

# Race and the Feminized Popular in Nietzsche and Beyond

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*I distinguish between the nineteenth- to twentieth-century (modernist) tendency to rehabilitate (white) femininity from the abject popular, and the twentieth- to twenty-first-century (postmodernist) tendency to rehabilitate the popular from abject white femininity. Careful attention to the role of nineteenth-century racial politics in Nietzsche's Gay Science shows that his work uses racial nonwhiteness to counter the supposedly deleterious effects of (white) femininity (passivity, conformity, and so on). This move—using racial nonwhiteness to rescue pop culture from white femininity—is a common twentieth- and twenty-first-century practice. I use Nietzsche to track shifts from classical to neo-liberal methods of appropriating “difference.” Hipness is one form of this neoliberal approach to difference, and it is exemplified by the approach to race, gender, and pop culture in Vincente Minnelli's film The Band Wagon. I expand upon Robert Gooding-Williams's reading of this film, and argue that mid-century white hipness dissociates the popular from femininity and whiteness, and values the popular when performed by white men “acting black.” Hipness instrumentalizes femininity and racial nonwhiteness so that any benefits that might come from them accrue only to white men, and not to the female and male artists of color whose works are appropriated.*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Many scholars have noted the tendency, in industrial and postindustrial Western culture, to devalue mass/popular culture by associating it with an already devalued femininity. Susan Cook argues that “‘the popular’ ... has been so thoroughly feminized” that “popular music,” like women in patriarchal societies, “is ‘the abject’” (Cook 2001, 1). Written at the turn of the new millennium, Cook's work counters Andreas Huyssen's claim that “the gendering of mass culture as

feminine and inferior has its primary historical place in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century” (Huysse 1986, 62). Luce Irigaray’s critique of Marx shows that this nineteenth-century feminization of mass culture is ongoing, and that women continue to occupy the same role(s) in patriarchy that commodities do in capitalism (see Irigaray 1985, particularly ch. 8). Though most of these theorizations of the “feminized popular” do not explicitly account for race, Rey Chow identifies a tendency, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, to rehabilitate “femininity” from its abjection in the “pop” ghetto by opposing a white feminized avant-garde to a newly racialized abject popular. Chow demonstrates that some twentieth-century avant-garde texts’ attempts to take (white) women and femininity seriously rely on a “semiotic ghetto in which to banish the non-white other” (Chow 1999, 160). Chow shows us that “the popular” is never simply gendered, but always also raced.

In this article, I focus on the ways differing racial dynamics help identify and periodize distinct constructions of the feminized popular. I return to Robert Gooding-Williams’s readings of aesthetic receptivity in Nietzsche’s work and in Vincente Minnelli’s film *The Band Wagon* to highlight the *intersection of feminization and racialization* in both texts’ reevaluation of popular music.<sup>1</sup> These texts situate a normatively white, heteromale subject in relation to two racially distinct feminized populars: a white one and a nonwhite one. Both Nietzsche and Minnelli describe a white heteromale subject’s rehabilitation, via appropriation, of a feminized popular. Whereas Gooding-Williams argues that Nietzsche treats white femininity as *analogous* to nonwhite racial identity, I will show that *both* Nietzsche and Minnelli posit exotic, nonwhite femininity as the *antidote* to a *threatening white femininity*. Supplementing Chow, who identifies a nineteenth- to twentieth-century (modernist) tendency to rehabilitate (white) femininity from the abject popular, I identify, in both Nietzsche and Minnelli, a twentieth- to twenty-first-century (postmodernist) tendency *to rehabilitate the popular from abject white femininity*. In this way, Nietzsche is genuinely “born too early,” as his attempt to rehabilitate the popular from abject white femininity is an early example of the new kinds of racist, misogynist logics required to shift the site of post-World War II Western cultural avant-gardes from (European) modernist bohemia to (American) youth pop culture (for example, rock ‘n’ roll).<sup>2</sup>

In what follows, I examine parts of Nietzsche’s texts and Minnelli’s film—namely, those about popular culture as such—that Gooding-Williams does not address. He focuses on the aspects of these texts that are explicitly about race and/or gender, but he misses the fact that these *texts foreground race and gender in order to make their main argument*—that pop culture is valuable, and we wrongly treat it as abject. In the first part, I recount Gooding-Williams’s reading of Nietzsche, and then turn explicitly to Nietzsche’s *Gay Science*—the writing of which bookended his work on *Zarathustra*—to examine the role of race and

gender in Nietzsche's own construction of the feminized popular. Because Christine Battersby's reading of Nietzsche helps clarify this shifting approach to femininity, and its implications for living women, I briefly discuss her work in the second part of the first section. The second part focuses on *The Band Wagon's* main "argument" or "theme"—that pop-culture cred is more desirable than high-culture status. I read the "Girl Hunt" mini-musical as a retelling of Bizet's opera *Carmen*: like Don Jose (*Carmen's* lover), Fred Astaire's character fears domestication by white bourgeois femininity, and seeks refuge in a hypersexualized, nonwhite femininity. Unlike Bizet's hero, Astaire's character does not succumb to the "decivilizing" threats posed by nonwhite femininity.<sup>3</sup> Rather, he masters and appropriates them for himself. *The Band Wagon* tries to convince us that pop culture, as feminine and exotic as it may be, is safe and wholesome when performed for us by white, heteromale bodies. Or, put differently: pop culture cleansed (via black masculinity) of abject femininity, now "that's entertainment!"

## II. ARIADNE ... FROM NAXOS?: RECONSIDERING NIETZSCHE'S FEMINIZED POPULAR

Gooding-Williams compares the role of femininity in Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* with the role of blackness in Minnelli's *The Band Wagon*: they both serve as means for a white masculine subject to access the "receptivity"—the ability to appreciate and perform compelling works of art—that rationality and civilization have supposedly denied him. As I have argued previously (James 2010b), *Zarathustra's* conception of receptivity is just as much about race as it is about gender: the lack of receptivity is not a problem with masculinity generally, but with a specifically *white* form of masculinity; thus, femininity in Nietzsche is not comparable to, but intersectional with, blackness. This is why, I argue, Nietzsche offers both femininity and "southern" (that is, Mediterranean) culture as antidotes to European skeptical melancholy. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche uses a feminized, racially exotic "popular" to critique the "seriousness" of European metaphysics and morality (what Gooding-Williams calls "the melancholy of a skeptic" [Gooding-Williams 2006, 54]). "Joyful wisdom" or "gay science" is Nietzsche's remedy for this "skeptical melancholy," and he describes it using metaphors of femininity, dancing, and Italian (as opposed to German) opera. If, as Gooding-Williams suggests, "Ariadne is the rejoinder to Zarathustra's lament, because she is a metaphor for the power of receptivity" (Gooding-Williams 2006, 48), we must remember that Ariadne is, as Strauss's opera reminds us, from Naxos (a Mediterranean island). By nineteenth-century standards, *Ariadne* is not *white*.

Though Nietzsche's discussion of aesthetic receptivity is more complicated than Gooding-Williams presents it to be, I still think Gooding-Williams's

critique of Nietzsche deserves consideration. In the second subsection below, I supplement Gooding-Williams's critique with the one Battersby offers in her reading of Nietzsche's notion of sublimity. Battersby argues that Nietzsche's receptive subject does not so much *appropriate* racially exotic femininity as learn to identify and foster the "feminine" traits he already possesses (but is encouraged to moderate). This results in a climate wherein femininity and nonwhiteness are valued only when they appear in white male bodies. I will argue that Battersby's distinction between "otherness" as external and "otherness" as internal tracks shifts from classically liberal to neoliberal models of "difference," respectively. This shift in how "difference" is conceived and handled parallels and contributes to the changing status and function of white and nonwhite feminized populars in late-twentieth-century Anglo-American pop culture.

#### ZARATHUSTRA AND WHITE MASCULINITY

Gooding-Williams repeatedly notes the role of masculinity in Nietzsche's critique of reactive Western metaphysics and its ascetic ideal; for example, he notes that Nietzsche faults European philosophy for the fact that it "sees the dry, passionless spectator as the paradigm of scholarly excellence" (Gooding-Williams 2006, 45). As a disinterested judge who must remove himself from all his real-world commitments, the idealized Western intellectual exhibits, as Foucault's reading of Plato demonstrates, a normatively masculine relation to himself, to his body, to others, and to the world.<sup>4</sup> In a binary gender system, then, the opposite of masculine disembodiment and alienation is feminine embodied immediacy. However, the masculinity and femininity in play here are not racially unmarked (if only for the reason that gender is never racially unmarked), but is an implicitly white, masculine subject in search of receptivity, which Nietzsche frames in terms of white femininity or a racially darkened and exoticized "south."

Gooding-Williams describes Zarathustra's masculine alienation, his tendency to "withdraw into himself" (Gooding-Williams 2006, 47), in the same terms that are often used to describe white identity and white embodiment. Locating knowledge in a metaphysical sphere, Zarathustra's knower "projects the image of a deathly and otherworldly life, appearing to be a shadowy phantom whose essence is suprasensible" (47). If, as Richard Dyer argues, "the soul, the mind, and also emptiness, non-existence and death" are "part of what makes white people socially white" (Dyer 1997, 45), then this epistemic idealization of death-like disembodiment can be understood as a manifestation of the more general structures of white identity. In Gooding-Williams's characterization of Zarathustra, the source of the knower's melancholy is his perceived loss of embodiment—that is, his whiteness. If, as Dyer argues, "whiteness involve[s] something that is in but not of the body" (14), then the fact that Zarathustra's masculine knower

“personif[ies] a happiness that ‘smells’ of contempt for the earth, yet not of the earth itself” (Gooding-Williams 2006, 47), makes it clear that the knower’s masculine disinterestedness is a distinctly white form of masculinity. Although Nietzsche *implicitly* racializes masculinity, the implicit white racialization is part of the logic of whiteness itself; as I will show below, he *implicitly* racializes white femininity, but *explicitly* racializes nonwhite femininities.<sup>5</sup>

If white masculinity is the cause of Zarathustra’s disembodied melancholy, then he seeks to appropriate white femininity—that is, “passivity, expectancy, receptivity, a kind of sacred readiness” (Dyer 1997, 17)—as a means to restore his receptivity. This ethereal state of suspended animation is, according to *The Gay Science*, exactly what patriarchy attributes to and expects from women/femininity:

All great noise leads us to move happiness into some quite distance. When a man stands in the midst of his own noise, in the midst of his own surf of plans and projects, then he is apt also to see quiet, magical beings gliding past him and to long for their happiness and seclusion: women. He almost thinks that his better self dwells there among the women, and that in these quiet regions even the loudest surf turns into deathly quiet, and life itself into a dream about life. (Nietzsche 1974, 123)

Nineteenth-century European patriarchy characterizes white women as beautiful, unperturbed “angels in the house.” Nietzsche’s women’s whiteness is evident in the last clause of the quote above: the quiet is “deathly,” and one avoids life’s vicissitudes by inhabiting a spiritual, disembodied realm. Echoing Dyer’s language of whiteness as deathliness, Nietzsche describes this feminine distance as what it would be like “not to be dead and yet no longer alive” (Nietzsche 1974, 123). This white femininity provides the masculine subject a refuge from the literal and figurative “noise” of industrial society (and its alienation).<sup>6</sup> Although this ghostly white femininity serves as a respite from the hubbub of modern life, it does not sensitize one to affect. Because of its whiteness, this femininity keeps embodiment, particularly embodied affect, at a distance.

Derrida emphasizes this quality of women/femininity, their “action at a distance,” and connects *distanz* with Nietzsche’s all-important metaphor of dancing—that is, *tanzen* (see Derrida 1981). Dancing is a metaphor for a receptive Zarathustra, for the “joyful wisdom” that redeems Europe’s life-negating, melancholic will-to-truth. Nietzsche claims: “I would not know what the spirit of a philosopher might wish more than to be a good dancer. For the dance is his ideal, also his art, and finally also his only piety” (Nietzsche 1974, 346). So, Nietzsche’s “joyful” philosopher is not distanced from his body and is sensitive to its affects—he is receptive enough to dance, to take the “dis” out of “dis-tanz,” so to speak. However, Nietzsche thinks identification with/appropriation of white femininity is not necessarily enough to accomplish this.

Besides women, the other group Nietzsche associates with dancing is southern Europeans—darker-skinned Europeans whose whiteness has historically been questioned and/or qualified. (Simply put, in the nineteenth century, Italians were not considered fully “white” like Anglo-Saxons [Germans, the English]; see Painter 2010.) According to Nietzsche, “southern” artworks—in particular, Italian opera, which is highly melodic and tuneful, and often considered “light” or mere entertainment—are preferable to “northern” or “German” artworks (specifically, Wagnerian chromaticism). As Nietzsche explains,

The vulgar element in everything that gives pleasure in Southern Europe—whether it be Italian opera or the Spanish novel of adventure—does not escape me, but it does not offend me ... How come? Is it because there is no sense of shame and everything vulgar appears as poised and self-assured as anything noble, lovely, and passionate in the same sort of music or novel? ... That seems to me to be the moral of this story and the peculiarity of Southern humanity ... Hence there is no point in objecting to the element of masquerade in the melodies and cadenzas, in the leaps and jollities that mark the rhythms of these operas[,] ... the delight in masks and the good conscience in using any kind of mask! (Nietzsche 1974, 131–32)

Italian opera, unlike German, has overcome its will-to-truth: with the knowledge that “authenticity” and “realism” are themselves artifices, “southern” works emphasize pleasure, beauty, and artificiality over these more traditional qualities of “fine art.” Thus, it unabashedly and with “good conscience” delights in artifice or “the mask”: with their rhythmic “leaps and jollities,” southern works dance. Moreover, as “vulgar,” indeed, *popular* music, Italian opera *ought* to be more concerned with catchy hooks than with aesthetic or philosophical complexity—and, for Nietzsche, that’s nothing to be ashamed of. According to Nietzsche, women share this lack of shame or “good conscience” in artifice and dancing.<sup>7</sup>

In my book *The Conjectural Body*, I give a thorough account of Nietzsche’s mutual reevaluation of both the feminine and the popular as a means to critique European metaphysics and morality, so I’ll be quite brief here. Basically, Nietzsche argues that European culture devalues both women and femininity because they are thought to be superficial and merely physical (rather than intellectual). However, because Nietzsche thinks there is no “reality” hidden behind “mere” appearance, being superficial is not a deficit but an asset. If “the most superficial and external aspect of existence—what is most apparent, its skin and sensualization—would be grasped first, and might even be the only thing that allowed itself to be grasped (Nietzsche 1974, 125), then women, who “consider the superficiality of existence its essence” (125) have an epistemic *advantage* over those European metaphysicians and moralists obsessed with depth and profundity. In

the previous paragraph, we saw that Nietzsche values “light” Italian opera over “serious” German music; similarly, Nietzsche values the *explicitly feminized attributes of the popular*—superficiality, sensuality, artificiality—as a way of opposing European epistemic and ethical norms.

Nietzsche thinks “Italians” and other “southerners” share women’s “good conscience in using any kind of mask,” that is, their refusal to privilege “profundity” or “essence” over “existence.” For example, Nietzsche claims that the more one distances oneself from one’s body and from music, the more one has “wax in one’s ears” (Nietzsche 1974, 332, a clear reference to Descartes and Odysseus), the more the practice of philosophy is a “kind of vampirism” wherein philosophers “become ever paler” (333).<sup>8</sup> The cure for this vampirism is found in listening to “sirens’ music” and/or on a “southern island” (332). Thus, for Nietzsche, *both* femininity *and* not-entirely-white “southern” identity is required to fully possess the joyful wisdom, the ability to dance, the “good conscience” that are necessary for overcoming the “seriousness” of European metaphysics and morality. White femininity is still somewhat distanced from corporeal affect; this is why Nietzsche privileges examples of Mediterranean women—the sirens, Ariadne—and describes femininity and the racially exotic in similar terms (for example, good conscience in the use of “mask”). Nietzsche’s popular is *both* feminized and racially exotic.

#### NIETZSCHE, NEOLIBERALISM, AND LIVING WOMEN

Although she does not explicitly call on the language of “the popular,” Battersby also focuses on the role of gender and race in Nietzsche’s concepts of sublimity, joyful wisdom, and his critique of European values. Battersby also finds evidence of Nietzsche’s tendency to equate femininity with racially exotic/orientalized qualities. In her reading, Nietzsche claims Christopher Columbus—an Italian—as an idealized alter ego (Battersby 2007, 182); he attempts to disidentify with his German ethnicity by identifying with this southern European explorer who is strongly associated with the Caribbean. According to Battersby, “Nietzsche allies Columbus with the man who is seduced towards the distant horizon” while at the same time “associat[ing] ‘woman’ with the seductions of distance” (181). Distance—which, as I argued earlier, Nietzsche also associates with dancing, joyful wisdom, and the popular—is a desirable quality found in both femininity and the orient. In this section, I want to address Battersby’s reading of Nietzsche because it raises two important issues: (1) the implications of Nietzsche’s gendered concepts and values for living women—or, whether his revaluation of femininity translates into feminist political and aesthetic positions, and (2) the shift from classically liberal to neoliberal forms of appropriating “Otherness.” Because the significance of Nietzsche’s “feminized popular” for living women depends upon the forms his gendered racialized cultural appropriation takes, I will address the second issue first.

According to Battersby, careful attention to Nietzsche's concept of the eternal return reveals that Nietzsche's appeals to femininity and racially exotic identities are "less appropriative" than are traditional notions of sublimity and receptivity, but are still ultimately detrimental to empirical women (and, presumably, non-whites). The eternal return is a maxim Nietzsche uses to help him practice a "joyful wisdom" based on affirmation and laughter rather than on negation and *ressentiment*: one ought to act, and to view one's actions, as if every moment of one's life would be repeated, innumerable times, for all eternity. Now, Nietzsche doesn't actually think we do relive each moment of our lives; the point is to act as though this were true. If we constantly have to relive our experiences, we had better affirm them than view them as sources of regret or shame. The point of the eternal return is "to privilege laughter over tragedy, and surface over depth" (Battersby 2007, 180). Battersby argues that Nietzsche ultimately uses the concept of the eternal return to critique traditional philosophical conceptions of the "self" and its relation to the "other." He rejects metaphysical binaries of surface and depth, or interior and exterior, in favor of a model of repetition and multiplicity. As Battersby explains, for Nietzsche "there is no 'beyond' and also no concealment—so what is sublime is the will to repetition, and the 'I' emerges from the process of repetition and not from encountering an 'other' to which it is opposed" (178). Traditional aesthetic receptivity relies on a hierarchical encounter in which the "self" identifies with and appropriates desirable aspects of the "other." According to Battersby, Nietzsche's difference-in-repetition model "involves ... a less appropriative relation to surfaces and the 'foreign'" (184) because it cannot be parsed according to the interior/exterior binary that is required to distinguish the "foreign" from the "proper."

If Nietzsche's self does not gain its identity from its opposition to some "other," but from its repetitive self-rehearsal, then it *could* be argued that Nietzsche's notion of receptivity does not so much appropriate women's and nonwhites' stereotypical attributes so much as identify the elements of stereotypical femininity and racial subalternity upon which hegemonic white masculinity depends or assumes, either as repressed content or as constitutive exclusion. But this shift from the "external Other" to the "internal Other," even if "less appropriative," is not less, just *differently exploitative*. Traditional aesthetic receptivity is grounded in a classically liberal conception of "difference" and appropriation; Battersby's Nietzsche, however, assumes a more *neoliberal* configuration of "difference" and cultural appropriation. Classically liberal (modern) logics of cultural appropriation treat difference as something opposed and external to the self or the nation, a foreignness that can be incorporated only when conquered, colonized, and domesticated.<sup>9</sup> Neoliberal (postmodern) logics of cultural appropriation treat "difference" as something internal to the self, (whatever is left of) the nation, or the "network," a (often precious) heterogeneity that needs careful cultivation to augment rather than impede the flourishing of the self, nation, or network.<sup>10</sup> Though it

seems to treat difference more positively—as something to welcome rather than something to eliminate—neoliberalism values “difference” *only when it appears in hegemonic bodies, contexts, and so on*. Battersby’s explanation of the consequences of Nietzsche’s aesthetics for living women makes this quite clear.

Arguing that Nietzsche’s revaluation of femininity turns on the continued marginalization of living women (which, for her purposes, are those with female bodies), Battersby questions the extent to which Nietzsche’s revaluation of femininity and nonwhiteness actually values these qualities when they appear in female and/or nonwhite bodies. Though “Nietzsche will be in many ways helpful,” Battersby finds that “he remains unable to think the bodily in ways that can adequately register female embodiment or the female subject position” (Battersby 2007, 15). According to Battersby, Nietzsche’s revaluation of traditionally feminized attributes hinges upon their remasculinization. For example, Nietzsche continually emphasizes the philosophical importance of the body and embodied experience—both stereotypically feminine/feminized phenomena. However, Nietzsche’s ideal body is a hypermasculine one. Battersby explains:

As in a “well-constructed and happy commonwealth,” within the healthy body it is all a matter of “commanding and obeying,” Nietzsche says, and he employs the metaphors of the “governing class” and the “feelings of delight as commander” to explain how the well-functioning body behaves.... [H]is new physiological model of the sublime nevertheless relies on a combative model of “great health” which negates the materiality of the female self. (187)

Nietzsche exaggerates the stereotypically masculine qualities of his ideal body—competition, mastery, autonomy—in the same way that the rock band Twisted Sister exaggerates the very macho attitudes and capacities of dudes wearing stereotypically feminized attire like hot pink spandex and electric blue eyeshadow (that is, by singing “We’re Not Gonna Take It Anymore!,” beating up male authority figures, and antagonizing Tipper Gore). In both instances, femininity *augments* an already-evident masculinity. Twisted Sister traffics in stereotypically feminine signifiers in order to further cement their masculinity—they are so obviously and securely masculine that not even makeup and hot pink spandex can call it into question. Were femininity to diminish rather than augment masculinity, it would not be aesthetically or socially valuable; femininity is not valued when it appears in women’s bodies or behaviors.

Battersby’s main objection is that Nietzsche’s “healthy body” is ultimately unable to account for “female” experiences of birth and reproduction. Although this objection has its merits and its weaknesses (which I won’t go into here), Battersby’s underlying concern about the continued centering of masculinity still holds, and the quote above indicates one reason why. The “great health” of the

“commonwealth” may revalue traditionally feminized embodiment over traditionally masculinized skeptical melancholy. It is, however, also synonymous with what Michel Foucault identifies as the foundational logic of neoliberalism: “a ‘biopolitics’ of the human race” (Foucault 2003, 243). In the same way that neoliberal biopolitics justifies violence in the name of fostering of “life,”<sup>11</sup> Nietzsche’s aesthetics instrumentalizes racialized femininities in order to foster the “health” of the metaphorical “commonwealth” that is the white, heteromale subject. As a “commonwealth,” Nietzsche’s subject is internally heterogeneous; his “health” is fostered when this heterogeneity is cultivated rather than repressed. Importantly, the “commonwealth” is still *threatened by internal foreignness*; the only beneficial “differences” are the ones that are already assimilated to and continue to center hegemonic norms (whiteness, masculinity, and so on). So, although Nietzsche’s approach to femininity and difference might be critical of classically liberal ones, it is not necessarily less misogynist or racist. This becomes especially clear when we apply Nietzsche’s use of feminized and racialized concepts to the experiences and works of living women, especially living women artists of color.

I strongly agree with Battersby that the ultimate lesson here is that we need to refocus our analyses of femininity/femaleness in aesthetics back on (presently or formerly) living women artists and audiences. Femininity and “female” corporeal styles are valued when they appear in male bodies. However, when femininity and “female” corporeal styles (especially sexually expressive ones) appear in women’s bodies, they are seen as evidence of women’s aesthetic inferiority and incompetence. Similarly, the “feminized popular” is valued when performed and consumed by males, but devalued when performed and consumed by females. To paraphrase Griselda Pollock and Roszika Parker, the sex of the pop star matters; it conditions the way pop is heard and discussed (see Parker and Pollock 1981). We need to value the “feminized popular” especially when it is created and appreciated by living women.

Unsurprisingly, the race of the female artist also determines the degree to which her work is taken seriously. Racially exotic femininities are devalued in some instances, but in other instances they are seen as more “authentic” or “oppositional” than white femininity. In both Nietzsche’s work and in post-World War II American pop culture, we find that stereotypical white femininity is no longer the cure for, but is one of the causes of, the (white, masculine) subject’s lack of receptivity. Associated with bourgeois domesticity and respectability, and thus with European high culture, white femininity becomes, in a society that increasingly values mass culture and popular music, something that the white masculine subject tries to escape and rebel against in his appropriation of stereotypical black masculinity.

In the next section, I examine the role of race and gender in *The Band Wagon*’s narrative about the conflict between pop culture and “fine art.” The

film's protagonist, Tony Hunter (played by Fred Astaire) appropriates stereotypical black masculinity as a means to both (1) restore the "intimacy with existence" (Gooding-Williams 2006, 55) that whiteness denies him but that is necessary for pop-culture success, and (2) protect him from the feminization (passivity, immanence, triviality) that threatens a too-intimate relationship with embodiment and mass culture. Attention to the film's high/low theme makes clear how gender functions *with* race to articulate a specifically twentieth-century version of aesthetic receptivity, namely, "hipness." Whereas "receptivity" is an attempt to rescue femininity from abjection, "hipness" is an attempt to rescue the popular from abject white femininity.

### III. THAT'S ENTERTAINMENT!

In this section, I use *The Band Wagon* to illustrate a shift in white heteropatriarchy's construction and appropriation of the feminized popular. My analysis focuses on two interrelated themes and scenes in the film that are absent from Gooding-Williams's account: the distinction between "fine art" and "entertainment," and the "Girl Hunt" musical-within-a-musical segment. Taken together, they demonstrate that by the mid-twentieth century (1953), the discourse of receptivity is focused primarily on the (white, heteromale) subject's ability to credibly create and be affected by popular culture. The protagonist's appropriation of black masculinity not only cures him of his white disembodied melancholy (as Gooding-Williams claims), but also protects him from the feminizing dangers posed by popular culture. This specifically twentieth-century notion of receptivity is informed more by ideals of "hipness" than by those of "taste."<sup>12</sup> "Hipness" is an attempt *to rescue pop from abject white femininity and to master racially exotic femininities*. Because the discourse of white hipness stereotypes black masculinity as sexually potent, physically strong, and occupying an inherently outsider stance, it is thought to offer a way of countering the "feminizing" effects of mainstream, white, bourgeois society.<sup>13</sup> *The Band Wagon* demonstrates precisely this: "Girl Hunt"'s protagonist performs stereotypical black hetero masculinity in order to protect himself from white femininity (that is, passivity, domesticity, conformity) on the one hand, and black femininity (irresistible and overwhelmingly active sexuality) on the other.

#### (WHITE) HIGH CULTURE AND (BLACK) POP CULTURE

*The Band Wagon* is a musical; released in 1953, it includes the now-famous song "That's Entertainment!" Its main theme, which motivates the conflict in both the main plot and the romantic subplot, focuses on the film's status as art and/or

entertainment, and the conditions of its success as such. The film is ostensibly about movie star Tony Hunter (played by Fred Astaire) and his friends developing, producing, and performing a musical; the romantic subplot involves has-been actor Hunter's growing affection for prima ballerina Gabrielle Girard (played by Cyd Charisse). I'll discuss both plots in order, and show how the romantic subplot furthers the main plot's reflection on serious/pop culture hierarchies.

First, the main plot: In order to help their friend rejuvenate his musical career, the Martons, a husband and wife writing team who are also close friends with Hunter, offer him their latest script. They arrange for another of their friends, renowned stage actor Jeffery Cordova, to produce and direct the play. Representing the white bourgeois establishment and its "high culture," Cordova is introduced immediately following the second musical number, which Gooding-Williams refers to as the Arcade scene. This sequence of scenes (Arcade scene, Cordova's introduction) frames the conflict between highbrow and pop culture as a conflict between characters: Hunter and Cordova. The Arcade scene, to which Gooding-Williams devotes extended attention, is about white culture's domestication of N'awlins jazz into big-band swing. I will review only briefly Gooding-Williams's analysis of the scene's racial politics, and refer readers to his text for a more thorough account. Hunter gets his shoes shined by a black man with whom he soon engages in a song-and-dance duet. Importantly, the shoeshine man, played by Charlie Daniels, uses his tools (brushes, polishing cloths) as percussion instruments and thus "teaches Astaire to 'swing'" (Gooding-Williams 2006, 151). Before Astaire joins Daniels in the number, the music is clearly rougher, brighter, and dirtier. As soon as Astaire begins to sing and dance, the style shifts to a smoother, more elegant, big-band swing feel: timbres are warmer, rhythms are more refined, and the overall mix sounds more sophisticated. So, Hunter's character appropriates "black" jazz and turns it into mass-marketable "swing." In so doing, he both establishes his pop-culture cred—and thus his superiority over other whites ("squares" like, we will soon see, Cordova)—and his cultural mastery—his superiority over black musicians, who, like Daniels's shoeshine man, can't capitalize on their own folk traditions.

The Arcade scene immediately cuts to Cordova's performance of *Oedipus Rex*, and the lively snares, kicks, toms, high-hats, and crashes of the former scene's drum set are juxtaposed to the ponderous-sounding timpani used in the latter scene. Contrasting Hunter's boisterous arcade with Cordova's staid concert hall, Minnelli establishes the conflict between the two men as a microcosm of the bigger ideological contest between "low" and "high" culture. Although, as Gooding-Williams notes, Cordova continually denies any sort of serious/pop or art/entertainment hierarchies, his attempt to demonstrate the falsity of this dichotomy produces an utter flop. Hunter and the Martons recruit Cordova to direct their new show. Collaborating with Cordova, they create a "modern day Faust," a "highbrow" endeavor rife with references to canonical literature and

classical ballet; this production will later be contrasted with the decidedly more lowbrow “Girl Hunt” segment near the end of the film. The film represents the premier of Cordova’s nouveau-Faust production with two black-and-white illustrations: one of a bull’s skull, and one of an egg—both are obviously white in hue and are metaphors for death or failure (“laying an egg,” as the cliché goes). Afterwards, we see patrons file out of the theater in a dazed, zombie-like state. It is clear, then, that this production fails because it is too “white”—still predominantly informed by the sensibilities of European art (for example, all the dancing is classical ballet).

The film contrasts Cordova’s square whiteness with Hunter’s hipness. For example, in the scene where the cast is rehearsing (not insignificantly) the line “We’re all living in the jungle,” Hunter is chided by Cordova for not delivering the line with sufficient emphasis or inflection—in other words, for playing it too “cool.” Preferring entertainment to “edification,” Hunter’s appropriation of the shoeshine man’s blackness endows him not only with “receptivity,” as Gooding-Williams demonstrates, but with “hipness.” While the race-gender politics of “cool” and “hip” have roots in the nineteenth century and beyond, the 1950s are when, with the Beats and with rock and roll, “cool” and “hip” become part of mainstream white youth culture; this film, released in 1953, is right on the cusp of this transformation. Because the “low” end of serious/pop hierarchies is conventionally associated with blackness and with African-American performers and audiences, the film’s reevaluation of “entertainment” and popular culture can be seen as a way to rebel against established white bourgeois values (aesthetic and otherwise). In so doing, the film exemplifies “hipness,” which is, as Ingrid Monson explains, the “American tradition of class abdication through gendered cross-racial emersion” (Monson 1995, 405). Understanding this discourse of hipness, both in general and in its role in the film’s retelling of Bizet’s *Carmen*, will clarify how gender works with race in the film to allow white men to take pleasure in typically feminized and blackened “entertainment.”

#### “GIRL HUNT”: FROM RECEPTIVITY TO HIPNESS

A re-telling of *Carmen*, “Girl Hunt: A Murder Mystery in Jazz” is the centerpiece of the new musical revue that replaced Cordova’s failed Faust-inspired production. *Carmen* is the gypsy mistress of the opera’s protagonist, military officer Don Jose; she leaves him for the toreador Escamillo, and for this Jose kills her in a fit of passion. According to musicologist Susan McClary’s analysis of Bizet’s original, both the opera’s music and libretto hinge upon *Carmen*’s death (McClary 1991). Musically, her seductive chromaticism threatens the stability of the opera’s tonal structure, just as politically, *Carmen*’s own exotic sensuality threatens the stability of her community’s race and class structures.<sup>14</sup> “One of the opera’s central

themes," McClary explains, "involves the necessity for white bourgeois codes of behavior (as exemplified by Michaela [Don Jose's white fiancée]) to reign supreme in the face of the apparently more permissive, more sinister lifestyles of the 'darker races'" (McClary 1991, 63). "Girl Hunt" flips the script on Bizet's original: Hunter (Don Jose) kills the white woman (Michaela)<sup>15</sup> and runs off with the dangerous, dark-skinned one (Carmen). I will show that while Don Jose cannot overcome his passion for Carmen and his jealousy of her lover the Toreador (signified by the trumpet in the famous "Toreador" aria), Hunter masters both the threats posed by nonwhite masculinity (the trumpet's high notes) and his attraction to nonwhite women's sexuality (Carmen, the dark-haired character played by Charisse). This shifting race-gender logic is indicative of the broader shift from traditional aesthetic "receptivity" to neoliberal "hipness."

"Girl Hunt" is about Hunter's investigation of a rather unique murder: while listening to a trumpeter practice, Hunter witnesses a man disappear in a smoky explosion. His investigation brings him to a juke joint called "Dem Bones Café." Here, he realizes that (1) the explosion was triggered when the vibrations from the trumpet-player's highest notes shattered a glass of nitroglycerine, and (2) with a glass of nitroglycerine sitting next to him on the bar, he is being set up for a similar fate. Hunter gets rid of the glass before the trumpeter reaches the necessary note, but then a gangster confronts Hunter with a gun. Hunter manages to fire first, only to discover that the gangster, and the mastermind of both murder attempts, is the Michaela figure, the blond, ballet-dancing white woman. Presenting the white woman as the ultimate threat to Hunter's life, this version of *Carmen* suggests that *white femininity* (representative of the domestic, purity, goodness, orderliness) is the greatest impediment to white male pleasure. Similar to fears that the postindustrial economy "feminized" traditionally male/masculine labor, "Girl Hunt" begins from the assumption that white bourgeois values (such as classical music and ballet) are, at bottom, effeminate, and that they impede white middle-class males from accessing their "raw" strength and virile sexuality. Participation in cultural institutions and dominant cultural discourses is no longer a sign of one's refined judgment, but of one's impotence and ignorance. Aesthetic pleasure, particularly pleasure in "high" culture, is feminizing, and white masculinity is not virile enough to contain the feminizing threats of pleasure. If aesthetic pleasure and white masculinity are feminized, the only way to be a "real" man is to disidentify with whiteness. Hunter exemplifies one common way white men disidentified with whiteness: they appropriated stereotypical black masculinity.

"Girl Hunt"'s dance scene demonstrates that when the virility attributed to black men appears in white men, it is an appropriate counter to the deleterious effects of whiteness on men's aesthetic pleasure. This scene shows Hunter dancing with a dark-haired, overtly sexual woman performed by Charisse's Girard character. With her visible physical features (dark hair, flamboyant dress, effusive

sexuality) and her mastery of African-American popular dance styles, Girard's dark-haired woman is multiply coded as racially nonwhite. Dancing alongside this implicitly blackened woman, Hunter's character masters African-American popular dance, African-American music, and (implicitly) African-American women. By appropriating black musical, corporeal, and sartorial styles, as well as "black" women and the position of black heteropatriarch, Hunter's character demonstrates both his renewed receptivity to aesthetic and corporeal affect, *and* his superiority over both actual black men (because he's white) and, more important, other white men (because he's "hip").

The fate of the female characters in "Girl Hunt" represents Hunter's newfound virility as the ability to neutralize the threats of passivity, domesticity, and prudishness posed by white femininity, on the one hand, and the threats of hyperactive, devouring sexuality posed by black femininity on the other.<sup>16</sup> By killing "Michaela" and running off with "Carmen," Hunter's "Don Jose" establishes his pop-culture "cred" and his elite status among whites in one gesture. Although Hunter renounces the values of white bourgeois "high" culture by embracing black vernacular traditions (music, dance) and, indeed, a "black" woman, his ability to profit from and not succumb to the dangers otherwise concomitant with stereotypical black identity demonstrates that he retains, in the end, his variously privileged white identity. To paraphrase Chow, "Girl Hunt"'s splitting of the female role between a white and a nonwhite woman further reinforces the man's position as the film's narrative center.

#### IV. HIPNESS, DIFFERENCE, AND THE CONTINUED CENTERING OF WHITE MASCULINITY

In this context, we can fully appreciate Gooding-Williams's remark that "the blackness Astaire gets" functions by "augmenting his masculinity" (Gooding-Williams 2006, 58). It is a specific form of stereotypical black masculinity that allows Hunter to both access pleasure (via receptivity), and master it in his attainment of pop-culture/Broadway success. White male appropriations of black masculinity allow the white masculine subject to experience aesthetic pleasure in a properly "virile" fashion, thus resisting the dangers that come with receptivity—passivity, vulnerability, fallibility, immediacy—dangers that women and black men are too weak to resist. As in Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*, contemporary Anglo-American popular culture feminizes receptivity to aesthetic pleasure; in the mid-twentieth century, however, white masculinity is too alienated, too intellectualized, too conformist to be a sufficient defense against the feminizing effects of aesthetic pleasure. White males need to appropriate not only "feminized" receptivity, but a hypermasculinized blackness, so that they can both experience *and control* pleasure. It is therefore key that this pleasure is available only to white men, for it is their appropriation of traits that, when present in blacks and

women (note the erasure of black women here), are dangerous, is the source of “rejuvenation.” Gooding-Williams notes that Minnelli “attributes a blackened masculinity to Astaire, but denies that a blackened masculinity endangers white women” (59). This denial is possible because Astaire is white. White patriarchy stereotypes black masculinity as inherently and inordinately dangerous; however, when it appears in a white male body, these threats are neutralized.

As I have demonstrated above, Hunter’s performance of stereotypical black masculinity gives him not only “receptivity,” the ability to access pleasure, but also physical and sexual virility, the masculine strength necessary to remain active in relation to pleasures that might otherwise be overwhelming and passivizing. *The Band Wagon* presents pop culture’s triumph over European high culture, black folk culture, and, as “Girl Hunt” shows us, over abject white femininity. Hunter uses blackness to augment his (white) masculinity, which in turn allows him to be receptive to pop culture without succumbing to its perceived femininity (either a too-passive/white or too-active/black corporeality).

The film illustrates one way in which mid-twentieth-century discourses of hipness reverse the gendering of the serious/pop hierarchy: pop culture is the province of “real” men (or, white men acting like they think black men act), and European high culture is now associated with abject white femininity. As I have argued above, this reversal coincides with the revision of receptivity into hipness. Though receptivity revalues the feminized popular, hipness rescues pop from devalued femininity. Receptivity disassociates “femininity” from females of all races, and values it when exhibited in/by white male bodies, but hipness dissociates the popular from femininity and whiteness, and values the popular when performed by white men “acting black.” Missing in both discourses are living women, white and nonwhite. So, Battersby’s critique of Nietzsche ultimately applies to both discourses of receptivity and to hipness. Feminists must continue to work toward a way of valuing the feminized popular when performed and consumed by women, especially women of color.

## NOTES

A version of this paper was previously presented at the 2011 Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy, and it was inspired by a response I gave to Robert Gooding-Williams’s 2004 talk at DePaul University. This paper was also the basis of a seminar I gave at the 2010 PIKSI Summer Institute, as the American Society for Aesthetics Diversity Lecturer. I am grateful to all the commenters, and especially to my *Hypatia* reviewers, for all their insightful feedback.

1. This article expands upon both (1) my previous reworking of Gooding-Williams, which argued that race and gender work *together* in both Nietzsche’s and Minnelli’s renderings of aesthetic receptivity, and (2) my earlier work on the feminized popular generally, and its appearance in Nietzsche’s work in particular. See James 2009; 2010a; 2010b.

2. Just to clarify: I am not endorsing Nietzsche's views here. I'm arguing that Nietzsche *exemplifies* and is helpful in identifying a *problematic phenomenon* that becomes a central feature of Western pop-cultural aesthetics in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

3. Don Jose kills Carmen in a fit of passion and jealousy. Thus his desire for her transforms him from a paragon of law and order (he's in the military) to a criminal.

4. "What was affirmed through this conception of mastery as active freedom was the 'virile' character of moderation.... Self-mastery was a way of being a man with respect to oneself" (Foucault 1990/1997, 82–83).

5. Nietzsche does not seem to find it necessary to racially disaggregate white and non-white masculinities. As an astute audience member at my presentation of this paper at the 2011 SPEP meeting pointed out, "Zarathustra" is a non-European figure, a representative of Persian masculinity. The role of race in Nietzsche's treatment of masculinity bears further consideration in another venue. I want to focus, in this article, on *femininity*, so I'm limiting my discussion of masculinity to those instances that bear on Nietzsche's use of femininity.

6. This floating above things is characteristic of the redeemed, receptive subject: Nietzsche argues that "we need all exuberant, floating, dancing, mocking, childish, and blissful art lest we lose the freedom above things that our ideal demands of us.... We should be *able* also to stand *above* morality—and not only to stand with the anxious stiffness of a man who is afraid of slipping and falling any moment, but also to *float* above it and *play*" (Nietzsche 1974, 164).

7. "Old women are more skeptical in their most secret heart of hearts than any man: they consider the superficiality of existence its essence, and all virtue and profundity is to them merely a veil over this 'truth,' a very welcome veil over a pudendum—in other words, a matter of decency and shame, and no more than that" (Nietzsche 1974, 125).

8. In the *Odyssey*, receptivity to music and to corporeal affect is cleaved from social authority, order, and the functioning of the status quo. In order that the ship continue on its voyage back to Greece (and that Odysseus's orders be carried through, that he return to his estate to reclaim his proper title as patriarch, and so on), receptivity to music and corporeal affect must be separated from the working and navigation of the ship. Odysseus has free ears, but a bound body, and his crew have closed ears and (relatively) free bodies. Everybody has some form of bonds: either bound ears or a bound body. It is only these literal, physical bonds that allow for music and corporeal affect to coexist with the orderly functioning of a European patriarchal institution (the military ship), and European patriarchy itself. What is new in the nineteenth century is the idea of *racial whiteness*: it is the *metaphorical bondage medium* that substitutes for the wax or ropes in the *Odyssey*. Racial whiteness moderates and domesticates receptivity to musical and corporeal affect, which would otherwise steer the erstwhile "ship" (men's bodies, patriarchy, and so on) off course. I am grateful to one of my anonymous reviewers for helping me think through this point.

9. For further discussion of the contrast between classically liberal and neoliberal constructions of difference and cultural appropriation, see Winnubst 2011. This shift between classically liberal and neoliberal logics of "difference" can also be traced in Puar 2007, especially in her discussions of homonationalism, superpanopticism, and profiling.

10. Foucault explains the shift from classically liberal conceptions of external threats to neoliberal conceptions of internal threats as follows: "We have to defend society

against all the biological threats posed by the other race, the subrace, the counterrace that we are, despite ourselves, bringing into existence.’... At this point ... we see the appearance of a State racism: a racism that society will direct against itself, against its own elements and its own products. This is the internal racism of permanent purification, and it will become one of the basic dimensions of social normalization” (Foucault 2003, 62).

11. Biopolitical administration is, as Foucault explains, “the acquisition of power over man insofar as man is a living being, that the biological came under State control, that there was at least a certain tendency that leads to what might be termed State control of the biological” (Foucault 2003, 240)

12. For more on hipness and taste, see James 2009. For more on postmillennial hipness, see James 2011.

13. One of my anonymous reviewers pointed out that some white stereotypes about black men frame them as feminine and feminized, their blackness preventing them from exhibiting “genuine” (that is, white) masculinity. Although such stereotypes certainly exist, aesthetic receptivity and hipness deal with a very specific stereotype about black masculinity, one that is in fact inconsistent with other stereotypes that feminize them. In these discourses, which are obviously part of white culture and from white perspectives, black masculinity is an *antidote* to femininity/feminization, not continuous with or analogous to it.

14. As McClary explains, “despite the undeniably greater popular appeal of the gypsy dances, the musical conventions regulating structure turn out to reside on the side of the unfortunate white, male, high-art ‘victim,’ whose duty it is finally to purge all traces of the exotic and chromatic, to restore social and musical order *at any cost*” (McClary 1991, 61).

15. According to McClary, “the character of Michaela, Don Jose’s childhood sweetheart, represents the stereotypical Angel in the House: the sexless, submissive ideal of the bourgeoisie” (McClary 1991, 57).

16. In a number that was deleted from the final cut of the film, Charisse dances to a song called “Two Faced Woman” <http://jp.youtube.com/watch?v=25MwJ65Yloo> (Accessed 3/25/2011). This song seems to suggest that Charisse’s character represents both black and white femininity (dark and light, day and night, purity and sensuality, as the lyrics say). Hunter’s wooing of Charisse’s character is further evidence that he has conquered the threats posed by both white femininity and black femininity.

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