The couple's descent to Atlantis as a refuge from the cruelty of the world is similar to the way that the protagonist in Dylan's 'Subterranean Homesick Blues' (1965) advises a kid to drop out and go underground to escape the forces of conformity and repression: "Get jailed, jump bail / Join the Army if you fail / Look out kid / You're gonna get hit."[22] The protagonist tells the kid to "jump down a manhole" and "light yourself a candle" as a way to save himself in the same way that the couple in '1983' purposefully leave their group behind as they seek refuge underwater. A process of social negation is evident in both songs that not only characterises liberation as personal, deeply uncomfortable and lonely but necessary in order to escape a world that the protagonists cannot change.

Furthermore, Dylan's 'Gates of Eden' (1965) explores the concept of paradise and the idea of returning to a 'pure state' by negating everything that exists outside of Eden. The song's protagonist carves out a position inside the gates of Eden (along with his lover) by systematically rejecting the falsehoods and cruelties of conventional behaviour and societal norms. For Dylan, those outside of Eden are trapped in false consciousness: "At times I think there are no words / But these to tell

[22] Dylan, Bob. 'Subterranean Homesick Blues', rec. 1965, *Bringing It All Back Home* (New York: Columbia, 1965).

what's true / And there are no truths outside the Gates of Eden."[23] In the same way, the couple in '1983' repudiate everything outside of Atlantis and see those who doubt them as victims of false consciousness: "'The machine / That we built / Would never save us' / That's what they say / (That's why they ain't coming with us today)." Like 'Gates of Eden', '1983' rejects convention and the false consciousness of those outside of the utopia that awaits. These themes of the pursuit of personal liberation through the subversion of society's expectations were central to the hippie counterculture and are expressed by Hendrix in '1983'. Thus, we can see how '1983' is fundamentally structured with countercultural themes and tropes that an Afrofuturist analysis of the song cannot fully account for.

It is also significant that Hendrix chose Atlantis as a refuge in '1983' because it was a favoured locus of the hippie culture of the 1960s, popularised by cult author Aleister Crowley's *Liber 51: The Lost Continent* (1913). Assuming that the protagonist and his companion successfully join Atlantis as merpeople, their transformation into a new species places them outside the racial categories of their previous existence. This element of physical, and therefore racial, metamorphosis might lend itself to an Afrofuturist interpretation as existing categories of race are replaced by a whole new biology that puts the protagonist beyond race itself. But the negation of the self and the ego that is part of this process can also be interpreted as a form of personal liberation as theorised and celebrated by the hippie counterculture, which pursued new modes of consciousness that recomposed the self and defied categories of rationality. This shows that at the very least, '1983' is not overtly racialised in its themes or narrative in any clear or consistent way.

[23] Dylan, Bob. 'Gates of Eden', rec. 1965, *Bringing It All Back Home* (New York: Columbia, 1965).

These observations therefore raise the question of how far '1983' is *Afro*futurist or simply futurist. Is it defined as Afrofuturist purely on the basis of Hendrix's blackness rather than because of its particular aesthetic and thematic features? Hendrix's wish to both escape and complicate simplistic racial categories and definitions, as outlined in the previous chapter, might further problematise Fulton's link between these songs and Afrofuturism. The questioning of biological definitions of race is compatible with Afrofuturism, but the kinds of physical metamorphosis envisaged in '1983' owe as much if not more to hippie philosophy and countercultural tropes as they do to critiques of racialisation. Thus Afrofuturism at best provides an incomplete account of the song, and the small amount of evidence offered by Fulton is not enough to define Hendrix under Afrofuturism as an umbrella term.

Hendrix The Spaceman: Race and Science Fiction in 'Third Stone From the Sun' and 'Up from the Skies'

Fulton links '1983' with 'Third Stone from the Sun' (1967) because both are science fiction scenarios which depict the destruction of the world. However, he does not go into any more detailed analysis of 'Third Stone' than this. The lack of detailed analysis in Fulton's approach is a recurrent feature of the debate about Hendrix as an Afrofuturist. It is therefore appropriate to consider this song alongside '1983' in order to understand how it might relate to Afrofuturism.

More satirical than '1983', 'Third Stone from the Sun' tells the story of an alien space voyager from another world who observes life on Earth and decides that chickens are the most intelligent creatures; the alien thus destroys the Earth

because /he/she/it believes nothing else of worth exists. The song opens with a sliding major ninth chord that is supplemented by Mitch Mitchell's elasticised, propulsive free jazz style drumming that solidifies into a rock beat driven by Hendrix's blues scales and filled with Chuck Berry double-stops.[24] This leads to a jolting descent induced by the tremolo before shaking the listener awake to a jazz beat that lacks a clear time signature or tone. The song self-destructs through a flurry of distortion, feedback, shrieks and wailing from Hendrix's guitar which denies any sense of tonality or closure to the song.

For Fulton, Hendrix's use of science fiction in 'Third Stone from the Sun' links him to Afrofuturism. But his account of the song seems to suggest that it is more conventionally futuristic in its appropriation of science fiction rather than distinctively *Afro*futurist. Nonetheless, it is conceivable that the 'alien' visitor to Earth in the song is an allegory of racial difference, a symbol of the 'otherness' produced by the racial categorisation of human life forms, who serves to deconstruct race as a biological and technological category. The song's protagonist could conceivably represent the racial other and Hendrix might be using the perspective of the alien to subvert existing racial assumptions by imagining an alternative reality in which the alien or racial other is the master, rather than the victim or antithesis, of technology. As an allegory or symbol of the racial other, the alien in the song may be a figure for a kind of blackness that is no longer denied mastery of technology or control of its destiny based on its 'otherness.'

However, as in '1983', the song's allegory is not overtly racialised in any clear and intentional way and this complicates Fulton's reading of it. The 'alien-ness' of the song's protagonist is a device used to highlight the cynicism and hubris of mankind.

[24] Murray, Charles Shaar. *Crosstown Traffic: Post-War Pop and Jimi Hendrix* (London: Canongate Books, 2012): 238.

This is a tried and tested science fiction trope in which an ancient traveller of some kind visits a planet only to see through the falsity it has created for itself. Moreover, as with '1983', the song's themes and imagery are more obviously influenced by countercultural ideas and preoccupations than by racial concerns. The alien protagonist in 'Third Stone' is some kind of intergalactic scout who arrives in a "kinky machine", implying that he is something of a psychedelic voyager burdened with a deep knowledge of the universe that he has seen through and refuses to conform to.[25] Furthermore, the song moves from the sublime to the ridiculous, utilising a playful and absurdist form of satire that was central to the countercultural sensibility. The alien visitor's love of Earth's "strange beautiful grass of green" and "majestic silver seas" does not prevent it choosing to destroy the world because it judges humanity no better than their "superior cackling hen." If we are to understand 'Third Stone' as an Afrofuturist text, is it because Hendrix offered a racial allegory that shows its protagonist subverting racial categories, or simply because he was a black musician using science fiction in his music to express his sense of estrangement from and dissatisfaction with the world?

Fulton argues that 'Up from the Skies' (1967) can be interpreted as another example of Afrofuturism within Hendrix's work. Hendrix opens the song by simulating the sound of space and time travel with his guitar to tell the story of a human being who has travelled through time to see the future of a world he once knew, only to witness a planet that has become scorched and destroyed. The song has an undercurrent of the blues which may reflect a kind of lament at the state of the world the protagonist discovers and his efforts to make sense of this. The future appears to be very much dystopian as the protagonist describes the "smell of a world that has

[25] Hendrix, Jimi. 'Third Stone From the Sun', rec. 1967, *Are You Experienced* (London: Track Records, 1967).

burned" and scenes of mindless conformity as he looks upon people living in "cages tall and cold" with their "vacuum" minds.[26] The only positive elements are the "vibrations and echoes from long ago", from a time when people would "love the world and let their fancy flow." The saddened protagonist emphasises that he "just wants to talk" with the world's current inhabitants and means no harm.

These themes suggest that, as with '1983' and 'Third Stone', the protagonist could be interpreted as a hippie trying to find answers about the destruction of the planet's ecology, the demise of creative freedom and the severing of humanity's communal bonds. The protagonist is nostalgic as someone who "lived here before the days of ice" and states his concern about the degraded future he finds himself in, ravaged by violence and inhabited by those who "dust away past the age of old." The themes here are anti-conformist and express the perspective of a youth culture disillusioned by the violence and moral failure of the older generation. Hendrix's vision of this ruined world is perhaps more credibly seen as a critique of the parental generation's failures and a protest against the erosion of personal and expressive freedoms than as a racial allegory. The use of a time-travel story to expose the reality of war and the trauma of mass conformity is more clearly connected to the concerns of the hippie counterculture than to any explicit racial themes.

Moreover, the protagonist's sense of alienation from the world they once knew reflects strong elements of isolation and critical negation that are evident in the music of counterculture artists, particularly Bob Dylan. The isolation and alienation of the time travelling protagonist in 'Up From the Skies' is similar to Dylan's protagonist in 'Subterranean Homesick Blues' or 'Like A Rolling Stone' (1965) – "How does it feel / To be on your own / With no direction home / A complete unknown / Like a

[26] Hendrix, Jimi. 'Up From the Skies', rec. 1967, *Axis: Bold As Love* (London: Track Records, 1968).

rolling stone?"[27] Dylan constructs a view of the world for those who have rejected or been rejected from the society they once conformed to, similar to the vision Hendrix constructs in 'Up From the Skies.' The protagonist in 'Up From the Skies' is an outside observer and not part of the degraded new reality he finds himself in, but there is a clear sense of emptiness, misery and negation that echoes Dylan's songs and relates to the counterculture's sense of its willed alienation from the violence, conformity and lack of community that characterised conventional, mainstream society. It is significant in this respect that Hendrix covered 'Like A Rolling Stone' in live performances as well as recording versions of Dylan's 'All Along the Watchtower' and 'Wicked Messenger', showing his own interest in Dylan's work as a countercultural figure. Hendrix's engagement with the theme of estrangement from society in 'Up from the Skies' therefore lends itself more to a countercultural reading than a racial critique.

Fulton also links Hendrix to Afrofuturism because both 'Third Stone' and 'Up from the Skies' "seem directly suggestive of Hendrix's 1966 planet flight to London."[28] However, again, he does not offer any detailed analysis of the music itself to support this claim. In the wider context of Afrofuturism and its various definitions, neither of these Hendrix songs makes any clear references to the African diaspora or a "prosthetically enhanced future" that explicitly reimagines and liberates black culture.[29] The difficulty with the kind of retrospective analysis engaged in by Afrofuturist critics is that it could be seen as projecting its claims upon Hendrix as part of a canon-building agenda to support the construction of a new academic scholarly field. The absence of any clear evidence in these songs of a concern with

[27] Dylan, Bob. 'Like A Rolling Stone', rec. 1965, *Highway 61 Revisited* (New York: Columbia, 1965).
[28] Fulton (2011): 2.
[29] Dery (1994): 180.

racial themes, black culture and the African diaspora does not necessarily invalidate the claims of Afrofuturist critics. As we have seen, the songs can be interpreted allegorically. However, the lack of clear textual evidence and sustained engagement with racial themes means that Afrofuturist critics can provide only partial readings of them. Moreover, as we have also seen, these readings neglect the songs' much more substantial use of countercultural themes, ideas and imagery. Hendrix may have used space as his stage in 'Third Stone' and 'Up from the Skies,' but the extent to which his work is Afrofuturist is still open to question.

It is necessary therefore to consider other proponents of Afrofuturism's claims to Hendrix in order to find more persuasive arguments than Fulton's. Eric Steinskog's and Salim Washington's ideas about the significance of technology within Hendrix's music pick up where Fulton's focus on Hendrix's use of science fiction themes ends.

Hendrix the 'Miss-User': Technology and Afrofuturism in 'Machine Gun'

Erik Steinskog argues that Hendrix's music represents what black science fiction writer Samuel Delany calls the 'miss-use' of technology within black culture.[30] He believes that Hendrix's 'miss-use' of technology created "a sonic counter-history to visual modernity" and therefore represents a vital contribution to the Afro-modern within Afrofuturism.[31] The subversion of technology as the 'white man's domain' is claimed to be a key component of Afrofuturism and this has been applied to Hendrix. Steinskog cites Paul Gilroy's argument that Hendrix is a creator of modern sound because he 'miss-used' technology originally developed for military research in order

[30] Steinskog, Erik. *Afrofuturism and Black Sound Studies: Culture, Technology and Things to Come* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature, 2018): 181.
[31] Ibid.

to create new soundscapes.[32] Gilroy highlights Hendrix's use of the Univibe in 'Machine Gun' (1970). The Univibe was "an early pedal-based phase shifter that simulated Doppler effects" used by the US military to improve radar operations.[33] Similarly, Steinskog argues that Hendrix adopts Delany's "miss-use" of technology in order to actively deconstruct and assault established uses of technology and entertainment in the creation of an Afro-modern aesthetic.[34] Yet what is missing in this analysis is what makes this kind of "miss-use" exclusively 'black' given that LSD – a technology administered by the CIA on human test subjects as an interrogation technique from the early 1950s to the early 1970s – was heavily used by the largely white counterculture and hippie culture in an attempt to expand human consciousness, subvert militarism, end war and find new modes of being.[35]

Steinskog goes on to link this 'miss-use' of technology with what Salim Washington calls "the proliferation of black techniques applied to conventional European instruments."[36] Washington argues that Hendrix's use of electronic feedback shows that "the Afro-technological impulse has manifested" itself in the invention of new instruments.[37] For Washington, the reinvention of old instruments or the creation of new ones are essential features of 'the Afro-technological'.[38] This subversion of race and racism through technology is a key feature of Afrofuturism and touches on the theme of liberation from restricted definitions of race as a

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[32] Ibid.
[33] Gilroy, Paul. *Darker Than Blue: On the Moral Economies of Black Atlantic Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010): 140.
Doppler effects are used on a Doppler radar to show the velocity of objects at a distance by bouncing microwave signals off a target.
[34] Steinskog (2018): 182.
[35] Lee, Martin A. and Shlain, Bruce. *Acid Dreams: The Complete Social History of LSD: the CIA, the Sixties, and Beyond* (New York: Grove Press, 1985): 8-10.
[36] Washington, Salim. 'The Avenging Angel of Creation/Destruction: Black Music and the Afro-technological in the Science Fiction of Henry Dumas and Samuel R. Delany', *Journal of the Society of American Music*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2008: 236.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Steinskog (2018): 182.

biological category. Technology, it is argued, allows black artists to expose race as an invention and therefore to push back against constructed racial boundaries.[39] For Afrofuturism, blackness is a technology that is created as a fixed division, a default category that imposes a set of expectations on groups defined by race.[40] For Steinskog, Washington and Delany, an artist like Hendrix is a *de*coder who reinterprets these racial boundaries: here is a black artist who wields technological capabilities traditionally associated with whiteness and uses them against the historical grain of established racial categories.

In their view, Hendrix's 'miss-use' of technology breaks down race as a social construction by transforming the way the electric guitar is used into a mode of resistance against racial categorisation. Steinskog speculates that the 'miss-use' of technology, in this case Hendrix's use of the Univibe, is part of what Washington calls the use of "black techniques" to recreate European instruments.[41] This affords Afrofuturist critics the chance to point to a black artist who seemingly broke a white monopoly over established forms of technology by blending musical ideas and fusing them with a highly-technologized form.[42]

There is, however, a striking difference between Hendrix the guitar player and Lando Calrissian, the highly skilled black pilot of the Millenium Falcon who successfully blew up the second Death Star.[43] For Afrofuturist critics, Lando might represent the use of technology that exposes the fiction of race, whereas Hendrix represents the persistence of this fiction which is used to categorise him as an Afrofuturist. For advocates of Afrofuturism, concepts of race are put into question by the intersection of blackness, technology and discourses of liberation, but the fact is

[39] Womack (2013): 27.
[40] Womack (2013): 27-28.
[41] Washington (2008): 236.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Marquand, Richard, dir. *Star Wars Episode VI: Return of the Jedi*. Twentieth Century Fox, 1983.

that blackness remains a prerequisite of this ideological triad. Afrofuturist critics argue that race is a social construction that Afrofuturism can expose, but the fact that these same critics attribute artists' themes and techniques to their blackness shows that they reinscribe race to justify their claims. This highlights an inherent contradiction in the argument of Afrofuturist critics and complicates their accounts of Hendrix and his music. The fact remains that because Hendrix has been *retrospectively* recruited as a standard-bearer of this 'miss-use' of technology, there is little appreciation or analysis of the very real context in which his aesthetic was formed and how the claims made about his use of technology are still fundamentally linked to restricted ideas about race.

Afrofuturist critics' focus on how Hendrix produced sound and how he used technology such as the Univibe in new ways means that the methods of sound production take precedence over Hendrix's aesthetic approach. Thus, songs like 'Machine Gun' are deemed to represent a vital Afrofuturist impulse, but without any detailed analysis of the song itself. This demarcates the construction of another Hendrix that we are forced to contend with, Hendrix the 'miss-user,' defined by what Washington calls "black techniques."[44] Yet, it could be argued that, in the absence of any convincing account of what makes such techniques essentially and distinctively 'black', this kind of terminology applies an ideological veneer of race to Hendrix that serves as a substitute for considering Hendrix's aesthetic itself.[45]

As I showed in chapter one, Hendrix's sonic experimentations, use of feedback and manipulation of new sounds in general were categorically rejected by many of the black artists he played with during his early musical career, not only on

[44] Ibid.
[45] Tagg, Philip. 'Open Letter: 'Black Music', 'Afro-American Music' and 'European Music'.' *Popular Music*, Vol. 8, No. 3, 1989: 295.

the Chitlin' Circuit but in Harlem too. They were also repudiated by Black Arts theorists, not least because these same techniques were also central to 'white' counterculture rock. In his own time, then, Hendrix's methods and techniques were clearly not understood by African-American musicians, fans or intellectuals to be distinctively 'black' – quite the opposite, in fact. Steinskog's and Washington's idea of Hendrix using "black techniques" to subvert the existing use of technology offers no clear definition of what these techniques are or evidence to justify the claim that they are essentially and distinctively 'black'.[46] Moreover, they argue that Afrofuturists use technology to expose the 'fiction' of race, yet at the same time they insist on the reality of this fiction as the root of the *Afro* in Afrofuturism. To claim that Hendrix is an example of an artist who disrupts and deconstructs the separation between blackness and technology, therefore, is to restrict him in a racial category rather than liberate him from it. In order to develop this argument, it is essential to understand Hendrix's aesthetic approach in more detail, particularly in the example of 'Machine Gun.' I will now explore the significance of this song as a prime example of Hendrix's unique aesthetic approach and use this to interrogate the claims of critics who rest their view of Hendrix as an Afrofuturist on the use of technology in his music.

One of the most distinctive characteristics of Hendrix's aesthetic can be seen in what can be described as his 'immersive' technique which is central to 'Machine Gun'. This is because Hendrix creates sounds that disrupt the conscious, rational mind. Immersion in this context is defined by: a) changing the listener's perception of time, particularly the sensation of losing temporality in the process of listening to the music and b) the stimulation of a spatial presence that encourages the listener to perceive that they are spatially located in an alternative sonically-constructed

[46] Washington (2008): 236.

environment. It is clearly difficult to measure these actual sensations, but Hendrix's creation of real-life sound effects of war from his guitar – rapid machine gun fire, bombing, screams, sirens and the rotation of helicopter blades – along with the melody and intense feedback sections can credibly be interpreted as seeking to induce these effects on the listener. These immersive qualities have the effect of destroying spatio-temporal coordinates and thus act as a sonic assault on rationality, the foundation of science and technology and therefore of modern war. This is significant because these anti-rational qualities are definitive of psychedelic rock, which was largely made up of white artists. This therefore problematises the claims of Afrofuturist critics who argue that Hendrix is an Afrofuturist because he used technology to create these new sounds in 'Machine Gun.'

This is how Hendrix introduced the song at his Fillmore East performance (1969-1970):

> Happy New Year, first of all. I hope you have about a million or two million more of 'em…I'd like to dedicate this one to the draggin' scene that's going on, all the soldiers that are fighting in Chicago and Milwaukee, and New York. Oh, yes – and all the soldiers fighting in Vietnam. I'd like to do a thing called, 'Machine Gun.'[47]

Introducing the song as if the American public had forgotten about the Vietnam War is significant because the regiment that Hendrix had served in as a paratrooper

[47] Hendrix, Jimi. 'Machine Gun', rec. 1970, *Band of Gypsys* (New York: Capitol, 1970).

before he was honourably discharged, the 101st Airborne Division, had been sent to Vietnam in early 1965. Murray notes that this makes the song especially personal for Hendrix as "he knew *exactly* who was paying the price of the politicians' games" in South East Asia and this adds to the potency of the music and lyrics.[48] It is noteworthy that these kinds of biographical considerations are not taken into account by Washington and others in their focus on sound production and "black techniques", illustrating the disposable nature of Hendrix as an icon so often used to promote particular agendas, in this case Afrofuturism itself.[49]

Yet there is a significant racial dimension to this introduction because Hendrix chose to name three cities – New York, Chicago and Milwaukee – in which the FBI had launched a severe crackdown against the Black Panthers in 1969.[50] In a January 1969 interview, Hendrix even referred to "a song I'm writing now that's dedicated to the Black Panthers" which may well have been 'Machine Gun' given how strongly his introduction alludes to racist violence aimed at black radicals.[51] However, he went on to say in the same interview that this reference to Black Power was "the sort of thing we might go into, not pertaining to race but pertaining to...like symbolism and today's things and what's happening."[52] Thus his reluctance to

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[48] Murray (2012): 31.
[49] Washington (2008): 236.
[50] Fred Hampton and Mark Clark, leaders of the Black Panthers' Chicago chapter, were murdered by Chicago police in December 1969.
The 'Panther 21' were arrested in New York in April 1969 and charged with conspiracy to bomb various locations around New York and the Tristate area. They were eventually acquitted of all charges. Many of the group believed that their arrest was the result of infiltrators from the police and FBI.
The Milwaukee police enacted a sustained and widespread campaign of brutalisation against the Black Panther Party in 1969. This worsened in September 1969 when six Panthers were arrested within 48 hours during two separate incidents, all of whom were brutally beaten while in custody. The first arrest was made due to a traffic violation and the second was on the charge of attempting to murder a police officer with a shotgun. Of the three Panthers arrested in the latter incident, all were found guilty by an all-white jury with two of them receiving thirty year sentences and one of ten years. The Milwaukee branch of the Black Panther Party was eventually dissolved in November 1969 as a result of the external pressures and tactics employed by the FBI.
[51] Roby, Steven. *Hendrix on Hendrix: Interviews and Encounters with Jimi Hendrix* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2012): 148.
[52] Ibid.

commit to established notions of race is still evident, even though he did in fact introduce 'Voodoo Child (Slight Return)' as 'the Black Panthers' national anthem' when he performed it at the same Fillmore East gig.[53]

In August 1969, Hendrix performed 'Machine Gun' and 'Star Spangled Banner' at a benefit concert for Harlem's United Block Association. This came two weeks after his Woodstock performance in an effort to cultivate closer ties to black audiences and communities. Indeed, he introduced 'Voodoo Child (Slight Return)' as 'the national anthem of Harlem'.[54] But instead of showing outright support for the Panthers, Hendrix stressed in a press conference that his performance was a sign of changing times "leading up to love, peace, and harmony for anybody, and a *chance* for anybody."[55] Again, then, he distanced himself from being wholly identified with racial categories as a black artist.

David Henderson argues that Hendrix's Harlem performance highlighted "the true paradox of his fame" as "Jimi was known world wide, but not in Harlem, his symbolic hometown."[56] Younger black members of the audience took an interest in Hendrix before the show and posed for pictures with him, touching his hair and observing his "pink pants, yellow blouse, his Moroccan vest, and...Indian moccasins"; Henderson speculates that this made Hendrix feel more serious than usual.[57] This holds weight given Hendrix was afforded the chance to play to a black audience largely devoted to the R&B players that had previously rejected his sound in his early years.[58] According to one account, some audience members threw eggs

[53] Roby (2012): 150.
[54] Henderson (2002): 313.
[55] Roby (2012): 218.
[56] Henderson (2002): 313.
[57] Henderson (2002): 312.
[58] Henderson (2002): 312-313.

at the stage and shouted hostilities at Hendrix.[59] Chris Hodenfield's account of the Harlem concert for *Circus* magazine in September 1969 detailed Hendrix's response:

> Jimi eating out the guitar; Jimi playing with his elbow; Jimi swinging the Stratocaster around back so the neck comes out through his crotch; Jimi picking and grinning with his teeth snapping the strings. The hot Harlem fans going wild.[60]

By breaking out moves from his days on the Chitlin' Circuit, Hendrix was 'performing blackness' to ingratiate himself with a black audience, before he could launch into his own cosmic rock 'n' roll. When we consider this alongside the fact that Hendrix distanced himself from racial categories in the run up to this performance, it shows that a racial analysis of Hendrix is full of contradictions. This highlights a key feature of analysing Hendrix in the context of the claims made about him by proponents of Afrofuturism: while wanting to show solidarity with oppressed African Americans, Hendrix simultaneously tried to guard himself from racial categorisation in his pursuit of new sounds. This suggests that Hendrix was trying to maintain a distinction between race as a confining, socially constructed category and rac*ism* as a very real and destructive product of this social construction.

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[59] Needs, Kris. 'Hendrix: The Gigs That Changed History - #9 The Harlem Street Fair.' *Louder Sound*, October 2015, https://www.loudersound.com/features/hendrix-the-gigs-that-changed-history-9-the-harlem-street-fair (accessed 02/08/2019).

[60] Hodenfield, Chris. 'Experience Break-Up: Noel Splits and Jimi Moves Uptown', May 2009, https://crosstowntorrents.org/showthread.php?1403-Newspaper-amp-Magazine-Articles-(Text-Only)-1960-s-1970-s (accessed 02/08/2019).

Hendrix's consistent disavowal of racial categories in his utterances, the rejection of his music by black artists, fans and intellectuals, and his largely white audience clearly complicate a racial analysis of him. Thus, this problematises the approach of Afrofuturist critics because by claiming that Hendrix is an Afrofuturist, their analysis of his music ties itself to his blackness, despite the presence of these additional factors, and risks reinforcing the very categories Hendrix felt it necessary to reject in interviews and in his music. It is significant that Hendrix ended his Harlem performance with a black power salute but followed it with a hippie peace sign. This reiterates the complications of a racial analysis of him and shows that the perspective of race is not a stable framework for analysing his music given that it is full of contradictions.

Hendrix had donated money towards the release of the Panther 21, a group of Black Panthers who had been arrested in April 1969 accused of planning bomb and rifle attacks in New York City. He also agreed to play at a benefit concert for the Panthers at the Oakland Coliseum. Henderson details the release of FBI documents that confirm Hendrix was one of the Bureau's targets in its effort to disrupt, subvert and prevent any black public figures from galvanising the Black Power and anti-war movements.[61]

In addition to performing for the Black Panthers, Hendrix had been the biggest name to play for the Vietnam Moratorium Committee in early 1970, an anti-war concert in Madison Square Garden, exemplifying his public support for the anti-war movement. This was a concert organised by non-violent factions of the anti-war movement who were pushing for negotiations to end the Vietnam War.[62] He was forced to cut this performance short after he was given bad LSD, prompting

[61] Henderson (2008): 2-3.
[62] Henderson (2002): 342.

speculation of possible sabotage, a common tactic employed by the FBI both directly and indirectly in their efforts to disrupt the anti-war movement. It is worth noting that Hendrix never offered full-throated support for the Black Panthers on the basis of his race and regularly shunned suggestions of his support for them. His discomfort with race in an interview with the *Los Angeles Free Press* after his Harlem performance in 1969 demonstrates his uneasy relationship with the Black Power movement:

> Most of them are sheep. Which isn't a bad idea. This is the truth, isn't it? That's why we have the form of Black Panthers and some sheep under the Ku Klux Klan. They are all sheep and in the beginning they were all following a certain path.[63]

Hendrix went on to develop this:

> F.P.: How about for each individual that's involved in the Black Panthers?
>
> Jimi: No, see, most of that comes from any kind of aggressive group like that....So what they are doing now is fighting among their individual selves. There's nothing we can explain to them. Most of it is from bitterness. There's no colour part now. There's no black or white. It's very small. It's just like animals fighting among each other – then the big animals will come and take it all away.[64]

[63] Henderson (2002): 317.
[64] Henderson (2002): 317-318.

The elliptical nature of Hendrix's response in interviews like this one complicates any racial analysis of Hendrix because it is difficult to establish a clear and consistent account of Hendrix's beliefs about race. The difficulty for advocates of Afrofuturism is that they have not fully taken this into account. The fact that Hendrix was not forthcoming when asked about racial issues complicates a racial analysis of him and problematises the way that Afrofuturist critiques rest on often implicit claims about Hendrix's blackness. However, the way that Hendrix refers to freedom and liberation as beyond colour, particularly after the racial dimensions of his Harlem performance, situates him within an anti-establishment and anti-racist context more than a militantly pro-black one.

Hendrix's fractious relationship with the Black Panthers and his public support for the anti-war movement are significant in evaluating the claims made about him by proponents of Afrofuturism because 'Machine Gun' can be credibly read as an anti-racist, anti-war song rather than simply being concerned with blackness. When we consider that the protagonist of 'Machine Gun' adopts the persona of a Vietcong guerrilla fighter, it strongly suggests that Hendrix underscored the imperialist and racist dimensions of the Vietnam War in the same way that SNCC and the Black Panthers had characterised the conflict in South East Asia. But reading the song from a predominantly 'black' framework – as Afrofuturist criticism does – fails to account for additional aspects of the song which foreground an anti-racist and anti-war perspective. An Afrofuturist interpretation of 'Machine Gun' thus remains a partial and therefore incomplete account of Hendrix and his music.

The Univibe plays an important role in the evolution of the music, but it is not the only significant feature of 'Machine Gun'. This makes Steinskog's and Washington's claims about the song's meaning highly selective. Hendrix successfully

commanded an array of equipment and employed a number of techniques as part of his unique aesthetic approach to drive the song and prevent it from imploding. Hendrix opens with the Univibe on, creating a twisted, warped kind of sound in the frame of an E minor seventh chord and then leads into a more established melody. A striking feature of the song is that there are no actual chord changes as the guitar's melody drives the music through its repeating riffs. As Hendrix moves on to play his first gunfire motif, the snare drum plays in unison with him. Before the refrain is sung, Hendrix plays a short instrumental guitar solo and accompanies his singing with the lead guitar, a typical feature of solo acoustic guitar blues as seen in many songs from Blind Willie Johnson's 'God Moves on the Water' (1929) to Howlin' Wolf's 'Smokestack Lightnin'' (1959). In contrast with the focus on fantasy and the future in Afrofuturism, the lyrics are rooted in the present tense and are much more graphic and politically charged than the more outlandish sci-fi fantasies of '1983', 'Third Stone' and 'Up from the Skies':

[Refrain]

Machine gun

Tearing my body all apart

Machine gun

Tearing my body all apart

[Verse 1]

Evil man make me kill you

Evil man make you kill me

Evil man make me kill you

Even though we're only families apart[65]

Hendrix goes on to play “a long trill, varying its pitch by up to a major third with the tremolo bar” to create the sound of helicopter propellers.[66] The ensuing guitar solo features pentatonic inflections clearly reminiscent of the blues before letting out a howling shriek in the form of a sustained high A note, pushed up to a B and sustained several times. The ensuing simulation of mortar fire comes from the ascent of the tremolo which is a vital part of his performance of ‘Machine Gun.’ Hendrix escalates the tension in the form of “a thirty-second note triplet pattern solo that is similar to the peak of the ‘Voodoo Child’ solo.”[67] This is immediately followed by an ascending tremolo slide, matching a slower rhythmic pattern to replicate the crashing of mortar fire.[68] This demonstrates Hendrix’s unique ability to transition from a rapid note pattern to a realistic sound effect mid-performance and is indicative of his ability to jar the listener into new soundscapes.[69]

Hendrix’s Fender Stratocaster was armed with a highly flexible tremolo on the body of the guitar where the strings were attached; this allowed him to dramatically lower the pitch of all six strings as well as raise them slightly. The tremolo unit contained a set of springs to offset the tension of the strings which Hendrix would pull at through an opening in the back of his guitar, something which he did in his live performances of ‘Machine Gun’ to create feedback later in the song, as well as by

[65] Hendrix, Jimi. ‘Machine Gun’, rec. 1970, *Band of Gypsys* (New York: Capitol, 1970).
[66] Botta, Christian. ‘Dionysian Symbolism in the Music and Performance practices of Jimi Hendrix’, *City University of New York Academic Works*, 2013, https://academicworks.cuny.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1204&context=cc_etds_theses (accessed 18/05/2019): 72.
[67] Botta (2013): 74.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid.

tapping the neck and body of the guitar.[70] As a left-handed player, Hendrix chose a right-handed Stratocaster guitar so that he could control the volume, tone control and tremolo more easily in performances of songs such as 'Machine Gun.'[71] The contrast between his use of light guitar strings tuned down half a step and high volume and amplification meant that he could bend notes more easily and play unconventional chord formations whilst achieving a rich texture through Marshall amplifiers of at least a hundred watts each. In performing 'Machine Gun', these amplifiers were supported by a wah-pedal, a fuzz-pedal to "add distortion, sustain and volume", an Octavia as well as the Univibe to create "a rotating speaker effect."[72] The Octavia pedal was created by the white sound engineer Roger Mayer who formed a close friendship with Hendrix based on their interest in producing new sounds. The Octavia pedal meant that each note played could be brought up an octave higher almost instantly. It was first used by Hendrix in 'Purple Haze' in 1967. Its use in 'Machine Gun' allowed Hendrix to create the jarring effect of suddenly playing notes at a much higher pitch, simulating sirens, rocket and mortar fire and human screams, and this heightens the sensation of fear on the battlefield throughout the song. What also makes Hendrix's playing unique in the context of this technological arrangement is his ability to use both hands to repress certain strings, eliminating unwanted sounds, and his use of the thumb to hold single notes and chord tones while muting other sounds.[73]

Hendrix's skill is most clearly seen in the second half of 'Machine Gun' where the listener experiences a succession of sound waves: after Buddy Miles' vocal section, a heavy wave of feedback fuzz engulfs and almost erases the last nine

[70] Botta (2013): 67.
[71] Botta (2013): 68.
[72] Botta (2013): 69.
[73] Ibid.

minutes with the sound of airplanes flying overhead, more machine gun fire and what sounds like an air siren, one of Hendrix's more common effects.[74] Verse four features Buddy Miles again and confirms the death of the soldier in the song:

> Don't you shoot him down / He's got to leave here / Don't you shoot him down / He's got to stay here / He ain't going nowhere / He's been shot down to the ground / No way he can stay there! / No, no, no, no, no.

Hendrix introduces the soldier with the line "I pick up my axe and fight like a farmer," which strongly suggests that the protagonist is a Vietnamese guerrilla fighter fighting an invading force that possess the technological might to destroy his way of life. In the absence of heavy weapons, the farmer defends himself with an axe, a tool used in his daily life just as Hendrix uses his guitar as a weapon in his performance. Yet despite the soldier's death, he seems to predict the downfall of his enemy, possibly because of its reliance on its technological superiority: "'cause I know all the time you're wrong baby / And you'll be goin' just the same." The parallel between the farmer's axe and Hendrix's guitar suggests the ability of improvised peasant techniques to resist superior technology. This interpretation shows that there are limits to the approach of Afrofuturist critics because the way that the Vietnamese farmer 'miss-uses' his axe to resist 'superior technology' raises the question of what is distinctively 'black' about the 'miss-use' of technology. This cross-racial dimension of the song complicates the approach of Afrofuturist critics because the "black techniques" that they claim make Hendrix an Afrofuturist can only provide a partial

[74] Botta (2013): 74.

interpretation of 'Machine Gun.'[75] Given that Afrofuturist critics base their account of 'Machine Gun' on Hendrix's blackness, the cross-racial elements of the song show that proponents of Afrofuturism place Hendrix in a restrictive racial category in their interpretation of his music.

The song's theme of the establishment forcing people to kill each other and the necessary subversion of its agenda of destruction is not restricted to any one racial or national group in the song: "Evil man make me kill you / Even though we're only families apart." The "evil man" suggests that the Vietnamese farmer and American soldier are linked because they are following the orders of their leaders who have an ideological agenda of their own. While there is nothing to suggest that the American soldier is black, Hendrix's spoken introduction to the song at the Fillmore East emphasises the violence of the US state against black citizens. However, I would argue that these cross-racial aspects illustrate a connection based more on shared humanity than any one racial perspective and acknowledge the oppression born out of political conformity. The lyrics suggest that the result of complying with the establishment is death and destruction: "Machine gun / Tearing my body apart...Machine gun / Tearing my family apart." This suggests that the racial themes within 'Machine Gun' are a critique of political conformity and lend themselves to an anti-war perspective just as much as an anti-racist one. This complicates an Afrofuturist reading of 'Machine Gun' because by relying on Hendrix's blackness to argue that he is an Afrofuturist, advocates of Afrofuturism only provide a partial account of the song in light of these additional factors.

Following Buddy Miles' vocals, the mimicking of machine gun fire from both the guitar and snare drum start the next verse and punctuate each line sung.

[75] Washington (2008): 236.

Contorted notes fly out of Hendrix's guitar using his whammy bar and represent what Botta describes as a sort of purgatory, a vision of life and death for the soldier before the end of his life.[76] A hurricane of feedback signals the complete lack of tonality to the song as it crashes towards its conclusion, the climax of the battle having taken place. Botta reflects on the significance of this disarray at the end in relation to the soldier because "it places him outside of the major forces that constitute his world and at the same time illustrate how small he is in relation to the military action he is a part of."[77] However, this is complicated by the protagonist at times appearing to be a Vietcong soldier because this figure is in fact central to the critique of war and violence. The soldier may even be liberated by the effects of war because it causes him to become more fearless: "I ain't afraid of no more mess, babe...After a while your cheap talk don't even cause me pain / So let your bullets fly like rain." The closing lines of the song overwhelmingly appeal to peace: "No guns, no bombs...No nothin', just let's all live and live / You know instead of killin'." Thus, although 'Machine Gun' has clear racial themes and Hendrix frames the Fillmore East performance with references to the horror of violence against black militants, it is also clearly anti-racist and anti-war in a much wider, internationalist sense. It is significant that Hendrix ends the song with an appeal for peace rather than racial solidarity or race-based militancy because this places Hendrix beyond an exclusively 'black' framework.

Hendrix's approach in 'Machine Gun' triggers the overwhelming sensation of not only bringing the battlefield to the doorstep of his audience but of dragging them into it. This reflects both the immersive nature of the performance and the slogan of the anti-war movement: 'bring the war home!' Hendrix used special and

[76] Botta (2013): 75.
[77] Ibid.

unconventional equipment to achieve these effects and they made possible the replication of bombing sounds and feedback in much of the performance, but it was his vision of these 'sound paintings', his blend of the blues with rock, his ability to wield, balance and direct this complex array of sounds, rather than just the machinery itself, that marks him out as a musician.

To single out the Univibe as a signifier of his "black techniques" and a measure of Hendrix's value to the interpretative framework of Afrofuturism not only diminishes the range of skills he employed as a musician, but also fails to register the fact that 'Machine Gun' is open to a number of credible interpretations that place it both inside and outside of a distinctively black cultural continuum.[78] The above analysis provides a more detailed account of the song than do Steinskog and Washington and shows that the Univibe is only one part of a much larger scaffolding within Hendrix's music. While Hendrix addresses racial themes within the song, the fact that the protagonist is at one and the same an American soldier and a Vietnamese resistance fighter, and that the song climaxes in a plea for peace shows that its subject matter is not solely related to the plight of black militants.

Moreover, Hendrix was not alone in using the Univibe. Pink Floyd's David Gilmour began using a Univibe in 1971, while Robin Trower of Procol Harum used it with Hendrix's own combination of technology and instrumentation: a Fender Stratocaster and Marshall amplifiers. Other white musicians of the day such as Jeff Beck, Pete Townshend and Jimmy Page also used very light guitar strings and experimented with technology themselves, including the wah-pedal, the tremolo arm and feedback. This problematises the approach of Afrofuturist critics because there does not appear to be anything distinctively 'black' about using new technology to

[78] Washington (2008): 236.

create new sounds. Advocates of Afrofuturism rely on Hendrix's use of the Univibe as a black artist to claim him, but they do not account for the use of the Univibe by white artists in their framework.

Steinskog's and Washington's attempts to claim Hendrix for Afrofuturism on the basis of his 'miss-use' of technology are therefore problematic. So too is Fulton's claim that some of Hendrix's sound paintings, including 'Machine Gun', connect him to the aesthetic of Afrofuturism because they are "overtly related to current events" of the day, provide a form of social commentary and express the turmoil of the 1960s through new uses of technology.[79] Hendrix is far from alone among many other artists of the period who did this, artists with whom Hendrix associated, was influenced by, and influenced in turn as part of a countercultural rock music community. In the same vein as 'Machine Gun', 'Draft Morning' (1968) by The Byrds is an example of a song that also used surreal and hard-hitting sounds of war to immerse the listener in the experience of a soldier being drafted and sent off to battle.

Other artists used technologically generated sonic effects to comment on the current events in the 1960s, especially the war, including The Doors in 'Unknown Soldier' and Tim Buckley in 'No Man can Find the War.' The fact that white artists of the period were using technology to communicate an anti-war message using new sounds problematises the claims of Afrofuturist critics because they do not fit into a black critical framework. This shows that the claims made by Afrofuturist critics about Hendrix place him in a restrictive racial category because they rest their claims on his blackness.

[79] Fulton (2011): 6.

Hendrix's aesthetic approach is no doubt unique in relation to these other songs and artists, but proponents of Afrofuturism do not offer a clear picture of what is distinctively *Afro*futuristic about Hendrix's work in comparison to them, beyond the fact that Hendrix was black. As we have seen, Hendrix's 'Afrofuturist' songs do not contain a clear, affirmative message of black identity. Moreover, they are open to alternative interpretations – as anti-racist, anti-war and anti-conformist – deriving from Hendrix's interest in and commitment to counterculture philosophy and the hippie ethos. This places them beyond a distinctively black framework. Hendrix's music instead induces something close to a form of alternative or modified consciousness, where the music drowns the senses and the categories that inform rationality. This is significant because these qualities show that Hendrix's music was clearly committed to the artistic and philosophical agenda of psychedelic rock, even though he combined this with elements of R&B, soul and jazz. Sheila Whiteley argues that Hendrix's music was fused with 'psychedelic codes' that represent the "counter-culture's emphasis on the immediacy of the experiential here and now of psychedelic experience" and as we have seen, these elements of psychedelia are clear in the songs analysed in this chapter.[80] The presence of psychedelia within Hendrix's work shows that the accounts of Hendrix by Afrofuturist critics analysed in this chapter are at best partial and cannot fully account for his music beyond a black framework. This leads us to an exploration of Hendrix's music through another kind of black framework in the form of Afrosurrealism, which I explore in the next chapter.

[80] Whiteley, Sheila. 'Progressive Rock and Psychedelic Coding in the Work of Jimi Hendrix.' *Popular Music*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 1990: 38.

Chapter three

"Just call me helium": Hendrix and Afrosurrealism

> The way I write things, I just write them with a clash between reality and fantasy mostly. You have to use fantasy in order to show different sides of reality. It's how it can bend...reality is nothing but each individual's own way of thinking and then the establishment grabs a big piece of that...I just keep it almost naked almost, y'know.[1]

Hendrix frequently adopted fantasy in his songs and his view of it in interviews like the one quoted above is comparable to a surrealist type of vision. Like the surrealists of the twentieth-century art world, he was less interested in using fantasy to escape reality and more in employing it to trace how reality 'bends' in order to uncover hidden aspects of it that are ordinarily suppressed or overlooked. Also like the surrealists, this method had a subversive or politically resistant function for Hendrix: it kept his and his listeners' ways of thinking free from capture by the 'establishment'. However, what makes Hendrix's surrealist view of reality unique is that it operated without any categorical distinction between fantasy as a major theme of his music and sound as a medium of musical form. Surrealism in music has been identified in the realms of theatre, opera and concert music but not in the field of popular music. Theodor Adorno identified Igor Stravinsky, Kurt Weill, Bert Brecht, Paul Hindemith and Hanns Eisler as surrealist musicians because their music "proceeds from the

[1] Hendrix, Jimi. 'Jimi Hendrix on The Experience', 11th September 1970, August 2014, *PBS Blank on Blank* https://blankonblank.org/interviews/jimi-hendrix-on-the-experience/ (accessed 26/08/2019).

cognition of alienation."[2] Adorno argues that these composers are surrealist because they do not pretend to seek an "aesthetic totality" and this is comparable to the limits of conventional aesthetic modes that Hendrix wanted to push beyond in his music.[3] This is significant because so few musicians have been identified as surrealist. 'House Burning Down', 'Voodoo Chile' and 'Voodoo Child (Slight Return)' (1968) are three key Hendrix songs that contain surrealism as both a theme and a means of shaping sound and this invites analysis of them from a surrealist perspective.

Hendrix's fusion of form and content to create a surrealist view of reality relates him to Afrosurrealism, a critical artistic practice that tries to expose hidden elements of reality in the way that Hendrix envisaged through his use of sound. Afrosurrealism can be understood as an artistic impulse designed to deepen our understanding of black subjectivity and its multiplicity by complicating our understanding of established regimes of knowledge as they relate to blackness and the black experience. Through the critical deconstruction of conventional narratives and the excavation of the hidden contradictions and realities of race, Afrosurrealists aim to disrupt existing accounts of black subjectivity by expressing blackness as a multifaceted, contradictory experience that cannot be neatly categorised. Afrosurrealism seeks to create an aesthetic-critical approach equal to the challenge of representing the contradictions that are hidden or overlooked in established narratives about race and the surreal experiences race and racism create. Looking beyond traditional aesthetic modes, Afrosurrealism seeks to provide a new and expanded form of black American expression that is otherwise excluded or neglected.

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[2] Adorno, Theodor W. *Essays on Music* (London: University of California Press, 2002): 396-397.
[3] Ibid.

For proponents of Afrosurrealism, blackness and surrealism combine to form an aesthetic framework for black artists to challenge dominant, mainstream discourses by uncovering 'hidden' realities through artistic expression. Amiri Baraka initially called this impulse 'Afro-Surreal Expressionism' in 1974, but the terms 'Afrosurrealism' and 'Afro-surreal' were coined by D. Scot Miller in his *Afrosurreal Manifesto: Black is the new Black – a 21st Century Manifesto* (2009). Miller called on artists to adopt an Afrosurreal impulse in their work to challenge the decline of art produced by black and minority artists brought about by demographic changes in urban centres, and outlined a definition of what this meant. Miller's manifesto formed the basis for a contemporary understanding of Afrosurrealism and will thus be the cornerstone of my analysis of Hendrix and Afrosurrealism.

For Afrosurrealists, there is an "invisible world striving to manifest, and it is our job to uncover it."[4] Miller contends that human nature and nature itself create the most surreal experiences and that they are buried in the invisible world that Afrosurrealist artists and critics seek to expose. For Miller, Afrosurrealism attempts to reclaim the "lost legacies" of the lived realities of black populations by re-creating the past in the present.[5] He contends that unearthing these lived realities and re-creating them offers a deeper understanding of the importance of black struggles in the present:

> Afro-Surrealists restore the cult of the past. We revisit old ways with new eyes. We appropriate 19th century slavery symbols like Kara Walker, and

[4] Miller, D. Scot. *Afrosurreal Manifesto: Black is the New Black—A 21st century manifesto*, 20 May 2009, http://dscotmiller.blogspot.com/2009/05/afrosurreal.html (accessed 02/08/17).
[5] Ibid.

> 18th century colonial ones like Yinka Shonibare. We re-introduce "madness" as visitations from the gods, and acknowledge the possibility of magic.[6]

Afrosurrealism purports to challenge the privilege of mainstream historical narratives through the subversive power of surrealist tropes. The invisible contradictions of race and the surreal experiences they create are central features of Afrosurrealism and this means that excavation and reclamation are key Afrosurreal strategies that view time as a fluid construct in the artistic process. Thus Afrosurrealism is a critical or interpretive approach as well as a creative one because existing aesthetic modes are inadequate in uncovering the contradictions and surreal experiences of race overlooked by established regimes of knowledge. For Miller, Afrosurrealism privileges “excess as the only legitimate means of subversion, and hybridization as a form of disobedience.”[7] Miller argues that this focus on hybridization allows Afrosurrealism to “distort reality for emotional impact” in order to challenge rationality and objectivity in art and defy the categorisation that they create.[8]

Miller attempts to clarify the role that race plays in this artistic response by drawing attention to the vital role of African art and black artists in the history and development of surrealism:

> Leopold Senghor, poet, first president of Senegal, and African Surrealist, made this distinction: "European Surrealism is empirical. African Surrealism is mystical and metaphorical." Jean-Paul Sartre said that the art of Senghor and

[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.

> the African Surrealist (or Negritude) movement "is revolutionary because it is surrealist, but itself is surrealist because it is black"...The root for "Afro-" can be found in "Afro-Asiatic", meaning a shared language between black, brown and Asian peoples of the world. What was once called the "third world," until the other two collapsed.[9]

Moreover, Miller makes a distinction between Afrosurrealism and Afrofuturism that is worth highlighting in the course of analysing Hendrix's work from both critical perspectives:

> Afro-Futurism is a diaspora intellectual and artistic movement that turns to science, technology, and science fiction to speculate on black possibilities in the future. Afro-Surrealism is about the present. There is no need for tomorrow's-tongue speculation about the future…What is the future? The future has been around so long it is now the past. Afro-Surrealists expose this from a "future-past" called RIGHT NOW.[10]

While advocates of Afrofuturism purport to use science fiction to move beyond restrictive ideas of race, proponents of Afrosurrealism seek to highlight the ever-present, hidden peculiarities of race through art. For Afrosurrealists, the surreal experiences borne out of race and racism are best expressed through art to show how strangeness and blackness continue to intersect. In his manifesto, Miller states

[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.

that “the Afro-Surrealist seeks definition in the absurdity of a ‘post-racial’ world.”[11] While Afrosurrealist critics like Miller acknowledge the fluidity of race in the same way that Afrofuturist critics do, proponents of Afrosurrealism are less invested in the possibility of moving beyond race in the way that many Afrofuturist critics and artists are. Afrosurrealism therefore offers a critical artistic practice for understanding the work of black artists rather than an explicit blueprint for the creation of art within an established movement.

This is significant because Miller widens his definition of Afrosurrealism by explicitly stating that it offers a critical artistic practice that accounts for the categorisation of other oppressed peoples and provides a critical framework that rejects established regimes of knowledge:

> Afro-Surrealists are ambiguous. "Am I black or white? Am I straight, or gay? Controversy!" Afro-Surrealism rejects the quiet servitude that characterizes existing roles for African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos, women and queer folk. Only through the mixing, melding, and cross-conversion of these supposed classifications can there be hope for liberation.[12]

For Miller and advocates of Afrosurrealism, the experience of being black or the ‘racial other’ in America fundamentally informs the surrealist tropes within the art they produce to create cultural texts that illuminate the hidden and often lost realities of race as a surreal, contradictory experience. Miller’s characterisation of race

[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.

suggests blackness is one part of a cross-racial artistic expression of surrealism. Miller argues that Afrosurrealist notions of artistic subversion, excavation and reclamation apply to artists both within and beyond a black framework, and this is important because it suggests that Afrosurrealism is a critical artistic practice. This is because it encompasses both an interpretive approach that re-reads the past through an Afrosurrealist perspective *and* an aesthetic mode of reclamation for cultural producers interested in excavating the hidden contradictions of race through the creation of art.

Terri Francis complements Miller's manifesto by asserting that surrealism and Afrosurrealism represent a critical artistic practice rather than a coherent movement with a definitive set of principles. She argues that the act of creating surrealist art to challenge convention is as important as any theoretical definition of it:

> Neither surrealism nor Afrosurrealism is a style, a set of criteria, an ideology, a genre, or even a coherent exploration. It is not a movement. It is an imaginary, magnetizing loosely related sensibilities and it certainly is a modernism connected to...the Harlem Renaissance, negritude, magical realism, and what Haitian novelist Jacques Stephen Alexis called marvelous realism.[13]

Francis and Miller both suggest that Afrosurrealism offers a critical framework for understanding the work of artists, both within and beyond a black framework, through a programme for the production of art. Rather than re-writing history, the process of producing art and using it to attempt to reclaim a lost reality is what holds

[13] Francis, Terry. 'Introduction: The No-Theory Chant of Afrosurrealism', *Black Camera*, Vol. 5, No. 1, Fall 2013: 97.

value for Afrosurrealists. The creation of Afrosurrealist art thus provides recognition of some of the central contradictions of race: that, historically, black Americans and those viewed as the 'racial other' have been viewed and presented as simultaneously present yet invisible, their identity and its complexities reduced to simple racial stereotypes despite their presence within American society.

Robin D. G. Kelley and Franklin Rosemont offer an account of surrealism that also complements Miller's definition of Afrosurrealism:

> Above all...surrealism does not signify unreality, antireality, the nonsensical, or the absurd. On the contrary, surrealism – an *open* realism – signifies *more* reality, and an expanded *awareness* of reality, including aspects and elements of the real that are ordinarily overlooked, dismissed, excluded, hidden, shunned, suppressed, ignored, forgotten, or otherwise neglected.[14]

They highlight the vital role that artists of African descent played in the history of surrealism and in reclaiming hidden aspects of reality. Thus surrealism is "the only major modern cultural movement of European origin in which men and women of African descent have long participated as equals, and in considerable numbers."[15] They cite the influence of African-American jazz in France on André Breton, author of the *Surrealist Manifesto* (1924), and Toussaint L'Ouverture, leader of the Haitian Revolution, who they claim Breton regarded as a hero.[16] They also highlight the work of Alexandre Dumas, an author of African descent who influenced early European

[14] Kelley, Robin D. G. and Rosement, Franklin. *Black Brown & Beige: Surrealist Writings from Africa and the Diaspora* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009): 3.
[15] Kelley and Rosemont (2009): 6.
[16] Kelley and Rosemont (2009): 7.

surrealists with themes of injustice and revenge in his novels.[17] Significantly, they underline the fact that European surrealists in the early twentieth century were early defenders of African tribal sculptures as "manifestations of visible poetry" and "objects imbued with spiritual energy" rather than exhibition items for Western museums.[18] Similarly, surrealist journals were open critics of white supremacy and numerous members of the surrealist movement made public statements in support of insurrections against Western colonialism, imperialism and white supremacy. In response to a revolt against Spanish and French colonial rule in Morocco in 1925, surrealist groups issued a political declaration supporting the right to self-determination for all peoples, regardless of race.[19]

Rosemont and Kelley also highlight the inspirational role of surrealism for Francophone intellectuals of African descent such as Aimé Cesairé, Léopold Senghor and Léon Damas who founded the Negritude movement.[20] The movement renounced colonialism and racism, called for a Pan-African alliance of people of African descent and explored issues of identity and belonging through surrealist tropes. This influenced the rise of black surrealism in America through the work of black writers such as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and Zora Neal Hurston, who drove the growth of the black radical imagination alongside jazz as a form of black expression. These cultural shifts also influenced the views of Larry Neal, Amiri Baraka and later D. Scot Miller.

Rosemont and Kelley conclude that the early surrealists' opposition to white supremacy "and the entire 'white mystique' surely must be recognised as part of the

[17] Kelley and Rosemont (2009): 6.
[18] Kelley and Rosemont (2009): 8-9.
[19] Kelley and Rosemont (2009): 9-10.
[20] Kelley and Rosemont (2009): 7.

broader project of revalorizing blackness that Breton and his friends shared with the protagonists of Pan-Africanism and Negritude."[21] Miller, Kelley, Rosemont and others draw on what they see as a vital and neglected Afro-black contribution to the global history of surrealism by established historical accounts and reiterate the vital influence of surrealism on the growth of the black radical imagination through other figures such as Ted Joans, Bob Kaufman and Amiri Baraka.[22] Through their linking of jazz, surrealism, poetry and literature, these figures helped a specifically black inflection of surrealism become a form of empowerment and self-defence that emerged from the global influence of surrealism as a critical aesthetic mode.

Miller's 'manifesto' is an example of the programmatic criticism within Afrosurrealism that calls for a particular type of interpretive and creative practice, while the work of artist Kara Walker is an example of the creative impulse within Afrosurrealism. Her art engages with the contradictions of blackness and the way that race produces a restrictive and fragmented identity. Walker, whose art is identified by Miller as an example of Afrosurrealism, argues that her work attempts to respond to the way that race creates a fixed identity that cannot account for the lived experience of blackness: "the idea of a single identity – the militant black woman, or whatever – wasn't enough. At any one moment I felt like 13 different characters piecing themselves together." Walker's art comes in the form of cut-outs from black paper in order to create silhouette displays against a white canvas. The murals she creates from these cut-outs engage with themes of identity, racism, slavery, oppression and the way that black history has been told in the past and re-told in the present. Walker hides the complexity of her characters by creating them as silhouettes and her aesthetic approach draws parallels to the simplicity of racial

[21] Kelley and Rosemont (2009): 12.
[22] Kelley and Rosemont (2009): 12.

stereotypes. This can be interpreted as an example of hybridization that Miller draws on in his definition of Afrosurrealism. Walker herself identifies what she calls "a stream of consciousness" in the process of cutting paper pieces and believes "it was probably my job to gather all those pieces back into one room. They were all pieces of me and they were unruly."[23]

'Grub for Sharks: A Concession to the Negro Populace' (Figure 1) is a prime example of her art.[24] The title refers to the act of throwing slaves overboard to lighten a ship's load, an act that took place during the slave trade and which lead to trails of sharks following slave ships. Walker's use of silhouettes in her cut-outs subverts the racial myths and stereotypes that were common in aesthetic depictions of slaves.



Fig. 1: 'Grub for Sharks: A Concession to the Negro Populace' (2004)

[23] Adams, Tim. 'Kara Walker: There is a moment in life where one becomes black', *Guardian*, September 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/sep/27/kara-walker-interview-victoria-miro-gallery-atlanta (accessed 19/08/2019).

[24] Walker, Kara. 'Grub for Sharks: A Concession to the Negro Populace', *Tate*, 2004, https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-liverpool/exhibition/project-space-kara-walker (accessed 19/08/2019).

Walker uses hybridization to complicate the history of racism and slavery by using stereotypes to subvert colonial thinking rather than legitimise it. Her use of black paper against a white wall means that Walker's characters inhabit a space they can claim for themselves and this is reinforced by the way they appear to be in movement. But by visualising the stereotypes of highly sexualised black women and men, objectified as commodities, Walker exposes the system of colonial thinking that created a violent and oppressive reality for slaves by transforming the viewer into an agent of categorisation. Walker exposes "obsolete visual triggers as substitutes for knowledge" in order to subvert the stereotypes used to justify oppression.[25] This is a key feature of Afrosurrealism because it deconstructs a well-known history of racism and colonialism and yet uncovers a reconstruction of meaning within it "where we might eerily remember things we never really experienced."[26] In this sense, Afrosurrealism is not creating something new but excavating a lived experience of history that complicates a contemporary understanding of it.

The subversive power of Afrosurrealism is also evident in Walker's 'The Keys to the Coop' (Figure 2), which seeks to de-centre normative reality in order to uncover new perspectives:[27]

[25] Stanciu, Elena. 'The Art of Kara Walker: Shapes and Figures of our Own Making', *Petrie Breakdown,* July 2016, http://www.petrieinventory.com/the-art-of-kara-walker-shapes-and-figures-of-our-own-making (accessed 20/08/2019).
[26] Ibid.
[27] Walker, Kara. 'The Keys to the Coop', *Tate*, 1997, https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/walker-the-keys-to-the-coop-p78211 (accessed 19/08/2019).



Fig. 2: ‘The Keys to the Coop’ (1997)

Walker creates the silhouette of someone who appears to be a young black girl and a plantation worker running with a set of keys in one hand and the head of a chicken she is about to eat in the other. While the girl’s possession of the keys symbolises an act of rebellion in the context of her possession as a slave, the shock and violence of her appetite might simultaneously cast her into a racial stereotype of aggression, despite her act of defiance. Historian Alisa Swindell argues that the girl’s “consumption of the usually discarded part of the chicken is a reminder that the slaves were underfed or given poor, generally unwanted cuts of meat, such as the head, feet, or entrails.”[28] She links this to modern day issues of access to food for black Americans and the continued racial identification of food through popular

[28] Swindell, Alisa. ‘Challenging Consumption: Kara Walker’s Keys to the Coop’, *Gastronomica*, Vol. 5, No. 2, Spring 2005: 6.

culture in its characterisation of chicken as a staple food for black Americans.[29] Historical symbols of slavery – namely the black body and its negative imagery – are thus subverted to complicate a conventional image of a docile young black slave and can credibly be seen as a reminder of the persistence of race in American history.

A more contemporary account of the critical analysis that Afrosurrealism seeks to employ is provided by Greg Tate, who gives an example of a lost or hidden reality of blackness. Tate argued in 2009 that black creative movements lacked the aesthetic range and critical impulse necessary to express the surreal nature of being black in America.[30] Asserting that blackness and strangeness are reflections of each other, he argued that attempts to express these experiences of race cannot be neatly categorised into restrictive aesthetic movements:

> ...the terms black science fiction, Afro-Futurism, Afro-Punk, post-blackness, Black Surrealism, Black Dada Nihilismus, etc., are all born of attempts to accommodate and simulate the strange reality of being black...Yet all these terms are actually redundant — black in America by itself already signifying the ultimate in Weird Tales.[31]

Tate argues that these umbrella terms are "a tad elitist and academic" because they imply that black working class artists cannot express the surrealist nature of race in

[29] Swindell (2005): 7.
[30] Tate, Greg 'Born to be Wildly Visionary', May 2009, http://dscotmiller.blogspot.com/2009/05/born-to-be-wildly-visionary.html (accessed 20/08/2019).
[31] Ibid.

the same way that black "college miseducated" artists can.[32] However, Tate identifies Hendrix as one of many self-taught working class black artists who are "more 'out of this world' than their merely grad school-sanctioned brethren and sistren", and whose work conveys the weirdness of being black in America without the need to invoke a complicated theoretical framework.[33]

Tate illustrates his point using Google Maps.[34] He points out that the high-rise building projects that house 4,200 people on Harlem's 155th Street, mostly of African descent, do not appear on Google Maps and are represented by a large white space named 'Polo Grounds'. The online information about the Polo Grounds relates only to the forgotten baseball stadiums that were once there rather than the high-rise buildings that house thousands of people.[35] Tate posits this erasure as "black science fiction" in action because a whole black community has been "erased from human consideration on the virtual map of the world and replaced by fanboy baseball lore."[36] Excavating and confronting this kind of lost or hidden reality is precisely what Afrosurrealists concern themselves with in their process of creating art.

The aim of Afrosurreal art, then, is not to create new realities in the way that a movement such as Afrofuturism does by using outer space and technology as a canvas for the black imagination, but rather to unearth existing realities through a process of critical analysis about race. Both Miller's 'manifesto' and Tate's article are examples of programmatic criticism that calls for a particular type of interpretive and creative practice, and both critics invoke Hendrix as an important predecessor for such a practice, even if Hendrix was not working with any programmatic concept of

[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid.

an art movement or critical practice in mind. However, while Hendrix has been associated with Afrosurrealism, there has been no sustained analysis of his music in relation to it. Miller singles out 'House Burning Down' (1968) as a Hendrix song that "opens the dialogue even further beyond the typical."[37] Similarly, as we have seen, Tate cites Hendrix as an artist whose ability to express the 'weirdness' of being back in America exemplifies the Afrosurrealist imagination. Thus, in the remainder of this chapter, I explore how far Afrosurrealism as a critical framework might help widen our understanding of Hendrix's music and argue that, in the case of 'House Burning Down', Afrosurrealism does expand our understanding of the song because it illuminates how Hendrix used fantasy and innovative, unusual sounds to expose the hidden realities of everyday life for black Americans and the surreal experiences created by race and racism.

Hendrix the Chariot Rider: Afrosurrealism in 'House Burning Down'

'House Burning Down' was released in October 1968, after the race riots of the 'long hot summer' in 1967 and the riots that erupted following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in April 1968. The 1968 riots in response to Dr. King's death were among the largest wave of civil unrest in the US since the Civil War, affecting more than a hundred cities. An Afrosurrealist perspective uncovers Hendrix's use of technology to offer a kind of sonic exhibition of the violence and destruction of the riots; in doing so, he presents a surrealist view of reality concerned with the contradictions of race and racism. 'House Burning Down' is not just a surrealist take on the riots but a unique example of Hendrix creating surrealist sounds to trace

[37] Miller, D. Scot. 'Panther Cry', March 2012, http://dscotmiller.blogspot.com/2012/03/culturesfbg.html (accessed 25/03/19).

reality's 'bends' in order to expose the hidden realities of the riots and the contradictions about race and racism related to them. John Perry argues that the song's lyrics were "a plea for moderation in the race riots sweeping the ghettos of major American towns during those long hot summers."[38] Perry highlights the fact that in many instances, the rioters burnt down their own neighbourhoods rather than the more affluent parts of cities such as Los Angeles, Detroit and Washington, and links this to Hendrix's lyrics:[39]

> Sisters and brothers, daddys, mothers, standin' 'round cryin' / When I reached the scene the flames were makin' a ghostly whine / So I stood on my horse's back an' I screamed without a crack / I say, Oh baby, why'd you burn your brother's house down?[40]

Perry's view of 'House Burning Down' is a useful reference for an Afrosurrealist interpretation because it represents a credible account of the song but is a conventional one that an Afrosurrealist analysis can problematise. The lyrics provide textual evidence for Perry's interpretation of the song as an appeal for non-violence and moderation: "I said the truth is straight ahead so don't burn yourself instead / Try to learn instead of burn, hear what I say, yeah, yeah." The inclusion of 'straight ahead' as a slogan of the black power movement combined with a message of non-violence – "learn instead of burn" – appears to acknowledge both the struggle of oppressed African Americans and the importance of non-violence. Perry argues

[38] Perry, John. *Electric Ladyland* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017): 101.
[39] Perry (2017): 102.
[40] Hendrix, Jimi. 'House Burning Down', rec. 1968, *Electric Ladyland* (New York: Reprise, 1968).

that these lyrics show that Hendrix's position on the riots in the song is "closest to that of Martin Luther King" and this is supported by the fact that Hendrix consistently identified with notions of peace and non-violence.[41] However, the elements of fantasy within the song – a chariot, a space boat and the disruption of temporality – lend themselves to an Afrosurrealist interpretation that expands Perry's analysis of the song beyond a conventional account of its racial themes.

Hendrix frequently used fantasy within his music, and while he may not have deployed it as an explicitly surrealist trope, his own view about fantasy's role in his music aligns him closely with both surrealism and Afrosurrealism. Hendrix viewed what he called fantasy not as escapism but rather as a means of compelling the listener to confront and consider the hidden realities of life. In an interview with Guitar Player in December 1968, following the release of his third and final studio album *Electric Ladyland* in October, Hendrix's comments about 'House Burning Down' reflect this belief:

> We're not adding false electronic things. We use the same thing anyone else would, but we use them with imagination and common sense. Like in 'House Burning Down', we made the guitar sound like it was on fire. It's constantly changing dimensions, and up on top that lead guitar is cutting through everything."[42]

[41] Perry (2017): 102.
[42] Hendrix, Jimi. *Guitar Player*, December 1968, http://crosstowntorrents.org/archive/index.php/t-21769.html (accessed 22/08/2019).

Hendrix's comments highlight the way he applies fantasy to sound as much as the subject matter, themes and imagery of his songs. This is a distinctive aspect of Hendrix's aesthetic approach because his use of fantasy and surrealism is a matter of form as well as content and makes him an innovator of surrealism. The unique way that Hendrix uses fantasy and surrealism to shape sound is not something achieved, at least to the same artistic degree, by any other artist of his day. His view of sound in interviews like this one conveys a sense of his artistic vision that sought to chart new uses of sound using fantasy and surrealism. Comments that Hendrix made in an interview with the *International Times* in 1969 further demonstrate his view of fantasy as a way of 'bending' reality:

> A lot of songs are fantasy-type songs so that people think you don't know what you're talking about at all...Like you might tell them something kinda hard but you don't want to be a completely hard character in their minds and be known for all that 'cause there's other sides of you and sometimes they leak onto the record too, you know, that's when the fantasy songs come in.[43]

In his last ever interview with Keith Altham in September 1970, Hendrix expressed his desire to use fantasy and the surreal in his music to communicate the complexity, cruelty and strangeness of the world without being didactic:

[43] Henderson, David. *'Scuse Me While I Kiss the Sky: The Life of Jimi Hendrix* (New York: Bantam, 2002): 273-274.

> There's too many heavy songs out nowadays. Music is getting too heavy, almost to the state of unbearable. I have this one little saying: when things get too heavy just call me helium, the lightest known gas to man.[44]

Hendrix's comments here reiterate his interest in pushing beyond established aesthetic boundaries to convey an extended reality that can only be realised by mixing it with fantasy. His desire to capture a multidimensional and flexible idea of reality (how it can "bend") that exceeds an establishment perspective suggests that he wanted to offer not only an unconventional form of social commentary but a subversive one.[45] Thus it can be argued that Hendrix preferred to take on complex subject matter from unorthodox angles, using fantasy as a vehicle to offer deeper messages in his songs without appearing to be too political or radical, or as he put it to the *International Times*, too 'hard'. In this context, Afrosurrealism allows us to analyse Hendrix's use of fantasy in 'House Burning Down' in new ways because its sense of revolt is ambiguous and by definition, surreal in its focus on the invisibility of reality.

From an Afrosurrealist perspective, Hendrix uses fantasy to allow the trauma and contradictions of the riots to express themselves where they are otherwise hidden beneath the destruction, physical damage and the narratives placed on them by both the establishment and radicals who would make political capital out of them. In an attempt to reclaim the trauma of the riot and its contradictions – self-inflicted but stoked by racism and oppression – the protagonist in the song sees beyond the

[44] Hendrix, Jimi. 'Jimi Hendrix on The Experience', August 2014, *PBS Blank on Blank* https://blankonblank.org/interviews/jimi-hendrix-on-the-experience/ (accessed 26/08/2019).
[45] Ibid.

obvious physical damage and political implications of the unrest and focuses on ‘different sides’ of that reality. The fact that “the flames were makin’ a ghostly whine” expands the language of struggle by introducing an element of magical realism, a stylistic device that conveys a realistic view of the modern world with added magical elements to portray something too absurd to believe. Magical realism might therefore give voice to the language of contradiction and the surreal experiences created by race in the context of the riots as a reaction against struggle. By adding magical elements into a real-world setting, Hendrix employs strangeness as a critical tool to empower lost voices as a way of uncovering the hidden absurdities of the riots. By subverting the visual destruction of the riots, easy to see and process as a horrifying spectacle, Hendrix uses his guitar to give voice to the flames to expand our understanding of the riots beyond a senseless act of violence. This is perhaps a sonic representation of the dead who continue to have a presence and who challenge the notion that the legacy of the riots exists only in the past by stressing that its impact is ever-present on the communities that burned their own neighbourhoods. Yet simultaneously, the dead are faceless and reduced to a single sound, an easily-caricatured form that denies them an individual identity.

Afrosurrealism tells us that blackness might be represented by the flames and in a multitude of ambiguous forms. The flames represent an aggressive, dangerous threat and therefore reiterate existing stereotypes of black Americans as violent and uncivilized, reducing the victims to a caricature of racial myths. Yet at the same time, the flames present a destroyed and reduced form, present and alive yet ostracised from the landscape. An Afrosurrealist interpretation of this magical realism tells us that the whining flames represent the irresolution of contradiction. This element of magical realism is a key Afrosurrealist trope that could conceivably signify the lost

reality or legacy of the contradictions and divisions of race, buried under the rubble of a false consciousness but uncovered by Hendrix as he "reclaims the souls of our cities" through his music.[46] By hybridizing the contradictions of race with a suspended temporality, Hendrix's use of the guitar to make a whining sound, in the opening and closing of the song, both empower and haunt. This is driven by the accentuated octave jumps that Hendrix employs in the melody and by the fact that Hendrix himself said that "we made the guitar sound like it's on fire" in the song.[47] Hendrix's 'surrealism' is therefore a matter of form and content in 'House Burning Down' because his use of sound creates the imagery of the flames and the theme of contradiction that runs throughout the song. From an Afrosurrealist perspective, Hendrix's use of magical realism serves to de-centre established narratives that focus on the violence and destruction of the riots by challenging dominant discourses that neglect the trauma of the riots and the contradictions of race and racism within oppressed black communities. The cosmic process of destruction that Hendrix creates in 'House Burning Down' conveys a fragmented black identity that is simultaneously invisible yet resistant, present yet disregarded, and this complicates a conventional understanding of the song as a 'resistant' political statement about race.

The surrealist nature of 'House Burning Down' is further evidenced by the fact that "A giant boat from space landed with eerie grace / And came and taken all the dead away." Hendrix uses his whammy bar to create a sonic downward Doppler effect which simulates the descent of the space boat and turns the song into a "space opera."[48] This is conceivably an example of the excess that Miller identifies in

[46] Miller (2009).
[47] Hendrix, Jimi. *Starting at Zero: His Own Story* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014): 114.
[48] Perry (2017): 103.

his outline of Afrosurrealism “as the only legitimate means of subversion, and hybridization as a form of disobedience.” For Afrosurrealist critics, Hendrix’s synthesis of reality with science fiction expresses an overflow of events that may appear strange and frightening but may actually uncover further contradictions of race. An Afrosurrealist interpretation of ‘House Burning Down’ offers new insight into the song if we view the protagonist, an outside observer who sees the violence and destruction from the safety of his/her chariot, as the personification of absurdity. After questioning the need for violence and pleading for moderation, the protagonist witnesses a “giant boat from space” take away the dead left by the destruction. The spectacle of the space boat and how easily it appears to remove the evidence of the violent events of the day from living memory suggest that Hendrix uses it to represent the police and emergency services who ‘cleaned up’ the riots, obscuring their real impact and preventing any deeper public consideration of the violence.

The space boat’s cleaning up activity also reflects the fact that the riots’ meanings were subject to a process of management by both the authorities and by black activists: they were labelled as ‘criminal disturbances’ by the authorities and ‘urban uprisings’ by the radical political establishment. This highlights the importance of perspective in ‘House Burning Down’ because the space boat appears at the end of the song and from a distance, which suggests that the protagonist is an outsider who is now viewing the scene from afar. Yet the song’s final lyrics return to the immediacy of the destruction with the repeated-line, “somebody’s house is burning down”, and a reminder of the “hell fire red” sky. This immediacy is reinforced by the surreal sound of Hendrix simulating the blaze with his guitar. The juxtaposition of these two images – the defamiliarization of the protagonist gazing up at the space boat and the immediacy of the destruction below, which the narrator urges us to look

at – offers a profoundly surrealist view of reality. The fact that the song insists "*somebody's* house is burning" makes it clear that the house is not the symbol of an urban uprising or a political statement, but someone's very real home in the process of being destroyed. This is a reminder of the reality and particularity of the destruction is an answer to the protagonists' friend in the beginning of the song who disregards the cause of the black smoke rising from the neighbourhood – "He just coughed and changed the subject and said, 'Oh wa, I think it might snow some.'"

This reminder of the immediacy of the destruction is important because the riots have already been forgotten by the end of the song, with the arrival of the space boat reducing and even erasing the individual identities, situations and struggles of a community that remains broken and oppressed. The fact that the space boat removes the bodies of the dead suggests that black communities live and exist in America yet are invisible. There is an acute contradiction between the first half of the song which appeals for peace and the latter half which becomes a space show. This can be read as an expression of the absurdity of not only the rioting but of blackness as a social construction and the surreal experiences it creates, experiences that conventional language cannot adequately communicate. More specifically, the song's narrative reinforces the notion that any attempt to question its absurdity – "why'd you burn your brother's house down?" – is eventually contained and possessed by society's power relations, as the space boat takes away the victims of the riots and returns the city to its status quo. Black Americans are denied a real presence within urban spaces as they resume a state of invisibility that denies them individual identities or subjectivity. Moreover, the fact that the space boat takes the dead away suggests that the ideological interpretation of the riots by black militants as 'political uprisings' also masks the reality of those who died, denying them the

same subjectivity as the survivors. Hendrix's aesthetic approach thus compels us to hear, see and feel the destruction of *someone's* house to convey the hidden realities of race and racism that are masked by conventional interpretations of the riots.

The space boat may therefore represent an abandonment of reason or the re-imposition of a limited and repressive notion of it (the establishment 'grabbing' reality, as Hendrix put it) that clears away the physical damage and buries the intellectual, emotional and philosophical complexities of the riots. This is reinforced by the fact that the neighbourhood is denied the right to bury its own dead by the appearance of a superior being in the form of the space boat. The dead are removed from the public sphere and their absence hides the trauma and contradiction of the destruction that killed them. This relates to the erasure of black life from urban space that Miller and Tate discuss as being part of the critical framework of Afrosurrealism and thus expands our understanding of 'House Burning Down' beyond a form of social commentary that simply appeals for peace. By complicating this more conventional understanding of the song, an Afrosurrealist reading can reveal how Hendrix's use of fantasy to address the riots reveals their contradictions and absurdities; they may be an act of rebellion against racial violence but are simultaneously a form of self-inflicted damage.

Unlike Hendrix's use of science fiction in his music, which heavily featured themes of escapism and refuge as outlined in chapter two, an Afrosurrealist interpretation of Hendrix's music shows how it engages with real life violence in a more direct way. There is a profoundly surreal form of realism in 'House Burning Down' that does not try to pretend there is a viable form of escape, but rather attempts to engage directly with the contradictions of race, racism and violence in a real-world setting. This is in contrast with the escapism of '1983' or the destruction of

the Earth in ‘Third Stone from the Sun’ which both offer a conclusion of sorts because the settings they take place in are both destroyed and left by the protagonists. The fact that ‘House Burning Down’ ends with the space boat taking the dead away and flying off into a sky still “burning hell fire red” impresses the lingering reality of the situation on to the listener and urges them to take account of the destruction of *someone’s* house through the imagery and sounds. An Afrosurrealist perspective therefore allows us to see a sense of the past haunting the present in ‘House Burning Down’ in a way that Hendrix did not always create in his other songs.

Afrosurrealism can therefore reveal new aspects of ‘House Burning Down’ that extend the understanding of the riots beyond the typical frameworks of civil unrest or urban rebellion. By applying an Afrosurrealist analysis, its critical approach complicates the song’s racial themes by showing that it is not simply an appeal to peace by Hendrix, but an expression of the hidden contradictions about race that established aesthetic modes cannot reveal. At the very least, Afrosurrealism can widen the discussion about Hendrix’s aesthetic approach beyond an established view of ‘House Burning Down’ as simply ‘a social commentary.’ ‘House Burning Down’ is a refusal to view the world in conventional ways and positions Hendrix as an innovator of surrealism with his use of new sounds.

By creating an aesthetic mode equal to the challenge of representing the riots as an event and how it relates to blackness as an ‘absurd’ social construction, Hendrix expands the use of sound in surrealism. An Afrosurrealist reading of ‘House Burning Down’ shows that Hendrix pushes mimesis beyond conventional limits in his search for new sounds in a way that few surrealists have in order to destabilise normative perceptions and settled reality. Hendrix’s sonic simulation of whining

flames, the use of the whammy bar to evoke the descent of the space boat, and other effects that make the guitar sound like it is on fire all point to an expansion of sound in Hendrix's work that take it beyond mimesis and into the realm of surrealism. What is significant in the discussion about Hendrix and Afrosurrealism is that Hendrix's exploration of new sounds within the surrealist aesthetic engages with complex ideas about race, oppression and black subjectivity in a way that other surrealist artists have not. An Afrosurrealist interpretation of Hendrix therefore positions him as an innovator of surrealism who widens its aesthetic scope and demonstrates his aesthetic range as an artist.

Hendrix the Voodoo Child: Afrosurrealism in 'Voodoo Chile' and 'Voodoo Child (Slight Return)'

'Voodoo Chile' and 'Voodoo Child (Slight Return)' (1968) are other Hendrix songs that lend themselves to an Afrosurrealist analysis because of Hendrix's deployment of fantasy and their strong links to the blues and surrealism. The supernatural elements within both songs strongly suggest that Afrosurrealism can offer new interpretations of them as surrealist views of reality, particularly as they relate to the sense of estrangement and 'otherness' inherent in the blues tradition. Hendrix's combination of form and content is clear in both songs because he uses technology and new sounds to complement the symbolism of voodoo and imagery of the supernatural to engage with themes of 'otherness' and revolt.

Paul Garon's analysis of the blues, surrealism and poetry is relevant to an Afrosurrealist analysis of 'Voodoo Chile' and 'Slight Return' because it helps us to understand Hendrix as an innovator of surrealism through his use of sound. Garon argues that the blues functions in the same way that poetry does because it is an aesthetic mode of spiritual revolt against repression. Garon defines repression psychoanalytically "whereby something (an idea, a memory etc.) is rendered incapable of reaching consciousness"[49] and argues that the blues, poetry and surrealism are reflections of each other because each "seeks to engage the imagination in a constant thrust toward other occluded aspects of reality, and through fantasy".[50] Garon argues that "the repressive structures of Western civilization" fail to grasp this consciousness because their "latent faculties of thought" restrict the imagination and their aesthetic modes are insufficient to engage with it.[51] For Garon, surrealism, poetry and the blues are connected through their use of distinctive symbolism. He identifies these as symbols of fantasy, magic, desire and aggression that achieve a consciousness unseen or unattainable through established aesthetic modes.[52] Seen through the lens of surrealism and poetry, the blues are an act of spiritual rebellion "and the destruction of the ideological limitations normally placed on our use of language."[53] Garon's view of the blues as a form of surrealist revolt is a useful complement to an Afrosurrealist reading of two of Hendrix's most ambitious and fantasy-laden songs, the electric blues 'Voodoo Chile' and 'Slight Return'.

[49] Garon, Paul. *Blues and the Poetic Spirit* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1996): 5.
[50] Garon (1996): 7.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid.

Originating in African folklore, "voodoo is a highly complex and sophisticated belief system" predicated on the idea making a pact with a deity – a god of the crossroads in African legend known as Legba – who gives the recipient supernatural powers.[54] While Legba was viewed as a representation of the devil in Christianity, blues folklore developed a more affirmative view: a 'gift from this god' could endow artists with superior musical abilities. Stories and myths about Mississippi bluesman Robert Johnson in particular claimed that he found his ability to play the blues in a voodoo cult where he made a pact with the devil. More generally, the relationship between blues in America and voodoo as a West African tradition functioned as an aesthetic mode that attempted to challenge Western rationalism and categorisation. While West African traditions had an influence on Black American Christian culture, the relationship between voodoo and the blues contributed to "the bluesman's pariah status among respectable folk" and racial stereotypes about black Americans.[55]

Voodoo was seen as "illegitimate, unorthodox and superstitious" by mainstream American society in the nineteenth century, particularly by the Catholic Church, and lead to the exoticisation and demonization of its practitioners.[56] These racial caricatures continued in the twentieth century and were driven largely by the "commercialization of ritual objects like Voodoo dolls and the mythologizing of the Voodoo priestess Marie Laveau."[57] Hendrix's engagement with the blues and its relationship to voodoo, invoked in 'Voodoo Chile' and 'Slight Return', continues a tradition of black artists who pay tribute to the mythology and lore of voodoo while engaging with and challenging a sense of otherness born out of racial stereotypes.

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[54] Murray (2012): 138.
[55] Murray (2012): 139.
[56] Pasquier, Michael. 'The Invisibility of Voodoo, or, the End of Catholic Archives in America', *American Catholic Review*, Vol. 125, No. 3, Fall 2014: 12.
[57] Ibid.

There is a strong tradition of voodoo references and symbolism in the country blues and urban electric blues of the Chicago school, from Robert Johnson's 'Me and the Devil Blues' (1937) to Willie Dixon's 'Hoochie Coochie Man', recorded by Muddy Waters in 1954, and 'Got My Mojo Working' which Waters popularised in 1957.[58] Even The Temptations paid homage to representations of the supernatural in the blues in 'I Can't Get Next To You' (1969): "I can turn back the hands of time, you best believe I can, / I can make the seasons change just by waving my hand, / I can turn a river into a raging fire, / I can live for ever if I so desire."[59] Hendrix himself recorded his own versions of 'Hoochie Coochie Man' in 1967 and 1969, demonstrating his sustained interest in the blues and its voodoo symbolism, even though neither version was intended for public release.[60]

In both 'Voodoo Chile' and 'Voodoo Child (Slight Return)', Hendrix invokes the spirit and tradition of West African religious practices and their potent symbolism within the blues by calling upon his own mystical and supernatural powers. In both songs, Hendrix proclaims that he is a voodoo chile/child and Murray argues that 'Voodoo Chile' in particular is Hendrix's statement of his own blackness:

> ...in the context of the life and work of Jimi Hendrix, it is worth reiterating that his self-identification as the Voodoo Chile functions as his statement of black identity: a staking of claim to turf that no white bluesman....could even hope to explore, let alone annex. Whether Hendrix intended 'Voodoo Chile' as an explicit challenge to the hegemony of Western rationalism and black

[58] Murray, Charles Shaar. *Crosstown Traffic: Post-War Pop and Jimi Hendrix* (London: Canongate Books, 2012): 139.
[59] Strong, Barrett and Whitfield, Norman. 'I Can't Get Next To You', rec. 1969 (Detroit, Michigan: Motown Records, 1969).
[60] Murray (2012): 182.

> American Christian culture is ultimately not the point. That Hendrix was announcing, explicitly and unambiguously, who he thought he was, is.[61]

The supernatural powers that Hendrix wields in 'Voodoo Chile' and his reinvention of the blues in the form of psychedelic rock certainly offer a sense of black identity that is affirmative and empowering, as Murray suggests. It can credibly be seen as "a supernatural brag" and follows a tradition within the blues of revolting against rationalism and categorisation, but in the style of psychedelic rock.[62] The guitar licks and motifs that feature throughout the track pay homage to the blues and are combined with Hendrix's virtuoso rock guitar solos and lyrics filled with the mythology of the blues. There is an historical engagement with the blues here that relates to Hendrix's blackness, but what the song is beyond an expression of blackness is unclear in Murray's account.

Yet Murray in fact casts doubt on whether Hendrix's expression of blackness is a positive one or not, suggesting that 'Voodoo Chile' expresses "alienation and an inescapable sense of *otherness*".[63] However, from an Afrosurreal perspective, 'Voodoo Chile' subverts this perceived isolation and rejects 'the racial other.' The lyrics of 'Voodoo Chile' feature Hendrix's supernatural origins as a 'voodoo child': "Well the night I was born / Lord I swear the moon turned a fire red."[64] Hendrix's supernatural origins appear to challenge normative reality because his 'otherness' is a way of giving him a sense of agency in the face of conventional reality. After the song's protagonist is born, his mother proclaims that "the gypsy was right!", a clear

[61] Murray (2012): 181.
[62] Murray (2012): 183.
[63] Murray (2012): 182.
[64] Hendrix, Jimi. 'Voodoo Chile', rec. 1968, *Electric Ladyland* (New York: Reprise, 1968).

blues reference to the opening lines of Willie Dixon's 'Hoochie Coochie Man': "gypsy woman told my mother / While 'fore I was born, / Said 'you got a boy child comin' / Gon' be a son of a gun."[65] The song's narrator shows us how his supernatural origins afford him extraordinary new abilities that create a realm of open possibilities beyond the confines of the conventional world:

> Well, mountain lions found me here / And set me on an eagle's wing / He took me past the outposts of infinity / And when he brought me back he gave me a Venus witch's ring

For Hendrix, the supernatural is the only way of accessing truth "past the outposts of infinity" where he can overcome the limits of rationality and reject the confinement of racial stereotypes. The legend and lore of the blues that Hendrix invokes here is thus closer to something of a spiritual revolt against conformity; Hendrix presents himself as a supernatural usurper of the typical rather than a victim of isolation or despondency, as Murray suggests. This is because the supernatural elements of the song defy and blur historical categories of race by rejecting the superstition of blackness as 'the voodoo other', and express something more explicitly anti-racist. Rather than simply being a statement of Hendrix's blackness, 'Voodoo Chile' uses sound, surrealism and the blues to subvert the 'otherness' of voodoo and blackness and present it as an empowering state of being that rejects any attempt to categorise it. This complements Garon's argument that the blues, surrealism and poetry are a spiritual revolt against "repressive structures of Western

[65] Dixon, Willie and Waters, Muddy. 'Hoochie Coochie Man', rec. 1954 (Chicago: Chess Records, 1954).

civilization" and the restrictions its rationality places on the imagination.[66] The fact that the protagonist in the song has powers over space and time supports Garon's argument because, much like psychedelic rock, they shatter the spatio-temporal coordinates of Western rationality: "'Cause I'm a million miles away / And at the same time I'm right here in your picture frame". From an Afrosurreal perspective, 'Voodoo Chile' combines distance with immediacy in the same way that 'House Burning Down' does to push beyond the limits of settled, normative reality. An Afrosurreal perspective enables us to see how 'Voodoo Chile' uses an unconventional aesthetic mode that counters traditional racial stereotypes and offers a more affirmative and empowering measure of blackness. Yet at the same time, an Afrosurreal approach tells us that the protagonist's power over space in this line conveys the simultaneous presence and absence of blackness in establishment narratives. The "picture frame" in the lyrics draws on the theme of perspective by suggesting not only a consideration of how the protagonist is viewed but how reality is constructed and 'framed' by established regimes of knowledge.

Turning to 'Voodoo Child (Slight Return)', an Afrosurrealist approach draws attention to the supernatural elements of the song as a subversion of racial stereotypes about a primitive, superstitious form of blackness. 'Slight Return' does this from the moment the track starts, as Hendrix opens the song with the combination of "a chant-like guitar riff" and a "percussive, muted strum accented on his wah-wah pedal", creating a motif that features elements of the blues, soul and funk.[67] Hendrix's use of new sounds here produces the effect of destabilising settled, normative reality as a way of heralding the arrival of his supernatural powers: "Well I

[66] Garon (1996): 7.
[67] Murray (2012): 183. This motif was used by guitarist Melvin 'Wah Wah Watson' Ragin and Dennis Coffey for a number of hits for The Temptations and was even featured in the title music for *Shaft*.

stand up next to a mountain / And I chop it down with edge of my hand / Well I pick up all the pieces and make an island / Might even raise a little sand."[68] By destroying old lands and raising new ones, Hendrix usurps traditional power relations which would position him according to the 'racial other'. Hendrix's use of the blues, new sounds and surrealist lyrics here evokes a distinctive symbolism of revolt and empowerment that represents a kind of surrealist consciousness that challenges the ideological limits of conventional reality. His use of the wah-pedal in particular to create the sound of chopping a mountain and building his own new world from the fragments reflects what Garon calls "the destruction of the ideological limitations normally placed on our use of language"; here, as in 'House Burning Down' with its flaming guitars, Hendrix generates sounds not usually found in music in order to upset the boundaries of settled reality.[69]

Moreover, in the spirit of surrealism's dismantling of conventional reality, these elements of revolt in 'Slight Return' reject the conformity of conventional society and its established regimes of knowledge. This was reflected in Hendrix's comments about the song. Hendrix ended his performance at Berkeley in May 1970 with 'Slight Return' and introduced it as "*our* new American anthem", having already performed 'Star Spangled Banner'.[70] Hendrix said this in his introduction of the song:

> we're all in this mess together, we're all livin', trying to grow...and some have big dreams and some of those get killed by all these bullshit old traditional

[68] Hendrix, Jimi. 'Voodoo Child (Slight Return)', rec. 1968, *Electric Ladyland* (New York: Track Records, 1968).
[69] Garon (1996): 7.
[70] Bershaw, Alan. 'Jimi Hendrix Experience – Voodoo Child (Slight Return)', *Paste Magazine*, March 2012, https://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2012/03/jimi-hendrix-experience-voodoo-child-slight-return234.html (accessed 01/09/19). Hendrix's spoken introduction is included in the audio.

> schemes, so that's why we always have to keep our asses together in one kind of window, right on together."[71]

Hendrix had previously dedicated 'Slight Return' to the Black Panthers as their national anthem[72] and at his Harlem benefit appearance (discussed in chapter two) said it was "the Harlem national anthem", emphasising its racial connotations. But this statement to an audience at Berkeley, the heart of the counterculture movement of the 1960s, suggests that Hendrix saw the song as a statement not only about existing racial categories but also as a rejection of conventional reality and conformity.[73] 'Slight Return' can thus be read as anti-establishment, a countercultural critique of conformity and rationality as well as racial categorisation. By enveloping reality with blues mythology, psychedelic rock and surrealist coding, 'Slight Return' rejects the containment of the establishment in its classifying of 'otherness' and offers an aesthetic response to the limits placed on reality by conventional society.

While my analysis of 'Slight Return' draws on an Afrosurrealist perspective, Afrosurrealist critics would likely view it as a partial account of the song. This is because Hendrix can be seen as producing a soundscape of race by actually conforming to the racial myth of the voodoo child in order to complicate one-dimensional notions of blackness. For Afrosurrealists, Hendrix might become a supernatural voodoo child to produce an image that reduces the full complexity of himself, both as a black man and an artist, in order to compare this with the simplistic ideas that viewed voodoo as abnormal and superstitious, and which by extension,

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[71] Ibid.
[72] Roby, Steven. *Hendrix on Hendrix: Interviews and Encounters with Jimi Hendrix* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2012): 150.
[73] Henderson (2002): 313.

created racial stereotypes about black Americans. Unlike most blues songs, 'Slight Return' directly engages with mortality and despondency and is not something that Garon explores in his analysis of surrealist symbolism and the blues. Murray acknowledges Hendrix's preoccupation with death in some of his other songs such as 'Angel' (1968) and suggests that Hendrix viewed death as an escape from the despair of the world in 'Slight Return'.[74] However, an Afrosurreal analysis might uncover new interpretations of the song in this context.

Rather than escape his "intolerable existence" and "existential angst" as Murray suggests, Hendrix invokes death as a metaphor for the supernatural subversion of racial stereotypes.[75] The lyrics suggest that as a voodoo child, Hendrix has powers that give him control over space and time: "I didn't mean to take you up all your sweet time / I'll give it right back to you one of these days." Just as in 'Voodoo Chile', the protagonist's powers destroy normative ideas of spatio-temporality, combining black folklore and religion with psychedelia and its rejection of the reductive classifying logic of Western rationality. These powers also suggest that death is simply a port of call or point of transition rather than a negative permanent state where people unwillingly suffer. The lyrics suggest that the voodoo child can casually move between life and death: "And if I don't meet you no more in this world / Then I'll, I'll meet you in the next one / And don't be late, don't be late." For Afrosurrealists, Hendrix's straddling of the line between life and death as a voodoo child might be as easy and simplistic as the racial stereotypes created by Western society. While Hendrix's supernatural abilities might subvert reductive racial stereotypes of voodoo as 'the racial other', and the pariah status assigned to the blues for its primitive, superstitious associations, he only achieves this by assuming

[74] Murray (2012): 184-185.
[75] Murray (2012): 184.

the racialised role of the voodoo child. In other words, Hendrix can only criticise racial ideology by indulging in the reductive role of 'the racial other', cast out by conventional society for its dangerous, superstitious use of dark magic. The narrow-minded simplicity of this idea compares with the reductiveness of racial stereotypes. This can credibly be seen as the kind of surreal experience of race that Afrosurrealism seeks to uncover, and in doing so, highlights a key contradiction of race as a social construction and the divisions it creates. Hendrix can therefore be placed both in and outside of a black framework in this analysis of 'Voodoo Chile' and 'Slight Return' because the song can be interpreted as subverting or challenging racial stereotypes whilst simultaneously conforming to them in order to expose their reductive racial ideologies.

The disintegrations of space and time that occur in 'House Burning Down', 'Voodoo Chile' and 'Slight Return' are aligned with psychedelia just as much as Afrosurrealism because it also rejected the limits of Western rationality and its destructive, narrowing of reality. Psychedelia's embrace of the imagination to defy the categorising logic of Western rationality in search of new forms of consciousness and new modes of being is clear in the destruction of space and time in each of these songs. While Afrosurrealism uncovers important new understandings about Hendrix's music, its focus on race risks excluding other ways of understanding Hendrix's aesthetic approach.

Afrosurrealism offers new possibilities for interpreting Hendrix's music, but a surrealist or psychedelic reading of his songs would offer an equally credible account of them. The strong thread of anti-racism and anti-conformity within both the surrealist and psychedelic traditions is reflected in Hendrix's music and cause us to raise the question of what might be uniquely *Afro*surreal about Hendrix's work. His

songs can be read in such a way as to place Hendrix both inside and outside of a distinctively black framework. This is reinforced by surrealism's historically multi-racial and anti-racist traditions, the fact that Miller explicitly states that Afrosurrealism is and should be multi-racial in its rejection of categorisation, and Hendrix's own disavowal of racial categories. While Afrosurrealism widens our understanding of Hendrix's music, it does so because it is rooted in surrealism and not because it is exclusively *Afro*surreal.

Conclusion: Hendrix the Soundscaper

Hendrix, psychedelic superspade??? Or just a damn good musician/producer? Depends on whether you want to believe the image or your ears.[1]

- Tony Glover reviewing *Electric Ladyland*, 1968.

As he was walking back to the equipment truck after the set, a black nationalist type came up to Jimi and said, "Hey, brother, you better come home." Jimi quickly replied "You gotta do what you gotta do and I gotta do what I got to do *now*."[2]

- An encounter following Hendrix's performance at the United Block Association's Harlem benefit gig, 1969.

Black kids think our music is white now, which it isn't. They say, "He plays white rock for white people. What's he doing here?" It just happens that the white people can dig it all of a sudden because some of them are very freaky and have imagination as far as different sounds are concerned. But the black kids don't have a chance too much to listen. They're too busy trying to get their own selves together. I want to show them that music is universal, that there is no white rock or black rock. There are only two kinds of music – good and bad.[3]

- Jimi Hendrix, 1969.

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[1] Glover, Tony. 'Electric Ladyland', *Rolling Stone*, November 1968, https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-album-reviews/electric-ladyland-183197/ (accessed 19/09/2019).
[2] Henderson, David. *'Scuse Me While I Kiss the Sky: The Life of Jimi Hendrix* (New York: Bantam, 2002): 313.
[3] Hendrix, Jimi. Starting at Zero: His Own Story (London: Bloomsbury, 2014): 157.

Hendrix has been continuously subjected to racial classification, but his life and work comprise a unique case study of a black artist who used music and sound to critique racism while simultaneously rejecting the very concept of race. Any future analysis of Hendrix's music might usefully be conducted in the context of this understanding in order to serve his aesthetic approach more effectively, in more detail and beyond existing accounts of his music that rest their claims about Hendrix on his blackness.

Hendrix's music shows that sound is not reducible to race and that it exceeds racial classification. This supports Philip Tagg's argument that concepts of 'black' music and 'white' music are ideological constructs with no clear definition or empirical basis,[4] and Brian Ward's claim that certain styles and genres become associated with and nurtured by racial groups because of racial segregation and not because they are intrinsically racial.[5] Tagg and Ward question the concept of race in the same way that Hendrix did because he did not acknowledge the framework of racial classification, and this reiterates how Hendrix's use of music and sound exceeds a racial framework.

While Hendrix was a black artist, the Afrofuturist and Afrosurrealist critics examined in chapters two and three of this thesis tend not to support their claims about Hendrix's music and sound beyond his blackness. Both of these perspectives claim to challenge and complicate race as a restrictive category, but reinscribe race to justify their interpretations of Hendrix. This results in Hendrix being viewed and defined through a predominantly racial lens – as he often was during his life – and

[4] Tagg, Philip. 'Open Letter: 'Black Music', 'Afro-American Music' and 'European Music'', *Popular Music*, Vol. 8, No. 3, 1989: 295.
[5] Ward, Brian. *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (London: University of California Press, 1998): 5-6.

therefore offers only a partial account of his music, especially because Hendrix consistently rejected racial categories through his music, views and commentary. These Afrofuturist and Afrosurrealist critics have chosen not to look at Hendrix's own views in sufficient depth or context and this limits their analysis of his music and sound to a restrictive racial framework.

Much of the writing about Hendrix does not attend to sound in any great detail – particularly in the case of Afrofuturist and Afrosurrealist critics – and this is something my analysis has tried to do.[6] A more detailed consideration of sound reveals the limits of language as it relates to racial classification and the way sound is able to create new modes of expression beyond race. By considering Hendrix's use of sound in more detail – the way he uses the guitar to simulate an underwater descent to Atlantis, for example, or to create sonic explosions, or to sound like a machine gun or as if it is 'on fire', or to evoke supernatural powers – it becomes clear that this is not reducible to race. The essentialist arguments of Afrofuturist and Afrosurrealist critics assume that sound can be racially classified and this has prevented deeper consideration of Hendrix's use of music and sound. By attempting to fit Hendrix into a racial grid, these critics have assumed that Hendrix's music and sound is evidence for race, but it is clear from a deeper consideration of his use of sound and lyrics that Hendrix's use of sound is not intrinsically racial.[7]

My analysis of Hendrix has sought to listen to his music more actively and in greater depth than many critics do to discover new ways of considering how his use

[6] Sheila Whiteley's analysis of 'psychedelic codes' is an honourable exception here because she considers Hendrix's use of sound in more depth than other critics in her examination of the links between his music, psychedelia and the counterculture.

[7] In *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (2012), Barbra and Karen Fields argue that racism is the practice that keeps the ideology of race in place by very clearly distinguishing 'race' as a myth or ideology that believes populations are or can be grouped according to racial characteristics and 'racism' as the social practices of discrimination that establish and reproduce notions of race. This is closely aligned to Hendrix's position on race and his rejection of racial categories.

of sound transcends racial classification. As I have shown, Hendrix's music can be interpreted as psychedelic, Afrofuturist, futurist, science fiction rock, Afrosurrealist, surrealist, anti-racist, anti-war and as a countercultural critique of conformity. No single one of these interpretations accounts for the entirety of his music; indeed, their use exposes the limits of racial and musical categories for analysing his work. Thus, further analysis of Hendrix's music might usefully pursue a detailed and alternative consideration of sound in order to register the richness of Hendrix's work and go beyond the particular interpretive approaches that critics have so far taken.

The lack of consideration towards sound and close textual analysis in the approach of Afrofuturist critics, whether intended or not, results in the retrospective recruitment of Hendrix and his iconic status as part of a promotional strategy for Afrofuturism as an aesthetic/critical movement. While his songs can be interpreted as Afrofuturist in part, Hendrix cannot be viewed as simply being a practitioner of alternative forms of blackness in the way that Afrofuturist critics interpret him. Afrosurrealist critics similarly cite Hendrix as a practitioner of blackness but have not sufficiently supported their claims with a detailed analysis of his use of sound. Again, this risks Hendrix being used as a promotional figure for the aesthetic/critical agenda of Afrosurrealism, albeit not to the same extent that Afrofuturist critics use his iconic status.

However, as I argued in chapter three, Afrosurrealism offers a more productive lens through which to interpret Hendrix's music than the approach of Afrofuturist critics because it acknowledges the contradictions of race as a social construction in a more critical way. Proponents of Afrofuturism purport to move beyond established notions of race, yet tend to reinscribe race as the basis for their claims about artists such as Hendrix. Afrosurrealism is a more useful approach for

analysing Hendrix's music than Afrofuturism because it accepts the contradiction between artistic freedom of expression and restrictive racial categorisation that was so central to Hendrix's life and work. Even though Hendrix's music can be placed within and outside of a distinctively black framework in the case of both Afrofuturism and Afrosurrealism, his place within the black framework of Afrosurrealism at least engages more deeply with the fact that race is socially constructed and the very real effects of racism that stem from this are surreal, absurd, damaging and restrictive. However, given that Afrosurrealist critics define Hendrix's uniqueness in terms of his blackness, they are culpable of mythologizing him in the way that other critics have, as outlined in chapter one. This means that Afrosurrealism remains limited by the racial classification that Hendrix rejected throughout his life.

In this context, even if Afrofuturist and Afrosurrealist critics strengthen their claims about the Hendrix songs which they have singled out by focusing on his unique use of sound in more detail and undertaking close textual analysis of his lyrics, these songs still represent a minority of his musical repertoire and remain open to other interpretations outside of a distinctively black framework. This means that any racial analysis of Hendrix's aesthetic approach that interprets his work exclusively within a racial framework can only provide a partial account of his aesthetic range as an artist.

It is significant that four of the six songs analysed in detail in chapters two and three of this thesis were made during or after 1968 because this was when Hendrix arguably reached his full artistic maturity. *Electric Ladyland* represented what Hendrix had long sought – the opportunity to create music on his own terms, outside of the control of his producers and managers. The new ways of understanding these Hendrix songs that I have tried to develop here are a more accurate measure of his

aesthetic range and begin to demonstrate how distinctive and multifaceted his aesthetic approach is. This will be important in future discussions about Hendrix because it complements what any new analysis of his work might usefully do, which is to look beyond the restrictive category of race in his music in order to fully understand its imaginative range and demonstrate the breadth of his unique aesthetic approach.

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