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Sherri Irvin

University of Oklahoma, sirvin@ou.edu

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Resisting Body Oppression: An Aesthetic Approach¹

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Abstract

This article argues for an aesthetic approach to resisting oppression based on judgments of bodily unattractiveness. Philosophical theories have often suggested that appropriate aesthetic judgments should converge on sets of objects consensually found to be beautiful or ugly. The convergence of judgments about human bodies, however, is a significant source of injustice, because people judged to be unattractive pay substantial social and economic penalties in domains such as education, employment, and criminal justice. The injustice is compounded by the interaction between standards of attractiveness and gender, race, disability, and gender identity.

I argue that we should actively work to reduce our participation in standard aesthetic practices that involve attractiveness judgments. This does not mean refusing engagement with the embodiment of others; ignoring someone's embodiment is often a way of dehumanizing them. Instead, I advocate a form of practice, *aesthetic exploration*, that involves seeking out positive experiences of the unique aesthetic affordances of all bodies, regardless of whether they are attractive in the standard sense. I argue that there are good ethical reasons to cultivate aesthetic exploration, and that it is psychologically plausible that doing so would help to alleviate the social injustice attending judgments of attractiveness.

Keywords: aesthetics, attractiveness, beauty, body, disability, fat, gender, Hume, oppression, race, social injustice, ugliness

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It is an everyday part of human experience to find certain faces and bodies more pleasing, more attractive, more beautiful, or sexier than others. And it is sometimes thought that when we experience them in this way, we are tapping into their true aesthetic value: my experience of pleasure in encountering another person's body is caused by, and is a detection mechanism for, the aesthetic value that body genuinely possesses. This is roughly the picture that Hume offers of the beautiful: he says, "Some particular forms or qualities, from the original structure of the internal fabric, are calculated to please, and others to displease" (Hume 1907, 271). The "original structure of the internal fabric" is the structure of the mind: the suggestion is that, given the structure of a well-functioning human mind, some objects will naturally give us pleasure, and those are the objects we rightly call beautiful. Ugly objects, similarly, are those "fitted by nature" to displease (Hume 1907, 273).

Whether one thinks that the sources of our aesthetic responses are primarily natural or, instead, are the product of conventional or cultural standards, this is a picture of aesthetic appreciation that remains dominant within philosophical aesthetics: we assess objects in relation to some appropriate standard, detect their aesthetic value, and issue judgments that can be correct or incorrect.² Appropriate judgments, according to such views, should converge, identifying the same set of objects as beautiful or ugly. This sort of picture is most often offered in relation to the appreciation of artworks, but there is no obvious reason why it can't be extended to the aesthetic appreciation of human bodies.

Moreover, it's not hard to see why there might be structures in the mind that produce uniform aesthetic reactions to certain kinds of bodies. Evolutionary psychology suggests that some qualities are found attractive because they are honest indicators of health and reproductive fitness (Davies 2012). Evolution has, on this view, selected for minds that feel pleased by, and are thus drawn to, bodies with good reproductive prospects.

On this picture, then, judgments of human beauty or attractiveness have intersubjective validity, can be correct or incorrect, and may even be such that correct judgments make one more likely to pass on one's genes, if we accept the evolutionary account.

Body Oppression

But there's also a dark side to these judgments. This dark side has been researched extensively in other disciplines, but recent philosophical aesthetics has,

² Carlson (2000) and Walton (1970), discussed below, are among the myriad defenses of the objectivity of aesthetic judgments. I do not mean to suggest that this is the dominant lay view of aesthetic value.

oddly, had little to say about the body.³ The dark side has to do with the way in which judgments of bodily and facial attractiveness get tied up with judgments about other aspects of the embodied person, resulting in a wide range of differential treatment that—with some exceptions—favors people whose bodies are judged to be attractive over those whose bodies are judged unattractive. (Even the exceptions, as we'll see, are not particularly comforting.) Here is a small selection from the myriad findings.

From the moment of birth, unattractive children receive less nurturing treatment.

Mothers of more attractive infants were more affectionate and playful compared with mothers of less attractive infants. . . . The mothers of less attractive infants were more likely to be attentive to other people rather than to their infant and to engage in routine caregiving rather than affectionate behavior. (Langlois et al. 1995, 464)

Adults judge attractive infants to be better behaved, smarter, and more likeable than unattractive infants (Stephan and Langlois 1984). Numerous studies have shown that people punish unattractive children more harshly and judge their actions more negatively (Langlois et al. 1995).⁴

When a child's school file is associated with an attractive photograph, a teacher expects the child to be more intelligent and more popular, to progress further in school, and to have parents who are more interested in education (Clifford and Walster 1973). "Attractive children are more likely to receive encouragement from their teachers" (Hatfield and Sprecher 1986, 49–50, citing Adams and Cohen 1974). Teachers and undergraduate education majors judged unattractive Black boys to be less academically competent than members of any

³ The principal exceptions are Brand (2000, 2013) and Irvin (2016). Richard Shusterman (1999, 2000, 2012), who has advocated an aesthetics of the body under the name 'somaesthetics,' tends to focus on the aesthetics of bodily experience rather than on bodily attractiveness. Other relevant work has been done outside aesthetics by Deborah Rhode (2010) and outside philosophy altogether by Tobin Siebers (2010).

⁴ I use the present tense to report most findings, which I assume to be indicative of how attractiveness judgments are implicated in many domains. However, it should be understood that not all results will apply seamlessly outside experimental contexts, and some trends may have shifted since studies were conducted.

other group (Parks and Kennedy 2007).⁵ It is well known that teachers' expectations and level of attention have a powerful effect on student performance (Rosenthal and Jacobson 1968), so it's easy to see how some of these attitudes become self-fulfilling prophecies.

Many studies have shown that physically attractive candidates are more likely to be hired and to have their work assessed favorably (Hosoda, Stone-Romero, and Coats 2003). However, attractive women are at a disadvantage in applying for managerial positions (Heilman and Stopeck 1985), as well as for "masculine sex-typed jobs for which physical appearance is perceived as unimportant" (Johnson et al. 2010, 301).

Attractive criminal defendants are judged more leniently than unattractive ones (Mazzella and Feingold 1994; Leventhal and Krate 1977). People judge a car accident to be more serious, and award more money, when an attractive victim is harmed by an unattractive driver than when the situation is reversed (Kulka and Kessler 1978).

Unattractive rape victims are judged more blameworthy for the fact that they have been raped (Thornton and Ryckman 1983). And fighting back doesn't help: "subjects responded the least favorably to the unattractive rape victim, particularly when she resisted the rape by fighting with her attacker" (Deitz, Littman, and Bentley 1984, 261).

Social sanctions against overweight and obese people are likely related to judgments of attractiveness. Women who are slender, but not emaciated, are more likely than fat women to be judged worthy of receiving help after a minor accident (Swami et al. 2008). As Puhl and Brownell (2001) discuss, obese people are subject to a wide variety of penalties. In studies, researchers found that 24% of nurses were "repulsed" by obese patients, and 12% preferred not to touch them (Bagley et al. 1989). Parents provided less financial support for overweight children to attend college (Crandall 1991, 1995). Obese applicants are less likely to be hired, and if hired are paid lower wages for comparable work and are less likely to be promoted; these effects are more pronounced for women than for men (Gortmaker et al. 1993; Loh 1993; Pagan and Davila 1997; Register and Williams 1990).

Attractiveness is also racialized. It has been widely observed that in a majority White society with a history of White supremacy, standards of beauty are racialized White, and this negatively affects both other-perceptions and self-perceptions of beauty in women of color. Shirley Anne Tate (2009) and Maxine Leeds Craig (2002) are among the many scholars who have written extensively on

⁵ I follow the convention here of capitalizing terms, including Black and White, used to identify racialized groups. I'll say more below about the racialized aspects of judgments of attractiveness.

this phenomenon. In a recent and controversial study (Lewis 2011), White subjects judged Black male faces more attractive than White male faces, but judged Black female faces less attractive than White female faces.⁶ However, Black men face other forms of stigma associated with appearance: they, unlike White men, are more successful as corporate leaders if they are perceived as baby-faced. The researchers hypothesize that “babyfacedness is a disarming mechanism that facilitates the success of Black leaders by attenuating stereotypical perceptions that Blacks are threatening” (Livingston and Pearce 2009, 1229).

I’ve focused on empirical studies that tell us about quantifiable outcomes. Obviously, the experiential effects of judgments of attractiveness are immense as well. Lizzie Velásquez has a rare disorder that prevents her body from storing fat, causing her to appear extremely emaciated. “When Velásquez was in high school, she discovered a video of herself on YouTube that was titled ‘World’s Ugliest Woman.’ It had garnered millions of views” (Barness 2014).

Sarah Atwell has an incurable condition that has caused a large tumor on one side of her face. She was physically bullied as early as third grade (James 2013). When she was 16, she posted a video online in which she holds handwritten placards saying “I have very few friends I trust,” “I get called names all the time . . . bitch, slut, fat face, fat, ugly. . . . It hurts” and “Sometimes I wish I looked different. Maybe the hurt would go away” (Discovery Fit & Health 2013).

The issue, then, is not that attractive people are treated a bit more nicely than unattractive people. Instead, we have a picture whereby, from the moment of birth, attractive people (with a few exceptions) accrue positive social capital in families, schools, and workplaces, while unattractive people pay a very substantial penalty that may involve less positive parental attention, less support from teachers, less recognition for their qualifications, less help when they need it, more punishment, and so forth. Some are routinely teased, bullied, dehumanized, and ostracized. These judgments often interact in disturbing ways with race, gender, disability, age, and gender identity, among other aspects of social identity (see, e.g., Ferens and Sikora 2016).

Clearly, judgments of attractiveness are a significant driver of harm. Moreover, the pattern of rewards and penalties associated with attractiveness judgments constitute a form of systemic social injustice. First, the harms in question

⁶ This study was harshly and correctly criticized for testing the hypothesis that “lighter women will be more attractive than darker women and darker men will be more attractive than lighter men” (Lewis 2011, 159) by studying only the responses of 18 White British subjects. While the study does not tell us “what makes a face attractive” (Lewis 2011, 159), it does tell us that attractiveness judgments made by White subjects under white supremacy are racialized.

are pervasive, and at times severe, affecting many areas of a person's life prospects. Second, the harms are tied to judgments about features the subject did not choose and has little power to alter. Third, judgments about these features lead to effects in domains to which they are not legitimately relevant. Finally, these judgments are governed by broader social practices and conventions that are transmitted much as other forms of bias are transmitted. Thus, although attractiveness, unlike race and gender, is not overtly recognized as a fundamental scheme by which we categorize one another, the pattern of results I have described shows that it does have a systemic effect in shaping the life prospects of identifiable groups of people. I take this to be sufficient to regard the situation as one of social injustice.

The systemic injustice is constituted in part by the fact that aesthetic judgments tend to converge on the same sets of faces and bodies as attractive or unattractive, just as standard views of aesthetic judgment suggest that they should. Because the same people are consistently found attractive or unattractive, the rewards and penalties associated with judgments of attractiveness are concentrated rather than distributed.

Alternative Strategies

One way we might address body oppression is by trying to separate judgments of attractiveness from judgments about and behavior toward people in domains where attractiveness is irrelevant. For example, if we find that gender is affecting our judgments of the quality of a student's work, we should find a way to remove gender from our assessment algorithm so as to focus on factors that are in fact indicative of the work's quality. Might we do the same for attractiveness judgments? I suggest that this is not a promising strategy.

First, the role of attractiveness in these domains is often implicit, and it is often difficult even to recognize, much less correct for, the influence of implicit factors on one's judgment (see, e.g., Nisbett and Wilson 1977). There is good evidence that failure of introspection into assessment processes is a widespread phenomenon that is relevant to aesthetic judgment (Irvin 2014; Lopes 2014). When people are unaware of the role bias plays in their judgment, they cannot engage in individual practices of eradicating it. Systemic solutions, such as eliminating information about race and gender in choice contexts, are required (e.g., Goldin and Rouse 2000; Saul 2013). In many instances of individual interaction, however, solutions of this kind are not available: we can't simply remove information about attractiveness from the situation.

When we aren't able to anonymize the judgment situation, the standard solution is to reduce bias associated with race and gender, not to leave the bias in place and attempt to reduce its influence in other domains. Bias can be reduced through such strategies as elimination of bias-promoting information in the social

environment (Dasgupta 2013) and repeated exposure to role models who defy negative stereotypes (Blair 2002). The aim is to eliminate the negative valence associated with recognition of race and gender. But there is no way to eliminate the negative valence associated with attractiveness judgments, since the latter are inherently valenced: as Hume suggested, they are associated with—indeed, partly constituted by—positive and negative affects. To judge someone to be unattractive, then, is not like simply judging them to be of a certain gender or race; it is, instead, analogous to judging them to be of a certain gender or race while laden with negative bias about that gender or race. For this reason, I will pursue a strategy that aims to disrupt the judgment of unattractiveness and replace it with a form of positively valenced aesthetic response, rather than a strategy that leaves the judgment of unattractiveness untouched and aims to reduce the influence of this judgment on judgments and behavior in other contexts.

Another strategy I will not pursue involves decreasing our attention to others' embodiment, especially when we recognize that this embodiment triggers negative responses in us. Attempting to suppress or ignore information has variable effects and can backfire, as studies of implicit bias have shown (Blair 2002; Blair, Ma, and Lenton 2001). Moreover, withdrawal of engagement with others' embodiment is one of the mechanisms of social oppression, as scholars of disability have often argued. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson notes that "truncated stares come from our distress at witnessing fellow humans so unusual that we cannot accord them a look of acknowledgment" (2009, 79). "Looking away," she continues, "is an active denial of acknowledgement" which can "erode . . . dignity and self-esteem" (2009, 83). Withdrawal of attention to another's embodiment, then, is often dehumanizing. A strategy that involves taking care not to attend to the embodiment of people consistently judged unattractive risks communicating a denial of their personhood.

For these reasons, I will not consider strategies that involve either quarantining our judgments about people's bodies from other judgments about them, or withdrawing attention from their bodies in favor of attention to other aspects of their personhood (though attending to other aspects of their personhood is certainly important, and is compatible with the strategy I advocate). Instead, I will argue we should choose to cultivate a specific kind of aesthetic practice, one that does not involve assessing bodies in relation to standards that are derived either from natural response tendencies or from culture or convention. I'll first consider the adaptation of an aesthetic practice that has been proposed in relation to natural environments, but ultimately reject it in favor of a more radical proposal.

Positive Aesthetics and Appropriate Aesthetic Categories

Kendall Walton (1970) famously observed that many of our aesthetic assessments depend on seeing an object in relation to a category. Many aesthetic

assessments are comparative: when we say that something is “dynamic” or “serene,” we are implicitly comparing it to other items, and for these assessments to be correct, we need to ensure that we are using an appropriate comparison class. Walton suggested that the correct category for an artwork is determined in part by historical considerations having to do with what the artist intended or which categories were well established in the culture in which the work was made.

Allen Carlson adapted this framework to the aesthetics of nature. Rather than appealing to cultural factors to determine correct categories for natural objects, Carlson suggested that such categories are determined by the natural sciences. He offers the following examples:

The orca whale is a graceful and majestic animal. However, were it perceived as a fish, it would appear more lumbering, somewhat oafish, perhaps a bit clumsy (maybe somewhat like the basking shark). Similarly, the graceful and even elegant moose would seem an awkward deer; the charming, cute woodchuck, a massive and awe-inspiring brown rat; the delicate sunflower, a stiff and stodgy daisy. (Carlson 2000, 89)

Obviously, part of Carlson’s brief, like Walton’s, is to argue that assessments that depend on an inappropriate category assignment are incorrect.

Carlson suggests that a positive aesthetics of nature falls out of an understanding of appropriate aesthetic appreciation of nature. Positive aesthetics is the idea that everything, or everything belonging to a particular category, has positive aesthetic value. Why should we expect correct categorization to yield a positive aesthetics of nature? This, Carlson says, is a function of how appropriate categories for nature appreciation are chosen:

A more correct categorization in science is one that over time makes the natural world seem to be more intelligible, more comprehensible to those whose science it is. Our science appeals to certain kinds of qualities to accomplish this. These qualities are ones such as order, regularity, harmony, balance, tension, resolution, and so forth. . . . Moreover, these qualities that make the world seem comprehensible to us are also those that we find aesthetically good. (Carlson 2000, 93–94)

A striking aspect of Carlson’s argument for a positive aesthetics of nature is the rather narrow array of positive aesthetic qualities he appeals to: “order, regularity, harmony, balance, tension, resolution, and so forth.” When we encounter nature, surely part of what is there for us to appreciate is its wildness, its irregularity, its unruliness. The idea that proper aesthetic appreciation of nature

requires assimilating its aesthetic values to the aesthetic values of order and regularity that may be apt to scientific theories is not sufficiently motivated. In addition, as applied to bodies, this approach seems excessively disciplinary. Order, regularity, harmony, and balance may constitute a body aesthetics well suited to ballerinas, at least while they're dancing. But if we think about sexual encounters, for example, the aesthetic values we most treasure may be quite different.

A second problem is that this foundation might secure a positive aesthetics for nature overall—since we choose categories on which nature comes out to be orderly, harmonious, and so forth—but it will not secure a positive aesthetics for all the exemplars within any category. Once the categories are selected, we are still in the business of comparing each sunflower to other sunflowers (though not to daisies). Some members of any given category are going to lose out.

The idea of a positive aesthetics is a helpful one. An approach that yields a positive aesthetics of the body could allow us to continue to respond aesthetically to each other's embodiment without yielding the sort of injustices associated with judgments of attractiveness and unattractiveness. But how is this possible? On the consensual view, aesthetic appreciation just is the detection of aesthetic value in relation to some sort of standard or comparison class. Could there be aesthetic appreciation that does not invoke conventional standards? Could such aesthetic appreciation yield a true positive aesthetics of the body?

Aesthetic Exploration as Resistance to Body Oppression

I've used the expression "aesthetic practice" throughout this discussion, and now I'd like to make the concept explicit. An aesthetic practice, as I conceive it, is a practice of cultivating aesthetic experience or aesthetic appreciation. Hume, Walton, and Carlson advocate aesthetic practices within the same broad family having to do with assessment by relevant standards. This practice, if done well, should yield intersubjectively valid judgments about the true aesthetic character of the object. This form of aesthetic practice is often privileged in philosophical aesthetics; indeed, it's often treated as the only legitimate form of aesthetic appreciation. But other aesthetic practices are available to us.

I'd like to highlight a particular kind of alternative practice, *aesthetic exploration*, and examine its prospects for transforming negative aesthetic responses to bodies. It involves a specific kind of attitude in approaching an object: namely, a disposition to seek out that object's particular aesthetic affordances and enjoy them. Aesthetic exploration is not geared toward experiencing pleasure from "beautiful" objects and displeasure from "ugly" objects. It isn't particularly interested in beauty or ugliness per se, and it isn't content to rest in displeasure. It actively seeks pleasure.

One step in aesthetic exploration is, as I said, seeking out aesthetic affordances. Much of this has to do with careful attention. Here's an example. Considering the skin alone, my hand has a remarkable array of colors and textures. It's completely different on the palm side than on the outside. The topography seems infinitely complex and shifts constantly with my movement—for my hand is in constant motion whether or not I intend it. There are wrinkles and folds and tiny divides, lines that run parallel, meet up, radiate out from a point, intersect. There are spots darkened with age, fine purple blood vessels visible below the surface. The tactile experience afforded by my hand is similarly rich. The skin on the sides of the fingers is soft and silky; the skin of the lower palms is smooth, but without that silky quality; the outer surfaces of the knuckles are rough. Perhaps you'd like to take a moment to study your own hand, if you have one—if not, another body part will do as well. The exploration can involve any or all of the senses; it need not be primarily or at all visual.

I've barely scratched the surface of what the hand has to offer as an aesthetic object, especially if we consider the shapes it can take on with movement, the structures that can be seen and felt under its skin, and so forth. I haven't even begun to reflect on how knowledge of the body and its functioning could enrich my experience, such as if I considered the movement of my hand as a function of an intricate system in which nerves, tendons, ligaments, bones, muscles, and skin all have a part to play. (Note that I need not rely on assumptions about how the hand "should" function in order to explore and take aesthetic interest in how it is in fact functioning: tremor, for instance, can be aesthetically fascinating.) And the hand is only one, comparatively small part of the body—there would be just as much to say about other body parts, and still more to say about the body considered as a whole.

I've mostly offered a description of how my hand appears to me. I haven't said anything about its aesthetic properties, as these are usually construed: I haven't said that by virtue of the silkiness of the skin and the fine purple blood vessels below the surface it is delicate; I haven't said that by virtue of the roughness of the knuckles and the darkened spots and the thickness of the fingers it is coarse. I also haven't made any kind of pronouncement about its aesthetic value. I've just tried to offer a description of how I experience my hand on close inspection, and the description of course falls well short of the actual complexity of that experience. But the experience itself, in which I study the hand with open attention to its form and behavior, can be considered an experience of aesthetic appreciation, as I have argued elsewhere (Irvin 2008a, 2008b).

Of course, nothing in what I've said guarantees or even suggests that the experience will be pleasurable. Another component of the practice of aesthetic exploration is required: namely, a disposition to seek out and enjoy things that are interesting. This, like the tendency to assess things in relation to appropriate

categories, can be cultivated. It involves a sense of adventure, a willingness to encounter and celebrate the unique and surprising, a willingness to tolerate and persist through moments of experience that are jarring. The term ‘aesthetic exploration’ is meant to suggest both that we seek out aesthetic affordances that might frequently be ignored, and that we do so with a sense of adventure.

The fact that this is a practice has some implications. First, it may be cultivated through specific forms of activity. Second, one’s experience will change over time, as one becomes accustomed to and masters the practice.

What are the forms of activity through which aesthetic exploration is cultivated? First, one directs an exploratory gaze at ordinary objects, including bodies, with the aim of seeking out sources of richness and interest. Of course, when it comes to bodies, one must undertake this practice in an ethical way, not directing intrusive and unwanted gazes at others. Obviously, one shouldn’t practice on one’s coworkers, students, patients, or others over whom one is in a position of power. One shouldn’t direct lengthy gazes at people in public places, unless one has a very compelling reason—one that is definitely not a product of one’s imagination—to think that such gazes are welcome. One’s own body, and the bodies of one’s lovers, are a good place to start here. One can aim to look honestly. One can linger. One can seek out new sources of enjoyment.

Since we have the internet at our disposal, we can also attend to material that has been publicly released by people who are offering themselves and their bodies for aesthetic attention. This includes, for instance, videos of performances by dancers with visible disabilities or other forms of unusual embodiment (to use Garland-Thomson’s term). Of course, videos on the internet have their limits: they offer only visual information, and the level of detail is limited; they do not support the sort of rich multi-sensory engagement we can have with objects and bodies that are present in our space. Nonetheless, dance gives us an opportunity to appreciate the body as it moves rather than see it as a static shape, and to appreciate it as the dancer is actively presenting it. And, of course, there is nothing awkward or inappropriate about directing an extended appreciative gaze toward the body of a dancer in the act of performing: that’s what the dance is for. Of course, if we can attend such performances in person, so much the better.

Should we expect that aesthetic practices we cultivate in our role as mere observers will be transferable to situations in which we are interacting, as is required for the success of this project? Empirical evidence suggests that attention to counterstereotypic role models with whom we have no prospect of interacting can reduce implicit bias, which in turn would be predicted to improve our direct interactions with others (Blair 2002; Blair, Ma, and Lenton 2001). This gives some support to the prospect that practices undertaken in one’s capacity as a mere observer can be transferred to situations of interaction.

Returning specifically to the aesthetic case, the perceptual features available to us when we are merely observing are the same as those available when we are interacting. If we cultivate the ability to aesthetically appreciate these features in one context, it should be possible in principle to transfer this ability to other contexts where the same features are available. When we attempt the transfer, interaction and aesthetic exploration may initially involve a heavy cognitive burden, and the two tasks may interfere with one another. But this is a matter of practice: one can become so proficient at a task that it recedes into the background, ceasing to interfere with other things one might be doing. Something similar is true with the perceptual tasks involved in driving a car: initially, one might experience the combination of controlling the car and surveying the road and surrounding areas for potential hazards to be highly effortful, but eventually the perceptual task becomes second nature.

Our approach is to direct an exploratory gaze at the body and seek out aspects of it that are unique, experiences it affords that we have never had before. We aim to take pleasure in these encounters. On encountering a body with interest and openness, with a willingness to see it in ways that we have never seen it before, we can have an aesthetic experience of it that need not involve assessing it or issuing a verdict about whether it is delicate or coarse, beautiful or ugly, elegant or common. We can simply immerse ourselves in the experience for its own sake. This is one kind of aesthetic experience we might have of visual artworks or musical works: encountering the work with interest and exploring it. We can approach the body as though it were a new planet, or a familiar landscape made unfamiliar through the quality of our attention to it.

There are two obstacles we may encounter: negative aesthetic responses, and positive ones. We may find a particular body, or a part of it, ugly, unattractive, or disgusting. That is a familiar experience, isn't it? You might find some part of your body unpleasantly wrinkled; your knuckles might be enlarged with arthritis in a way you find unsightly. You might have age spots or burn scars that you experience as marring your skin. You might be disturbed by stretch marks or a protruding belly. Your hand might have fewer or much smaller fingers than most people's hands, it might be shaped differently or move differently, and you might—having lived your whole life in a society that treats this feature as an aesthetic defect—experience it that way yourself. One can, of course, also have such negative responses to the bodies of others. When this happens, we do not conclude our exploration. We continue to look with openness and interest. We attempt to shift our attention away from the body's violation of our expectations for what bodies should be like, and back to exploring what this body really is like. Burn scars may cause us to cringe initially, but on continued encounter, we may be able to appreciate their intricate

networks and distinctive textures. Garland-Thomson, discussing Doug Auld's paintings of burn survivors, says,

As portraits, the paintings announce that their subjects are worthy of public commemoration, important enough to look at, even beautiful. These pictures force us to make sense of faces patterned with vivid colors, limbs sculpted into surprising shapes, and bodies deeply etched with intricate swirls. (2009, 80)

Exposing ourselves to images that encourage a positive aesthetic approach to subjects usually understood as ugly or disfigured is an important strategy for cultivating aesthetic exploration.

Positive aesthetic responses, too, are an obstacle. When we experience pleasure triggered by the satisfaction of our conventional expectations for bodies, we may be tempted simply to linger there, deepening rather than undermining our reliance on conventional standards. We must apply aesthetic exploration in these cases as well, seeking to have positive aesthetic responses that are not triggered by conformity to standards.

The point of this practice is not to rest in a constant state of fascination. And it is also not, ultimately, to direct a disproportionate level of exploration at bodies that we encounter as somehow unusual or atypical. Instead, the aim is to gain a facility at appreciating the specific aesthetic affordances of bodies we encounter—all bodies, whether they seem typical to us or not. Cultivating a practice is a process that unfolds over time. One may initially need to focus on particular kinds of bodies in order to actively resist and overcome aesthetic practices that are deeply ingrained. But ultimately, the aim is to settle in to a different mode of aesthetic response to bodies as we encounter them throughout the course of the day, even when we aren't actively aiming to appreciate them aesthetically. The aim is to cultivate the practice consciously so that it eventually becomes second nature.

Aesthetic Exploration and Psychological Plausibility

I am, of course, assuming that it is possible for us, given the kind of creatures we are, to cultivate an attitude and practice whereby we take pleasure in these experiences of exploration. But notice that Hume, Walton, and Carlson, too, must make assumptions about what we will take pleasure in, given the kinds of creatures we are, if their views are to yield conclusions about which things are aesthetically valuable.

My argument depends on two psychological claims. First, it is possible to cultivate practices of appreciation that differ from those one might already be

commonly engaged in. Second, such practices, once cultivated, are likely to lead to pleasurable aesthetic experiences of a wide array of bodies.

Let's examine these claims in turn. It seems to be entirely possible to change the kinds of appreciative practices one participates in. One can shift from appreciative practices in which one simply lets art or music or wine wash over one, feeling whatever pleasures happen to arise in the encounter, to practices in which one consciously exposes oneself to certain products and attempts to understand what they have to offer, even if one does not initially find them pleasing. One can listen to and attempt to grasp what other critics have to say about these products, one can learn about the relevant art-historical traditions, one can discuss one's experiences with others, and so forth. One can thus adopt and cultivate a historical and critical form of appreciative practice to replace the ahistorical and acritical practice in which one was previously engaged.

Returning to the example of natural entities, one can cultivate appreciative practices of categorizing these entities in accordance with scientific knowledge, and evaluating them in relation to other items in their categories; or one can cultivate appreciative practices in which one is "moved by nature," as Carroll (1993) describes: one can allow oneself to feel the sort of awe that comes from striking perceptual stimuli regardless of whether one possesses scientific knowledge to explain why the entity one is encountering is especially notable. It may even be possible for the same person to cultivate both kinds of appreciative practice and the ability to shift between them.

I've offered a brief demonstration of what it would be to cultivate a different form of appreciative practice in relation to the body, when I described having an aesthetic encounter with the hand by attending to the complex details of its forms, surfaces, textures, and movements. We usually gloss over most of these details, and when we are assessing our bodies in relation to conventional standards of attractiveness, a few details may dominate our consciousness almost completely, especially when we are finding our bodies aesthetically unsatisfactory. But it is possible to reinvigorate our ability to pay attention to a wide variety of aspects of the body that are normally neglected. It's possible to learn how to perceive and attend to far more of what is available to us. You can test this claim for yourself.

The first psychological claim was that it is possible to change one's practices of appreciation, and to adopt the sort of practice I'm advocating. The second is that experiences of the body that arise out of this sort of appreciative practice will generally be positive. I'm not claiming that *all* objects will afford positive experiences if approached this way: there may be some things that are so recalcitrantly banal that even the most open and creative mind cannot find within them any source of aesthetic delight. But living human bodies, all of them, do have very rich affordances by virtue of their colors, textures, ever-shifting forms, complex

structures, capacities for movement, and so forth. The human body—every human body—is an incredibly replete aesthetic object.

Some will be deeply skeptical about the prospect that bodies that don't satisfy conventional standards of attractiveness—especially those that are quite far from satisfying them—could be sources of positive aesthetic experiences. One may feel that one is simply directly struck by the ugliness, or even disgustingness, of some bodies. Hume says, as we saw earlier, that some qualities are “fitted by nature” to produce aesthetic displeasure; and some people may feel that their responses of displeasure to some bodies are so powerful that they can't be overcome.

But I'd like to call into question the very idea that these responses are natural, or so basic as to be unalterable. The body shapes that are judged to be most attractive demonstrably change over time in a particular culture and vary from culture to culture (Anderson et al. 1992). Individuals' body preferences can shift over time: many people come to find aging bodies more attractive as they themselves age, and one may come over time to place either more or less value on muscularity. There is evidence that one's attitudes regarding body fat change when the people around one get fatter or thinner (Christakis and Fowler 2007). Notoriously, attitudes about body hair have shifted over the past few decades: pubic hair, which was once thought of as essential to sexual attractiveness, is now often thought of as a liability, to the extent that many people routinely have it painfully removed. The advent of Photoshop and related technologies has altered aesthetic preferences related to women's genitalia. Pornographic photographs frequently showcase altered labia, and in Australia there is a law (Office of Legislative Drafting and Publishing 2008) that pornographers have interpreted as requiring that, when editing images, they trim down any visible inner labia that protrude beyond the outer labia (ABC TV 2010). Surgery to alter the appearance of the labia, known as labiaplasty, has dramatically increased in many countries, apparently as a result of a media-driven reshaping of what is considered normal and attractive in female genitalia (Lowenstein et al. 2014).

The entire industry of marketing is predicated on the idea that people's tastes and preferences about a wide variety of things, including bodies, can be altered. Empirically, it seems to be quite effective. A recent entry is an ad campaign discussed in a Sociological Images blog post titled “Gillette, stymied by beards, heads south” (Wade 2014). The ad features three female models who describe how strongly they prefer shaved genitals in men.

If even our preferences regarding human genital configurations and presentations can be altered by elements of our social environment, that seems fairly powerful evidence that even if aspects of those preferences are natural or basic, they can sometimes be overridden. Once we have established this, there is

every reason to think that we might, through our choices, examine, explore, and manipulate our own response tendencies. We can choose to change the kinds of images we consume, to minimize our exposure to images that reinforce conventional standards of attractiveness, and to cultivate habits of thought and attention that actively resist a simple experience of pleasure in conventional beauty (Lintott and Irvin 2016). Similarly, we can cultivate habits of thought and attention in our encounters with bodies that don't satisfy conventional standards of attractiveness, with the aim of appreciating what every body, just as it is, has to offer as a rich and replete aesthetic object.

This is not to say that aesthetic responses are infinitely malleable. Individuals may have sticking points in their ability to relinquish conventional aesthetic judgments, and cultivating aesthetic exploration may be easier for some people than for others. My argument requires not that perfection be attainable, but only that it be possible to loosen the grip of conventional standards so as to reduce their unjust effects on our judgments in other domains. Replacing a negative aesthetic response to a burn victim's scarred skin with a positive response grounded in aesthetic exploration positions us to avoid penalizing her in other domains, and perhaps also enables us to offer her full recognition rather than avoid her gaze. This is true even if we are unable to shift our judgments and actions similarly in some other situations where doing so would be desirable.

Can There Be Ethical Reasons for Aesthetic Practices?

When I introduced the idea of cultivating an alternate form of appreciative practice in relation to bodies, I discussed the pervasive social injustice that attends judgments of attractiveness. Concern about this injustice is, of course, an ethical concern; and yet, I have used it here to motivate an aesthetic proposal. Some might wonder whether there is some sort of value confusion going on here. Can there be ethical reasons for aesthetic practices?

Let me first clarify one thing I'm not doing. I'm not suggesting that ethical reasons should figure *directly* in our aesthetic judgments. There are two prominent lines of argument suggesting that they should: there's an argument in environmental aesthetics suggesting that once we know how harmful manicured green lawns are in many geographic regions, we should find them aesthetically repugnant rather than attractive (Lintott 2006). And there's an argument that an artwork's immoral content should sometimes diminish our assessment of its aesthetic value (Eaton 2003).

An analogous line of argument in relation to judgments about bodies would be that once we know a particular body's shape has been produced by a debilitating eating disorder or some other unhealthy behavior, we ought to stop seeing that body as beautiful or withhold aesthetic approbation. But that is decidedly not what I

am arguing here. In fact, this strikes me as a probably misguided way of dealing with bodies that we understand to be unhealthy due to the embodied person's behaviors: eating disorders, and many other behavior syndromes that diminish bodily health, are often associated with psychological distress, and to socially penalize the person simply adds to that distress, potentially exacerbating any unhealthy behavior. Moreover, the idea that we should incorporate our beliefs about the health status of a body into our aesthetic response to it is troubling, given that as lay observers we are often in a poor position to know much about a person's health. A person seeing Lizzie Velasquez might well assume that she is suffering from a severe eating disorder, when in fact the condition that causes her body to be unable to store fat is genetic, and she reportedly eats about 5000 calories per day. Meanwhile, fitness models, who appear to be paragons of health, often achieve their body shapes through intermittent starvation dieting that leaves them physically weak and emotionally wrecked (Isaacs 2013, 2014).

What I advocate, then, is not that ethical considerations be incorporated in our aesthetic judgments of bodies, but, instead, that ethical considerations figure at an earlier stage, when we are deciding which aesthetic practices to adopt and cultivate. If we realize that a widespread aesthetic practice has pernicious and pervasive effects, then that is a reason to stop it, just as it would be with any other practice (cf. Saito 1998). Aesthetic practices, just like other human practices, can be assessed in relation to reasons, ethical and otherwise, that are external to the practice itself.

Traditional aesthetic theorists might doubt that the form of appreciative practice I am advocating here is truly aesthetic. I will not address this worry extensively here, since I have made relevant arguments elsewhere (Irvin 2008a, 2008b). Suffice it to say that there are a number of contemporary accounts of aesthetic experience or aesthetic appreciation on which a practice of consciously attending to the formal features of an object is straightforwardly an aesthetic practice (e.g., Carroll 2002). Some accounts add a requirement that one have some sort of affective experience, preferably a positive one (e.g., Levinson 2014), or that one be focusing on the formal features for their own sake rather than, say, for the purposes of telling whether one has sprained one's wrist (e.g., Stecker 2006). The appreciative practice I advocate does have us direct our attention to the formal features of the body for their own sake rather than using them as a vehicle for some other purpose. And, when these formal features are approached with attention and openness, one is likely to have an affective response: perhaps one of pleasure, interest, delight, or wonder, or what Richard Shusterman (1999, 299) calls a "slow savoring awareness." I conclude that this is a genuinely aesthetic practice.

Is Aesthetic Exploration Creepy?

In the short term, the practice I'm proposing would require increasing, not decreasing, one's focus on bodies: one's own (which is a good place to start) and those of others. To cultivate a new form of appreciative practice in relation to the body, one needs to practice it. It's possible that one could make progress, perhaps quite a lot, by adopting a similar sort of appreciative practice in relation to objects other than bodies. But ultimately, one will need to practice on bodies as well. It's not hard to see how consciously performing this sort of appreciative practice on the bodies of others could be undesirable in ways that might be subsumed under the term 'creepy.'

To allay this concern, let's first be honest with ourselves. We subject others' bodies to gazes of aesthetic assessment quite frequently, perhaps constantly. When an appreciative practice is a deeply ingrained habit, this assessment may be largely automatic, to the extent that we deceive ourselves that it isn't happening. But it is still happening: this is what explains the empirical results we saw earlier. The fact that we are not conscious of our aesthetic engagement with the bodies of others doesn't prevent us from committing microaggressions (Sue 2010) against people we judge unattractive: when we've automatically assessed someone as unattractive, we may be less likely to make eye contact with them, listen carefully to them, or take them seriously, and we may evince facial expressions or other forms of bodily comportment that subtly or not so subtly convey our lack of regard. And, as we've already seen, whenever we have power to alter their access to fair treatment in education, health care, criminal justice, employment, and so forth, we are likely to do poorly by them.

These considerations should undermine the idea that our current practices are benign. Once we've done that, we can see that it might be worth the investment to change them, even if changing them involves an awkward period while we get our act together. We may compare a phenomenon that sometimes happens when White people start to recognize and attempt to disrupt the patterns of engrained racism in which they have been, perhaps unwittingly, implicated. There can be a period of heightened racial awareness that leads a White person to be awkwardly and visibly self-conscious in the presence of people of color. Obviously, White people should do their best to minimize the effects of their awkwardness on others and to get over it posthaste. But it is better to go through an awkward period than to leave intact one's tendencies to commit racial microaggressions and abet racist institutions and practices in other ways.

When it comes to cultivating new appreciative practices in relation to the body, there are several strategies one can use to avoid creepiness. First, as I recommended above, one should start with one's own body, the bodies of one's lovers, and the bodies of dancers and other performers who have presented their

bodies for public display. In addition, one can aim to minimize the impact of the shift in one's practices of looking: to *look* as one always has, but *attend, think, and perceive* differently.

The practice I advocate does not conflict with another approach one might wish to take in resisting oppression of people judged unattractive: namely, heightening one's attention to the humanity of the embodied person. It is, of course, of the first importance, in considering whether to hire someone, what kind of educational environment to offer them, whether to convict them of a crime, and what kind of health care to offer, to focus on the aspects of their personhood that are relevant to these contexts. Getting to know someone's personality, ideas, interests, and quirks is vital to knowing and appreciating them as a person, and may sometimes help us to have more positive experiences of their bodies. However, much appearance-based discrimination occurs in contexts where counteracting negative aesthetic responses to the body through focus on the personality isn't feasible: we just don't have sufficient time or information to get to know the person's inner life. Cultivating a practice of positive aesthetic experiences of bodies addresses bias in a wide array of contexts, and is compatible with the aim of giving full attention to relevant aspects of personhood including skills, interests, needs, and talents. We live as embodied persons, and giving another person full recognition involves acknowledging, not denying or looking past, the condition of their embodiment. The strategy I have described is part of, not in tension with, full recognition of the personhood of others.

Conclusion

I suggest that through active cultivation, we can gradually shift our aesthetic practice from one of automatically assessing bodies in relation to conventional standards toward one of appreciating the embodiment of others, even when that embodiment does not satisfy conventional standards. If this is correct, then we can loosen, and perhaps eventually eliminate, the grip of attractiveness assessments on our minds, and thus weaken their influence on domains where they are irrelevant.

What I propose, then, is moving away from a model of comparative aesthetic assessment in relation to standards, and toward a model of aesthetic exploration in which bodies are appreciated as they are, for what they have to offer here and now. Rather than aiming to detect aesthetic properties and aesthetic value that are really there (or really not there) in relation to some intersubjectively valid standard, the idea is to seek out valuable aesthetic experiences of bodies. The claim is not that there is some different standard according to which all bodies have positive aesthetic value, but rather that all bodies can afford positive aesthetic experiences if approached through an appropriate appreciative practice. Moreover, there are ethical reasons for adopting such an appreciative practice, and for aiming to

extinguish the standards-based appreciative practice in which we are commonly engaged.

Is the practice I advocate free of categories and comparisons? Surely not: we see a body as a body, a hand as a hand, skin as skin; and what we notice, what we are able to notice, what is salient to us, is surely shaped in many ways by our background experience. Perhaps this practice is not free of standards, either: when I have a positive aesthetic experience of a body, perhaps I am in some way seeing it positively in relation to some standard. But this standard, if it can be called that, is not one that I bring to every bodily encounter, but rather one that I construct in this very encounter; it's one that is apt to reveal the aesthetic affordances of this very body as it is present to me at this moment.

Kendall Walton notes that it is possible to construct an ad hoc category in relation to which even a mediocre artwork will come out to be aesthetically great. He suggests, rightly, that this sort of category construction, which "would require talent and ingenuity on the order of that necessary to produce a masterpiece in the first place" (1970, 359), is nonetheless unacceptable for artworks: both the surrounding culture and the artist's intentions serve as historical constraints on appropriate categories for artworks (1970, 359–361). But perhaps for bodies, creative category construction that treats bodies as unconstrained by the aesthetic standards of a particular historical moment is just what is needed. Aesthetic appreciation of the body, done well, is itself an art.

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SHERRI IRVIN is Presidential Research Professor of Philosophy and Women's and Gender Studies at the University of Oklahoma. Her edited collection *Body Aesthetics* with Oxford University Press appeared in 2016. Her book *Immaterial: A Philosophy of Contemporary Art* is under contract with Oxford.