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## In but not of, of but not in: On Taste, Hipness, and White Embodiment

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## In but not of, of but not in: On Taste, Hipness, and White Embodiment

*Robin James*

### Abstract

The status of the body figures paradoxically in the interrelated discourses of whiteness, aesthetic taste, and hipness. While Richard Dyer's analysis of whiteness argues that white identity is "in but not of the body," Carolyn Korsmeyer's and Julia Kristeva's feminist analyses of aesthetic "taste" demonstrate that this faculty is traditionally conceived as something "of" but not "in" the body. While taste directly distances whiteness from embodiment, hipness negatively affirms this same distance: the hipster proves his elite status within white culture by positioning himself as, in the words of James Chance's song title, "Almost Black." The notion of hip contributes to my analysis of taste by focusing on both the gender politics of white embodiment, and how, by taking the social body as object of the prepositions "in" and "of," these discourses of taste and hipness produce individual bodies as white, and maintain Whiteness as a socio-political norm.

### Key Words

aesthetics, body, Dyer, feminist, hipness, James Chance, Korsmeyer, Kristeva, popular music, race, taste, whiteness

### 1. Introduction

The status of the body figures paradoxically in both discourses of whiteness and of aesthetic taste. While Richard Dyer's analysis of whiteness argues that white identity is "in but not of the body," [1] feminist analyses of aesthetic "taste" demonstrate that this faculty is traditionally conceived of as something "of" but not "in" the body. To be "of" (or not "of") a body is an ontological claim, an assertion of origin or provenance: to be "of" a body is to have a corporeal origin. To be "in" (or not "in") a body is a claim about location with respect to the body, an assertion of a body's proper attributes: to be "in" a body is to be a part of it, contained in it, incorporated by it. Accordingly, white identity is something contained in, but not original to, the white body, whereas aesthetic taste is something originally corporeal that now operates outside the body (i.e., in the intellect). To claim that white identity and aesthetic taste are "in but not of" or "of but not" in the body, respectively, is to say that they both corporeal and not corporeal, embodied and not embodied. It is my contention that the hegemonic function of both whiteness and taste is reinforced by this apparently paradoxical, but in effect politically flexible and powerful notion of embodiment. Indeed, "taste" becomes one of the most significant yet invisible components of white privilege precisely because it enables normative whiteness to act on and through bodies via notions of pleasure and disgust.

While the paradoxical relationship between whiteness, taste, and embodiment is centuries in the making, "hipness" is one of the most overt and widespread contemporary manifestations of this in-but-not-of/of-but-not-in logic. "Hip"

is the performance of stereotypical black male embodiment by whites: it is something supposedly "of" black bodies, but not "in" them; it is "in" white bodies but not "of" them. Moreover, the hipster attempts to situate himself as "of" but not "in" mainstream white culture. If taste is a necessarily unsuccessful attempt to decorporealize white identity, hipness is the necessarily unsuccessful attempt to excorporate a specific group of elite whites from white culture. That is to say, hipness disavows "whiteness" in order to more fully confirm the hipster's white privilege. No-Wave saxophonist James Chance's "Almost Black, pt. 1" illustrates precisely this, i.e., that the hipster's apparently racially ambiguous body is, in the end, only desirable when it reaffirms his whiteness. Thinking hipness together with taste demonstrates how the in/of logic of white embodiment works on the *social* body through its work on individual bodies. Moreover, comparing taste's "decorporealization" of white identity with hipness's "excorporation" of elite whites from mainstream white culture shows that, while taste and hipness attempt to achieve very different ends, they employ a generally similar method in so doing, i.e., this paradoxical logic of embodiment.

## 2. Dyer: Whiteness

Paradox abounds in Dyer's analysis of various aspects of whiteness, white identity, and white privilege. Indeed, paradox may be the most consistent thread running through his different approaches to and objects of analysis. [2] First and foremost, whiteness maintains its privileged (i.e., normative) position via its "invisibility," which is in turn achieved, paradoxically, of course, because of its omnipresence: the invisibility of whiteness as a racial position in white (which is to say dominant) discourse is of a piece with its ubiquity." [3] Since it is everywhere, whiteness "appears" to disappear, to be nowhere, because we are, in effect, desensitized to it, just like one becomes accustomed to a particular smell or to the sound of a passing train. We "see" it all the time, so we cease to recognize it as such; thus, whiteness is "invisible." In a society where power functions through visibility and surveillance, the position of the "unseen seer" is one of particular privilege. [4] Thus, while white people "are seen, we do not (and could not possibly) actually inhabit the realm of the unseen, observing subject without properties." [5] In order to maintain the illusion of "featurelessness" and "invisibility," whiteness is conceptualized as "unmarked, unspecific, universal" (ibid.), i.e., the absence of properties. Since whiteness is viewed as a non-property, as nothing in particular, and thus as normal, "white identity" becomes key to "the attainment of a position of disinterest – abstraction, distance, separation, objectivity – which creates a public sphere that is the mark of civilization." [6] This disinterestedness is, as I discuss later, key to the functioning of aesthetic taste, particularly in those theories (such as Kant's) wherein it functions precisely as the means to or foundation of a common, public, political space. What is particularly noteworthy in the context of this paper is that the false universalization of whiteness/white identity which grounds its normative force is made possible, in part, by its quite specific character of appearing as "in" but not "of" the body, present by virtue of its absence.

"Whiteness," explains Dyer, "is the sign that makes white people visible as white, while simultaneously signifying the character of white people, which is invisible." [7] Described in this way, paradox seems central to the functioning and significance of whiteness, for, in Dyer's analysis, "white" marks white people as unmarked, posits a contentless content, brings "non-existence" into existence, and renders "invisibility" visible. Although its normative status is achieved in terms of its relative invisibility and non-presence, white identity must be perceptible to others: to enjoy the privileges of whiteness, one must display the markers whereby one is recognized as such. Thus, the visible indices of white identity cannot themselves contain the "essence" of whiteness: "[t]o be seen as white," Dyer explains, "is to have one's corporeality registered, yet true whiteness resides in the non-corporeal." [8] While white privilege requires that white identity be read "in" the body, genuine whiteness is not viewed to be "of" the body. Because the purest whiteness must not be contaminated by the corporeal, white women and poor/working-class whites – who are more strongly associated with both the body and with physical labor (both productive and reproductive) – can be read as less "white" than bourgeois males.

This sort of disembodied subjectivity, a non-present presence, is echoed in Dyer's analysis of the status of white as a hue. In color theory, white is the absence of color, yet practically this presents difficulties: "white may not be a colour, yet in practice it is difficult to treat it as if it is not one," [9] for there are various tones and shades of "white", and "white" is obviously something different from "clear" (which might be more correctly the "absence" of color). Moreover, "there is a further paradox to all this, in that standard school science teaches that white is made of all colours fused together: white is no colour because it is all colours." [10] The paradoxes of white-as-hue are parallel to those operative in discourses of whiteness-as-identity: whiteness is nothing because it is everything, while in the same moment its very existence is grounded in non-existence. Accordingly, Dyer explains that "the slippage between white as a color and white as colorlessness forms part of a system of thought and affect whereby white people are both particular and nothing in particular, are both something and non-existent." [11] As "nothing in particular," whiteness is thus normal, average, common; however, as whiteness is itself something quite particular, it is precisely the opposite of a universal or commonality. Later in the paper I will discuss the role of this individual-universal dynamic in conceptualizations of aesthetic taste (which, in my mind, functions beyond or in addition to the sort of false universalism at work in theories of disinterestedness); for now what is important is that, like aesthetic taste, which abstracts from intimate bodily experiences to ideal social norms, whiteness transposes a specific sort of embodiment into cognitive and political ideals.

### **3. Korsmeyer and Kristeva on Taste**

While Dyer posits that whiteness is "in" but not "of" the body, something "that is realized in and yet is not reducible to the corporeal," [12] Carolyn Korsmeyer and Julia Kristeva's various feminist reassessments of traditional Western discourses of aesthetic taste demonstrate that it is usually

conceived of as something paradoxically “of” but not “in” the body, i.e., as something that begins in/from the body but exceeds and transcends its corporeal underpinnings, and is thereby most properly realized in non-corporeal domains (cognition, politics, etc.).

Korsmeyer observes that gustatory taste includes in both its experience and its conceptualization all the key aspects philosophers sought in/from aesthetic taste: immediate, intimate pleasure or displeasure, and notions of refinement and education, to name a few. Identifying as “paradoxical” the fact that gustatory taste “provides the language, indeed the conceptual framework,” [13] for aesthetic taste, while the actual sense faculty of tasting and the savoring of food is excluded from the purview genuine aesthetic appreciation, Korsmeyer argues that Western philosophy’s anxieties about femininity and embodiment necessitate the disavowal of aesthetic theory’s reliance on the experience of eating and drinking. [14] Gustatory taste, as the subjective experience of one’s intimate bodily sensations, concerns itself with perishable, transient goods and pleasures, with utility (one must eat to survive), with the private and domestic, and with material objects – all things stereotypically associated with women and non-whites.

Indeed, as Korsmeyer and others have argued, early theorists of aesthetic taste were motivated to distinguish a properly refined bourgeois masculine pleasure in art from unrestrained, corporeal pleasure in sex. In so doing, gustatory taste functions as the ground against which aesthetic taste – which is supposed to be universal, disinterested, and concerned with art only for art’s sake – is defined. [15] Thus, if gustatory taste is the key model for thinking about aesthetic taste, we see that aesthetic taste is grounded in bodily sensation, and in this sense “of” the body; however, insofar as traditional discourses of aesthetic taste seek to remove “taste” from the intimacy of the body and transplant it into the intellect and the public sphere, aesthetic taste is not located “in” the body but in the mind. Hence, for example, Kant claims that the experience of the sublime elicits pleasure by prompting one to reflect on one’s intellectual capacities and not, notably, on nature or art. Aesthetic taste is something intellectual and public modeled after something that is corporeal and intimate – it is “of” but not “in” the body.

This paradoxical status is, to extend Korsmeyer’s argument, necessary if the concept of aesthetic taste is to accomplish what its eighteenth- and nineteenth-century theorists designed it to do, i.e., serve as the basis for a subjective universal or *sensus communis*. Indeed, what Korsmeyer labels “the so-called problem of taste”, namely, “how to acknowledge the subjectivity of taste yet retain a foundation for standards of taste when discussing art” [16] is strikingly similar to what Dyer identifies as the paradox of whiteness, i.e., its status as “universal” or normative arises from its status as a highly specific and highly privileged category; that is to say, whiteness, like aesthetic taste, is a “subjective universal.” It is because they have this status, i.e., as norm and, because privileged, as applying to “everyone,” yet/because only to a strictly limited group, [17] that whiteness and aesthetic taste exhibit this paradoxical logic of dis/embodiment. Indeed, as

scholarship has shown, the very norms falsely universalized by aesthetic taste were patriarchal, European, bourgeois, heteronormative ones. [18]

Kristeva's more psychoanalytically and phenomenologically oriented account of aesthetic taste examines the paradoxical dynamic of embodiment in greater depth. While Korsmeyer offers a feminist critique of traditional discourses of aesthetic taste, Kristeva's project is more of a re-working thereof. Kristeva describes taste as a stage where the intimate and the public confront one another in ways which transform both. Rather than disavowing or rejecting the individual, subjective, and intimate, Kristeva's notion of taste seeks to describe the interactions which blur the border(s) between individual and society, particular and universal. It is precisely taste which bridges intimate and public life, thus making each possible: "The most intimate of the perceptions, and one that mobilizes an orality and a sense of smell that are far more internal than are the other senses (sight, hearing, and touch), taste nevertheless possesses the capacity to be shared." [19] Gustatory and olfactory senses function via the incorporation of external objects into the perceiving subject; at the same time, argues Kristeva, these senses situate bodily and psychic interiority in discourse and (re)cognizable experience.

Politics is possible, according to Kristeva, because a common – if not always consciously thematized – discourse works on and through bodies, rendering them speaking, sensing, and thinking subjects. The body politic, the arena of free action, intellectual inquiry, civilization and culture is possible precisely because it is also a sphere of intimate bodily sensation. [20] Indeed, Kristeva's purpose here is to question the boundaries between "public" and "private", intellect and body. Taste or "common sense" (i.e., *sensus communis*) is so effective/affective because "it is the 'effect of a reflection upon the mind'" which "affects me as a sensation would." [21] A socially constructed and shared discourse, taste subjectivizes (in Judith Butler's sense) the body, and is the locus where the social becomes material, and the intimate appears as such by virtue of its social mediation. Kristeva explains that, according to Arendt,

'the it-pleases-or-displeases-me, which as a feeling seems so utterly private and non-communicative, is actually rooted in this community sense and is therefore open to communication once it has been transformed by reflection, which takes all others and their feelings into account.' Put another way, when we taste or judge, we judge in our role as a 'member of a community.' [22]

Intimate and shared, bodily and discursive, Kristeva's notion of taste maintains a paradoxical, if deconstructed, relationship to embodiment. Even though she renders ambiguous any strict distinctions between material and intellectual, individual and social, Kristeva nevertheless posits taste as something that is something both "in" and "not in", "of" but "not of" the body. While political life and the life of the mind incorporate intimate bodily sensation, this sensation is never fully "in" nor "of" the body: "an always already socialized sensation," [23] Unlike

traditional formulations, Kristeva's deconstructed notion of taste does not disavow the role of embodiment in "common sense," but it does not for that fact re-conceive or re-situate taste's non-embodied embodiment (of but not in) or embodied non-embodiment (in but not of).

Both whiteness and taste are "always already socialized sensation[s]" [24] which, in conjunction with gender, sexuality, class, and ability, function to differentially situate bodies with respect to the body politic. Just as the "common sense" of taste indicates that "we belong from the outset to a community that requires neither understanding or moral imperatives to create itself but that nevertheless operates out of an always already socialized sensation," [25] whiteness operates as a grouping whose membership is determined by neither cognitive nor moral criteria, but through "an always already socialized sensation," a training of the body, a specific means of relating to the body in which learned behaviors are experienced as "my true inner self," or as a "gut reaction." [26] Kristeva acknowledges that "taste, which cannot be translated into words, is impossible to memorize, and is instantaneous and irresistible." [27] Just as one cannot develop a gustatory palate by reading a book, "common sense" is a sort of *savoir-faire* acquired as the body is socialized and subjectivized. Because taste appears to be internal, private, and not socially-mediated, it can be understood as or felt to be irrefutable: *chacun à son gout*. Moreover, it seems to be the natural consequence or feature of a particular type of embodiment, just as childbearing appears to be the natural consequence of female embodiment, or that predispositions to certain diseases are considered to be the natural consequence of certain genetic configurations.

The effect of this, then, is that it naturalizes socio-political relations constructing individual bodies in accordance with the prerequisites of the body politic. Thus, in the context of white privilege and normative whiteness, these social structures will be reproduced in and reinforced by dominant constructions of white embodiment. Angela Davis's discussion of the "racially segregationist distribution strategy" applied to mid-twentieth-century American popular music illustrates quite clearly the normative advantages derived from the confluence of whiteness and taste around a particularly paradoxical mode of embodiment. Arguing that the distinction between "race" music and implicitly "normal" or universal but in fact "white" music "implicitly instructed white ears to feel revolted by the blues and, moreover, to assume that this sense of revulsion was instinctive," Davis shows how white privilege locates itself as something simultaneously "in" but not "of" the body (as the "feeling" of social privilege) and "of" but not "in" it (as taste). Part of the "natural" experience of whiteness was to feel (in and with the body, but an always socially-mediated body) that non-whiteness (a social category, but one that is about and operates on bodies) was disgusting, i.e., dis-tasteful. It is my argument that whiteness and taste function together so powerfully because they are symmetrically and complementarily paradoxical in their embodiment: whiteness is "in but not of", and taste is "of but not in" the body. In but not in, of but not of, both whiteness and taste function normatively because they are everywhere but nowhere, universal but intimate.

#### 4. From Taste to Hip(ness)

This paradoxical logic of racialized embodiment evinces itself not only in the traditional, high-culture discourse of taste but also in more contemporary and pop-culture deployments of "hip." While, historically, "hip" and "taste" are very different in some important respects, at a more abstract, structural level they have much in common, particularly with respect to whiteness, differential privilege among whites, and white masculine embodiment. Both concepts indicate a certain form of refined discernment, either a *savoir-faire* or a learned judgment, the practice of which accords one special social status apart from various brands of "uneducated" or "clueless" masses. While taste arose as part of the consolidation of the white European bourgeois patriarchy, hipness emerged as a means for a certain elite portion of the white bourgeois patriarchy to affirm its privilege by rejecting what had become, by the twentieth century, feminized mainstream white bourgeois culture. [29] Picking up on "an American tradition of class abdication through gendered cross-racial emersion" [30] hipness is the inversion of taste: taste was meant to confirm class aspiration; hip is class abdication – both, however, function to assert and reaffirm white masculine privilege. Indeed, if taste asserts white masculinity insofar as it is defined against sexual desire and gustatory pleasure, then hipness affirms white masculinity in an approbation of a *specific sort* of sexual desire and sensory pleasure (i.e., an appropriately masculine one).

In the West, "hipness," i.e., the all-too-knowing, rebellious, and avant-garde rejection of bourgeois values (both by avant-garde scenesters and suburban kids trying to annoy their parents), is usually figured as something "of" black male bodies but of necessity not "in" them; alternately, it is something sort of "in" or "on" white bodies, but decidedly not "of" them. If "taste" expresses bourgeois white patriarchy's desire to appropriate and subjectivize white bodies with techniques and practices which *appear* to sever ties to embodiment, then "hipness" expresses the desire of a certain elite portion of the bourgeois white patriarchy to claim for itself a superior relationship to both the "real world" and "culture" with techniques and practices which *appear* to sever ties to the white bourgeois patriarchy. That is to say, insofar as taste is a white disavowal of embodiment which can never actually reject the body, hipness is the appropriation of the very embodiment disavowed by taste in order to then disavow whiteness and taste in ways which continue to call upon the structures and content hipness supposedly rejects. In the same way in which whiteness ultimately needs bodies to be read as white, hipness ultimately needs the values of the white bourgeois patriarchy in order to ground its cultural and political claims. In order to more fully *conform* to white bourgeois patriarchal ideals, hipsters attempt to *disassociate* themselves with the very white bourgeois patriarchy that underwrites the privilege accorded to this sort of innovative rebel. "Hipsters", in their claims to alienation from white bourgeois patriarchy, are really only attempting to one-up the white bourgeois patriarchy at its own game (by being *more* macho, *more* white). Hip's location within the white bourgeois patriarchy becomes clear when its deployments, both contemporary and historical, are examined in terms of this



paradoxical logic of racialized embodiment exhibited by the related concept of taste.

## 5. Embodied Quintessence

Looking to Ingrid Monson's analysis of the gendered and racialized dynamics of "hip" in the U.S., at least two different layers of hipness's paradoxical relationship to and deployment of embodiment become evident: first, "hipness" is something both ideal and material, "quintessence" and sheer physicality; second, the trappings of hipness are valued when they are viewed as "of" black male bodies but not when seen "in" them, while at the same time these trappings are valued when read in or on white bodies as something precisely not of them.

Throughout the history of its deployment in the U.S., "hip," argues Monson, is "quintessentially defined by and expressed in the sartorial display and bearing of black men." For various reasons, black men were seen to have more "authentic" relationships to their bodies and hence their gender and sexuality and, accordingly, occupy a position outside of or in resistance to dominant white bourgeois culture. [32] In the mid-to-late twentieth century, Western culture itself was considered (from a normatively white, masculine position) to be overdetermined by capitalist relations of production and commodification, and thus assumed to be irreparably alienating and passivizing, i.e., feminizing. When all activities, economic, cultural, and whatever, seem inevitably alienating, then the subject is faced with a seemingly inescapable loss of control, agency, and ownership of both his body and his intellect. Participation in cultural institutions and dominant cultural discourses was no longer a sign of one's refined judgment (i.e., taste), but precisely the opposite, of one's inability to make one's own choices. That is to say, the subject lost the privileges accorded to masculinity in a patriarchal society. Coupled with already-existent stereotypes about the hypersexualized African-American body, African-Americans' marginalization in/exclusion from post-industrial bureaucratized capitalism leads to the mythologization of poor, rural African-American men as more genuinely masculine than those men who participate in feminized dominant (white) culture. [33]

Thus, so the story goes, in adopting the visible bodily styles of black men, one also adopts their "outsider" status. From their often incomplete perceptions of a specifically stylized performance of black male embodiment, white hipsters abstract various modes of speech, comportment, dress, behavior, and thought. Thus, to go back to Monson's claim, the definitive metaphysics of hipness – its quintessence, its very being – consists in *stereotypes about* the embodied styles of black men. What is at issue here is not how actual black men carry themselves but white stereotypes about how they do. In "hip", then, we have something that is not genuinely "of" anyone's body but that gains its cultural cache via the fetishistic disavowal of this fact: hipness is desirable because it is understood to be "of" black male bodies since, in order to maintain its supposedly oppositional status, hip must not be seen to be "of" white bodies or white culture generally. This is so because, (1) as Dyer argues, whites aren't really supposed to have bodies, and (2), if it must be admitted that whites do

have bodies, their phenomenological and political status as white bodies implies that they are too thoroughly assimilated to dominant norms to be adequately "rebellious" or "masculine" bodies. Thus, in order to accede to the privileged position of "'anti-assimilationist' social critic," [34] whites perform "hip" in a way that manifests something in but not of their body; at the same time, this hipness is supposedly "of" a body which it is not at that moment "in."

Just as "taste" is a disavowal of whites' relation to their bodies, "hip" is also a white disavowal of white embodiment, this time mediated by white constructions of black masculinity. Hip attempts to legitimate, in white male bodies, certain modes of physicality and sensory pleasure as "appropriately" white, heterosexual, and masculine. Unlike taste, which is grounded in the abjection of physicality, hipness is an attempt to recoup a supposedly "authentic" relationship to embodiment and agency which mainstream culture renders otherwise inaccessible to the not-quite-privileged-enough masses. The white masculine performance of hipness is not an immediate immersion in physicality so much as a demonstration of one's ability to engage corporeality without thereby falling into a sort of feminized passive immanence.

If, as I have tried to show, "hip" is something that is "in but not of" the body because it is at the same time "of but not in" the Other's body, "hip" can be seen as the properly white and masculine subject's overcoming of the threats of both postindustrial alienation from the body, and of non-white racialized immersion in the body and its concordant alienation from postindustrial society. Like Ulysses, who was able to overcome the dangers of his forays into exotic lands (and women) and return safely home, the hip individual's engagement with "outsider" culture is always undertaken for the purpose of demonstrating one's ability to conquer or domesticate what would otherwise threaten or void one's privilege. What is on display, in the end, is virility, idealized white hetero male sexuality. As with Dyer's analysis of tanning, where he argues that whites' display of dark/non-"white" skin only further affirms their racial privilege by demonstrating that whites can adopt the physical features of non-whites yet nonetheless expect and exercise the privilege which is denied to non-whites precisely on the basis of this physical feature, I argue that hipness is in no way a rejection of the white bourgeois patriarchy, but indeed an affirmation of it, of white male bodies as inherently strong, powerful, virile. [35]

#### **6. "He's *Almost Black*..."**

Simultaneously read as white but not-quite white, non-white but not quite non-white, hipsters "embody" non-white corporeal styles for the express purpose of asserting their white, masculine, bourgeois privilege. Hip's location as *both* "in-but-not-of" and "of-but-not-in" facilitates this apparently ambiguous racial identification, just as ambiguous racial identification is key to the logic and performance of hip. The ambiguous racial identification upon which "hip" turns is borne out in James Chance's song "Almost Black pt. 1." [36] Moving from the mid-1970s New York free jazz scene into the No Wave scene which he and his band The Contortions came to

define, Chance consistently problematized the racial politics of then-contemporary American popular music. After leaving The Contortions, Chance fronted a new band modeled explicitly after the JBs and, accordingly, adopted the new stage name James White (a name which directly contrasts him to the leader of the JBs, James Brown). Later, this same act came to be known as James White and the Blacks. Appearing on James White and the Blacks's 1979 album "Off White," "Almost Black (pt. 1)" addresses the aesthetically and socio-politically privileged position of the white hipster who gains his authority by appearing, as it were, "almost black" but, for that very fact, in the end is all-the-more white. Significantly, the racial status of the "he" under question in the song (implicitly "he" is Chance) turns on his sexuality/sexual performance as a heterosexual male.

Chance's racial ambiguity is borne out in both the lyrics and the formal structure of the song. There are two main parts to the song: the first half contains vocals sung by two females, one presumptively white, the other presumptively black; the second half replaces the female vocalists with Chance's noise-improv alto sax. Initially, the lyrics are delivered in a spoken-word style by alternating white and black female vocalists: first, the white woman posits evidence of Chance's blackness, while the black woman argues that he is not; then, the black woman puts forth evidence as to Chance's whiteness, and the white woman argues to the contrary. Finally, in the last verse (Verse 3 in the chart below), the black voice drops out entirely and the white woman claims that her strong sexual desire for him arises from the fact that he is not quite white, and not entirely black either. While any stereotypically black characteristics he attempts to adopt are somehow awkward (e.g., slapping five), when it comes to sexual prowess, his potential blackness is not questioned. However, it is key that this "potential blackness" is at the same time what makes him "almost white." The white female voice finds him attractive and sexually potent because he "might be white" but is yet "almost black." [37] That is to say, he is thought to be "almost black" because he excels in hetero masculine sexual performance; he is still strongly desirable to white women because his exhibition of stereotypically black male hypersexuality is softened/domesticated by his ultimate whiteness – while hypersexuality is supposedly "dangerous" in black men, it is exceptionally desirable in white men. While Chance might be almost black, he is, in the end, necessarily white; this racial ambiguity can function as an asset only because these stereotypical features "of" black male bodies appear "in" a white man's body.

This reconsolidation of racial ambiguity is evinced more clearly in the musical form of the song. While the verses are internally and comparatively indeterminate in formal structure, the 12-bar intro/exit theme begins and ends the song in very unambiguous terms. Below you will find a chart illustrating the structures I am speaking about here. The two halves of the song are easily distinguished by melodic voice: the first half contains the female vocalists, the second half, Chance's sax improv. The first half is ten 4-bar phrases long, parsed in a 4+3+3 pattern based on the alternation of vocal roles; the second half is also ten 4-bar phrases long, but it can be parsed in two ways: either two equal parts (5+5), or two

unequal parts (7+3). While the latter interpretation more closely mirrors the structure of the first half, it might be more in keeping with the song's tendency to play with formal indeterminacy and asymmetry to contrast the first half with an evenly-split second half (so the song would be 3+4+3+3+1+5+5+3). What is key is that there is this foray into 5 groupings, which seem out of context with the patterns established in the first part of the song. However, the 5-groupings lead into another 3-grouping; difference is consolidated, narrative closure is achieved. Chance can be "almost black" because he is, in the end, clearly very white.

Measures	Formal function	Lyrics
4	intro	
4	Intro motive + guitar	
4	Guitar + sax	
4	Verse 1	"(w) Well, he's almost black..."  (b)...That nig-gah's white.
4	Verse 1	"Well, he's got some moves..."  ...But they ain't right.
4	Verse 1	He slapped me five  That five is jive  He don't talk
4	Verse 1	trash
4		He don't do shit
4	Verse 2	(b) He don't have roots  (w) Well he's proud of it
4	Verse 2	He's got some sass  He's gotta right
4	Verse 2	"He's got no soul, girl"  ...mmm...
4	Verse 3	"(w only from here out) ...but then, he might..."  He makes me feel  Hightened...
4	Verse 3	...all night

		I love 'im cause he might be white
4	Verse 3	But every time I feel that smack I want 'im more cause he's...
4		...almost black...
4		Sax
4		
4		
4		
4		
4		
4		
4		
4		
4		
4	Intro :II	
4	Intro motive + guitar	
4	guitar + fade out	

"Almost Black" (pt. 1) demonstrates on many levels that Chance's "hipness" arises from his ability to be read as somehow not completely included within whiteness/white bourgeois patriarchy. Even the genre of the track is a little too funky to be (white) noise/post-punk, but too awkward and noisy in its funkyness to be (black) funk or disco. However, by excluding himself from whiteness, Chance only further embodies white European culture's ideal of the rebel-outsider-hip-genius. Hipness might very well be understood as the ability to ride this very ambiguous line between insider and outsider, to use one's appearance as an outsider as a means to secure one's "insider" status as part of a specific elite within the dominant culture.

In-but-not-of/of-but-not-in is a paradoxical logic of embodiment; it is the same sort of relationship desired in hipness, this time to the social body. To be "hip" is to be in, but not "of" dominant culture in the sense that a hipster rejects various hegemonic norms while at the same time being privileged by them. Alternately, to be "hip" is to be "of" dominant culture but not "in" it in the sense that one might have rather mainstream origins (e.g., white middle-class upbringing in the Midwest) but no longer actively participate in the culture of one's birth. If it is the case that hipness ultimately desires to be "in but not of"/"of but not in" the dominant social body, then hipness can be read as a

characteristically white relation to the (white) social body. In hipness, the individual's quitting of the dominant social body is achieved through a specific relation to his or her own body: ex-corporation is both exclusion (from the body politic) and disembodiment (a white relation to one's own body, the desire to ultimately not "be" a (mere) body). One excorporates oneself from the social body by affectively situating oneself "outside" mainstream whiteness; this in turn is achieved in the performance of the stereotypical bodily styles of hetero black masculinity. Hipness, like taste, accomplishes its social function by working on/in individual bodies, their preferences, pleasures, and displeasures.

### **7. Alienation: Hip as "Subjective Universal"**

In the first part of the paper, I identified two ways beyond the traditional Kantian version in which taste functions as a "subjective universal": first, in Kristeva's sense as an "always already socialized sensation;" second, as a false metonymy or overgeneralization. Since, as I have just argued, hipness uses bodily affect to situate the individual with respect to the social body, both of these functions of taste's "subjective universality" can also be found in hipness. My "gut feelings" aren't entirely "mine", for I must be socialized to recognize them as meaningful in the first place. While I have already discussed some of the ways in which, as "always already socialized sensation", my "gut feelings" and perceived affect are "in" but not entirely "of" my body, I now want to turn attention to the other aspect of hip's relation to "subjective universality." In hipness, what Dyer identifies as the false universalization of whiteness gets turned on its head: while whiteness posits white experience as the normative "human condition," hipness attempts to "universalize" the alienation of African-American men, making it generalizable by ignoring or disavowing the concrete specificities of that alienation by virtue of which black men and white hipsters are differentially privileged.

Hipness is a sort of generalized alienation abstracted from the literal alien status of black men in the West [38]. When this sort of rebellious marginality appears in privileged (i.e., white) bodies, it is socially desirable; however, when it appears in non-privileged (i.e., non-white) bodies, it is seen as a threat to society at large. Constructed in accordance with this double standard, "hipness" mirrors the logic of marginalization <-- --> appropriation which feminist aestheticians have diagnosed as common to most Western conceptualizations of genius. [39] Patriarchy posits femininity as emotional, irrational, and intuitive. When these traits are found in women, they are given as evidence for women's exclusion from achievement; however, when they appear in privileged male bodies, these traits, when tempered with properly masculine reason, moderation, and education, are signs of exceptional intellect and creativity.

Similarly, my analysis of hipness demonstrates that (what whites perceive to be) black male alienation is acceptable to dominant culture when it appears in white bodies but "dangerous" and undomesticated when it appears in non-white bodies. From *Birth of A Nation* to Cam'ron and "Stop Snitching", mainstream white culture stereotypes alienated

black men as threats to the social order; thus, black male alienation is undesirable when it appears in black male bodies but has incredible cache when it appears in white male bodies because, supposedly, white men are able to overcome and neutralize the “dangers” posed by excorporation from the social body (because, perhaps, they’re never really “outside”? ). Indeed, in his analysis of white masculinity, Dyer argues that, with regard to the idealized white male, “darkness is a sign of his true masculinity, just as his ability to control it is a sign of his whiteness.” [40] It is never necessary to exclude the hip white dude from white culture because ultimately he is able to overcome the dangers lurking in masculinity; indeed, masculinity evinces its “perfection” in the ability to master the strength, aggression, and virility required of it.

This analysis of hipness shows how the in/of logic of whiteness works on the social body not only in addition to, but *through* its work on individual bodies. Although taste, through the notion of the *sensus communis*, addresses the relationship between individual judgment and shared standards, hipness attenuates and focuses on the paradoxical status of the individual’s location out/inside of the social body. While taste has, from the start, been a mechanism for (re)enforcing group boundaries and membership, it does not necessarily do so in terms of the in-but-not-of/of-but-not-in logic discussed in this paper. Hipness, however, does precisely this: in the economy of hipness, gendered and raced corporeal styles ex-corporate one from the dominant social body in a fashion which only further confirms one’s status as an elite insider. Put differently, hipness exhibits in relation to the social body the white logic of embodiment which, in the case of taste, is applied to the individual body.

Finally, this analysis of taste/hipness shows that the conceptual tools of aesthetics are a necessary component in analyzing the politics of embodiment. Political change requires change in the ways individuals experience their own bodies, bodily habits, routines, and preferences, and their body’s normative/preferable relationship to the social body. Political change involves changing the ways in which we experience our bodies, our pleasures and our dislikes. It involves changing habits, encountering new experiences, expanding and/or refining our palette of experiences. In examining white embodiment at both the individual and social levels, my discussion of taste and hipness shows not only how Western aesthetics trains us all to have normatively white bodies; it also articulates a baseline from which change must depart.

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### Endnotes

[1] Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997).

[2] “White identity is founded on compelling paradoxes: a vividly corporeal cosmology that most values transcendence of the body; a notion of being at once a sort of race and the human race, and individual and a universal subject; a

commitment to heterosexuality that for whiteness to be affirmed, entails men fighting against sexual desires and women having none; a stress on the display of spirit while maintaining a position of invisibility; in short, a need always to be everything and nothing, literally overwhelmingly present and yet apparently absent, both alive and dead." Dyer, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

[3] Dyer, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

[4] "[T]he invisibility of these assets," argues Dyer, "is part and parcel of the sense that whiteness is nothing in particular, that white culture and identity have, as it were, no content... Having no content, we can't see that we have anything that accounts for our position of privilege and power. This is itself crucial to the security with which we occupy that position." Dyer, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

[5] Dyer, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

[6] Dyer, *op. cit.*, p. 38. This position of "disinterest" is contingent upon other aspects of one's identity such as gender and class, because whites from non-dominant gender and class groups (just to pick a few examples) are seen as representatives of and unduly biased by their gender or class (but not, notably, of their race). Only able-bodied straight white bourgeois males can achieve, in the contemporary West, this supposed position of disinterest.

[7] Dyer, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] Dyer, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

[10] Dyer, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] Dyer, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

[13] Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1999), p. 38.

[14] "[T]he gendered ideas associated with body, eating, gustatory pleasures, and the sense of taste...function in opposition to the values that cluster around concepts of the aesthetic and the values of fine art." Korsmeyer, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

[15] It is thus that, "[d]espite the parallels between literal [gustatory] and aesthetic taste that prompted the choice of this sense as a metaphor for the perception of beauty, gustatory taste is expelled from formative theories of aesthetic taste such as Kant's." Korsmeyer, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

[16] Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Gender and Aesthetics: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 40.

[17] For example, Charles Mills remarks in *The Racial Contract* that "justice" means, for whites, "just us." Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

[18] See, for example, Christine Battersby, "Stages on Kant's



Way: Aesthetics, Morality, and the Gendered Sublime," in *Feminism and Tradition in Aesthetics*, ed. Peg Brand and Carolyn Korsmeyer (State College: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995).

[19] Julia Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt*, trans. Ross Guberman (New York: Columbia UP, 2003), p. 181.

[20] Although because of constraints of space I cannot discuss this here, it is important to think of Kristeva's reading of Arendt in the context of Foucauldian notions of biopower. Is Kristeva articulating, in language different from Foucault's, a theory of biopower? It seems so, especially since Arendt's idealization of the Greek polis and Kantian critique bears strong similarities to Foucault's later work both in *The Use of Pleasure* and his essays on Kant. Kristeva's point here is also comparable to Jacques Rancière's theorization of politics as a "distribution of the sensible." See Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Continuum, 2006).

[21] Kristeva, *op. cit.*, p. 225.

[22] *Ibid.*, pp. 225-226.

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 225.

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 225.

[25] *Ibid.*, p. 225.

[26] As feminist phenomenologists such as Iris Marion Young have shown, these "gut reactions" are also gendered: one throws, sits, and walks "like a girl" of a particular class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and bodily ability. Thus, it is important to note that whiteness also situates bodies in terms of gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and other identity categories.

[27] Kristeva, *op. cit.*, p. 223

[28] Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminisms* (New York: Vintage, 1998), p. 141.

[29] Andreas Huyssen argues that "documents from the late 19th century ascribe pejorative feminine characteristics to mass culture...not, however, working-class culture or residual forms of older popular or folk cultures" (59). Mass culture was and is considered to be feminizing in ways "authentic" working-class cultures are not because mass culture is seen as alienating and passivizing: "the lure of mass culture, after all, has traditionally been described as the threat of losing oneself in daydreams and delusion and of merely consuming rather than producing." Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 55.

[30] Ingrid Monson, "The Problem with White Hipness: Race, Gender, and Cultural Conceptions in Jazz Historical Discourse," *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Vol. 48, No. 3, *Music Anthropologies and Music Histories* (Autumn, 1995): 396-422, p. 405.

[31] *Ibid.*, p. 405.

[32] See, for example, Susan McClary, *Conventional Wisdom: The Content of Musical Form* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 43-44. Here she argues that "the blues came to represent an unassailably virile form of masculinity to British rockers" and a "retreat from the harsh realities of industrialized modernity."

[33] While the importance of this white identification with black masculinity cannot be overemphasized, it is also essential to note that not all kinds of black male embodiment were deemed appropriate for white male identification/modeling. Only versions of black male embodiment that oozed masculinity were acceptable; thus, anything that was too commercial, too accessible, too dance-oriented, and especially anything that originated in black gay clubs wouldn't work for the purposes of hip posturing.

[34] Monson, *op. cit.*, p. 397.

[35] Tanning "displays white people's right to be various, literally to incorporate into themselves features of other people." (Dyer, *op. cit.*, p. 49).

[36] Chance, James. "Almost Black pt. 1," on *Off White*, ZE-Buddah, 1979.

[37] If I do not speak about black female desire here, it is because it, in the form of the black female vocalist's lines, drop out of the song once sex is discussed. This song could be taken as representative of the general exclusion of black women/black femininity from discourses of hipness.

[38] See Monson *op.cit.*, 401-2.

[39] As Christine Battersby explains, the rhetoric of genius "praised 'feminine' qualities in male creators...but claimed females could not – or should not – create...The genius's instinct, emotion, sensibility, intuition, imagination – even his madness – were different from those of ordinary mortals...The genius was a male – full of 'virile' energy – who transcended his biology: if the male genius was 'feminine' this merely proved his cultural superiority." Christine Battersby, *Gender and Genius* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 3.

[39] Dyer, *op. cit.*, 28.