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## First-Personal Body Aesthetics as Affirmations of Subjectivity

Madeline Martin-Seaver

### Abstract

This paper redirects some of the philosophical discussion of sexual objectification. Rather than contributing further to debates over what constitutes objectification and whether it is harmful, I argue that aesthetic experience is a useful tool for resisting objectification. Attending to our embodied experiences provides immediate evidence that we are subjects; aesthetically attending to that evidence is a way of valuing it. I consider the human body as an aesthetic site, then as an ethico-aesthetic site, and finally as a site of resistance. In addition to deepening accounts of body aesthetic experience, this paper helps frame human bodies as integral to moral agency, rather than impediments to it.

### Key Words

body aesthetics; felt experience; objectification; subjectivity

### 1. Introduction

In “Women Recovering Our Clothes,” Iris Marion Young describes an experience of sexual objectification both captured in and evoked by an advertisement for wool clothing.[1] The two-panel advertisement’s slogan, “See yourself in wool,” invites Young to imagine herself in place of the woman pictured the first panel, which she enthusiastically accepts. The resulting imagined scenarios are lively and diverse, suggesting a full human life. But the second panel shows the woman watched from behind by a man, who Young describes as “bringing me down to his size.” By including this second picture, the ad flips the switch on women: they’re objects, after all. Young accepts

the invitation to see herself as a subject on her own terms, which the ad rejects. Both she, and the woman wearing wool, are objects.

Young's analysis of the ad and her response to it describes one kind of sexual objectification; her analysis links ideas in feminist film criticism about subjects and objects, gazers and the gazed-on. Young describes the pleasure of viewing fashion advertisements as lying "in images of female bodies in their clothes because my own gaze occupies the position of the male gaze inasmuch as I am a subject at all." This reading oversimplifies her earlier response to the ad, where she imagined herself as a subject in wool. It also reveals that awareness of ourselves as subjects can run alongside our experiences of objectification. In constructing a detailed philosophical response to the ad, Young demonstrates a subjectivity similar to traditional masculine subjectivity. But another, more basic kind of subjectivity enables the philosophical work and provides an immediate contradiction to the objectifying narrative Young encounters. That basic subjectivity, which is my focus here, lies partly in Young's disoriented response to the ad. For people in similar positions, reminders of subjectivity can be found in disorientation and in our bodily responses to objectification.

There is a lively existing literature on sexual objectification but the terms of the philosophical discussion there are rather narrow. Rather than contributing to the existing debates primarily about what objectification *is* and whether it is harmful, I focus on ways we can respond to our own sexual objectification.[2] Rather than trying to understand objectification itself, I am trying to understand how we can respond to it without succumbing to it. How do we resist the catcall? How do we refuse, rather than internalize, the way the man in the ad, or the ad itself, sees us? And how do we resist the idea that our bodies, so often the focus of objectification, do not burden us? First, I argue that attention to embodied experiences affirms subjectivity by providing (sometimes immediate!) counter-testimony to objectification. Affirmation and counter-testimony enable resistance to objectification. However, we still need to figure out how to give that counter-testimony special weight, particularly since objectification often comes at us from multiple sources and over a sustained period of time.[3]

My second suggestion is that aesthetic appreciation of embodiment lends needed weight. I urge particular attention to aesthetic facets of felt bodily experiences, thereby turning aesthetic and moral attention to first- personal experiences of being a body (embodiment). Such a multisensory experience emphasizes our bodies for ourselves, not for others. I focus on

embodiment, especially bodily feelings, because bodies feature so prominently in our thinking about and experiences of objectification, embodiment and subjectivity intertwine, and bodily feelings feature prominently and diversely in other forms of subjective experience, such as emotions. It is important that the attention be aesthetic because of the way aesthetic experience intertwines with value and appreciation. Aesthetic attention is a way of valuing something; it is also something we do as subjects. Aesthetically valuing embodiment helps us resist the kinds of oppression that deny our subjectivity and seek to enlist us in that denial. Our bodies are not merely the occasion of vulnerability and objectification but a source of resistance to objectification and openness to resistance.

Mistrust of the physical facts of human existence has a long history, while more recent work, particularly by feminist philosophers, points out bodily and aesthetic burdens borne by members of marginalized groups.[4] Even in this important critical work, bodies remain “problems.” Rather than continuing to place the sensuous in conflict with the moral, I highlight one particular way the aesthetic and human bodies are allies of self-understanding and projects of resistance.[5] Human lives present a complex union of subject-object experience. We are objects, as physical beings regarded by others, and subjects, as selves, persons, agents.[6] Bodily experiences, such as I discuss here, are subjective, in the sense that they are personal, not public, and not objective. Our subjective experience gives evidence to our personhood when that personhood is under threat from objectification. My focus is on humans who experience objectification, often marginalized groups. I leave to others the project of extending and nuancing the analysis to dominant groups.

As Young’s essay demonstrates, bodily surfaces, significantly of other people’s bodies, are readily available to our senses, especially to sight. The ad Young engages offers a clear case of sighted aesthetic engagement with bodies. Surfaces are the most intuitive point of entry for my project, and there is plenty of work on bodily visibility.[7] The existing literature lays a groundwork for the aesthetic’s presence in a non-traditional arena, the first-personal and felt. I first consider the human body as an aesthetic site, then as an ethico-aesthetic site, and finally as a site of resistance. I next review work in aesthetics emphasizing bodily experiences, particularly tactile experience of one’s own body, as aesthetic experiences. I draw on work by Sherri Irvin and Yuriko Saito to establish ways the body can be a site of aesthetic experiences, rather than merely the conduit for them. I then turn to feminist work on bodily experiences in the context of moral value. Developing an awareness of bodily changes and sensations, and their aesthetic characteristics,

improves self-knowledge and self-understanding. As a specific instance of the impact of our aesthetic environment on our moral lives, objectification illustrates the moral significance of giving attention to the aesthetics of embodied experiences.

## 2. Body aesthetics outside and in

Aesthetic experience is, to borrow a term from Sherri Irvin, pervasive. This section of the paper explores that pervasiveness and outlines some aesthetic experiences specific to embodiment (body aesthetics). Body aesthetics expands philosophy's focus to include aesthetic experiences beyond art-oriented aesthetics; here, I focus on felt experience. By directing our aesthetic attention to bodies, the things people do to and with bodies, and the experience of having a body, body aesthetics understands aesthetic experience as, on some level, always accessible.

Body aesthetics de-emphasizes the notion of aesthetic experience as separate from our day-to-day lives, thereby overlapping everyday aesthetics. Per Saito, everyday aesthetics directs attention to "sensuous qualities like size, shape, color, texture, sometimes smell, and the arrangements of parts. After all, it is these sensuous qualities with which we interact on a daily basis that, along with natural elements, make up the world in which we live." [8] Saito considers the sensuous qualities of quotidian experiences such as laundry, landscaping, and preparing and eating food. Such experiences include "aesthetic tastes and attitudes [that] often ... lead to consequences which go beyond simply being preoccupied with the surface, and . . . affect not only our daily life but also the state of the society and the world." [9] Both Irvin and Saito's views have received pushback for their use of the term aesthetic that I will address in Section IV. First, I survey the way body aesthetics analyzes human bodies and the experience of embodiment.

Aesthetic values affect the visible features of and practices related to the body. Aesthetic judgments inform what we put on and take off our bodies: clothing, makeup, hair, jewelry, tattoos, fat, skin. Practices of body modification and care intersect with self-understanding and self-expression. They express not only "one's evaluative feelings regarding oneself and what would make one pretty, handsome, sexy . . ." but one's cultural context and relationship to that context. [10] Shirley Ann Tate, discussing black women's beautification practices and their experiences navigating racialized beauty standards, writes that "[q]uestions of bodily practices such as those of beauty are always discursive and subject to the gaze of the other." [11] However, the "gaze of the other" is not definitive of these practices, nor of the practitioners. The meaning of black beauty practices originates

in black people's views of themselves. The gaze of the other matters but so does the gaze of the self.[12]

Body aesthetics presents felt experiences as aesthetic experiences by directing attention to aesthetic experiences *of or through* the body. For example, Irvin draws on a Deweyan account of "an experience" to help clarify why we should aesthetically consider activities such as "run[ning] my tongue back and forth on the insides of my closed teeth." [13] In addition to felt bodily sensations, the felt experiences from interacting with the world are also richly aesthetic. Simple features of the world, such as the smell of a cat's fur, can be quite complex: "[w]hen I lower my face into my cat's fur, my experience has subtle tactile, olfactory, visual, and emotional components." [14] We find this complexity of meaning elsewhere: scratching an itch, or the warm and coercive weight of a cat sitting on the bed with you, or the beginnings of a headache; such cases emphasize embeddedness and responsiveness to the world.

As our emotional experiences figure prominently in embodied aesthetic experiences, our emotional lives figure prominently in our aesthetic experiences. They also share some structural features. Emotional experiences frustrate conceptual divisions between the feeling of our bodies and the appearances of them and between our physical and our psychological selves. Many emotional states leave visible signs: we smile, we unch our shoulders, we cry. Such visual effects are intuitively objects of aesthetic evaluation. Facial expressions fit into modes of existing aesthetic evaluation, perhaps because faces are already objects of aesthetic evaluation and labor. Here, I mean "object" both in the sense of "focus" and in the sense of "thing." Faces, like the rest of the body, are both what we appraise and the "raw material" transformed through aesthetic or interpersonal activity. A smile changes facial appearance and is a visual display and signal for others. Our visual habits of aesthetic appreciation allow us to interpret a smile from the perspectives of observer and creator.

However, I have much more access to the invisible records of the smile: air on my teeth and tongue, the stretch of muscles in my cheeks, jaw, lips, and throat. The emotional context of these physical activities/sensations alters their aesthetic character. The stretch of muscles in a forced smile has a different quality from the stretch that accompanies a joyful one. We might not even notice the tension in our muscles that results from a joyful smile but find a forced smile unbearable. Our relationships with our bodies track both our understanding of what our bodies *look like* when they do things as well as what it *feels like* to do or undergo things.

Because our tactile and visual senses are entangled, the division between felt and visible experience is not especially neat. My smile alters my field of vision as well as *feeling like* something to me. Further, it feels like something to see someone else smile, too: sometimes like tension easing, sometimes like a lump in the throat, and sometimes like wanting to slap someone. When we find our bodies undergoing these experiences, we learn something about our bodily responses but we also learn about our orientation to the world around us. As I argue in the rest of the paper, attention to the aesthetic dimension of felt experience underlines subjectivity and, at least potentially, affirms personhood. For some of us, that affirmation might constitute new knowledge but for others, it will at least be a useful reminder, safeguarding subjectivity when it is at risk.

Certain groups are vulnerable to objectification and suffer harm because of this vulnerability and the way it positions them in their communities. Women, generally, have to deal with sexual objectification in ways that men, generally, do not.[15] People of color and the economically vulnerable, a group that includes many women, as well as queer and disabled people, and children, also risk objectification and have limited means of responding to it. Members of these groups experience both sexual objectification and also a more general kind: diminished access to the kind of moral consideration set down in the second formulation of Kant's categorical imperative.[16] They are less likely to be treated as anything other than a means to someone else's end. In less Kantian terms, members of these groups are more likely to find other people reduce their existence to the others' own interests, rather than that interactions with others reflect diverse particularity. In cases of sexual objectification, those interests collect around often oppressive sexual and gender dynamics.

In outlining the aesthetic possibilities of embodiment and the way these possibilities often feature in our emotional lives, I explained how it is that the body can be a source of aesthetic experience beyond the obvious (visual) ways. Throughout this section, I also kept my case study, objectification, in view, focusing for the moment on its social and aesthetic aspects. But the focus on objectification requires a more thorough examination of the way the body, aesthetics included, features in our moral lives. Objectification, after all, is primarily a moral wrong, not an aesthetic one.

### 3. The ethico-aesthetic body

So: we have reasons to think of bodily experiences as aesthetic experiences, to consider emotional experiences as intersecting with aesthetic experiences, and to understand there are specific, under-explored aesthetic values permeating our embodiment.

These aesthetic values may track our particular social context and racial, ethnic, and gender identities and may relate, sometimes quite closely, to moral values. I still need to clarify how our bodies feature in our moral lives. It is easy to see how they feature negatively: consider your behavior last time you got hungry. But consider, too, handshakes and hugs. Drawing on body aesthetics and feminist ethics, I argue that ethico-aesthetic consideration of the body enables a richer appreciation of embodiment and ethics. Framing our bodies as sources of morally relevant information, rather than impediments to rational moral actions, allows us to work with our bodies, rather than against them.

An aesthetics of embodiment addresses the convergence of the aesthetic and the moral. Irvin and Saito suggest at least two sites of convergence. First, attending to everyday aesthetic experiences can improve our appreciation of the world around us and our moral agency. Appreciating aesthetic experiences already available to us, including felt bodily experiences, may make us less likely to search, irresponsibly and unreflectively, for “new goods that make different experiences available. Perhaps we can discover that we already have enough, or even more than we need, to be satisfied.”[17] Second, awareness of the ways our aesthetic values structure decision-making bolsters our self-awareness and transparency. Saito explores the second point in the context of environmental ethics. We have aesthetic tastes for smooth green lawns and bright white cotton tee shirts; acquiring and maintaining them involves a great deal of money and hard work— but also, Saito points out, significant environmental harm.[18] This is a good moral reason to adjust our aesthetic thinking and, thereby, our moral activity. Irvin suggests adjusting our sense of aesthetic value allows us to reframe the moral project such that it no longer seems to hinge on self-sacrifice.[19] For example, reducing meat consumption can be “a matter of finding different ways to indulge the tastes that were once satisfied by meat.” Some of these experiences, such as the lawns, are largely external to bodies, while others, such as food and clothing, more obviously interact with or are incorporated into the body, although there is nothing in principle stopping you from bodily engagement with a smooth green lawn, and dogs certainly seem to enjoy rolling around on them.

The relationship between bodily experiences and ethics also emerges from the work of Gail Weiss and Ami Harbin, who highlight the moral insights that can arise from attending to our bodily experience. In *Body Images*, Weiss argues for an ethics grounded in “bodily imperatives:” “ethical demands that bodies place on other bodies in the course of our daily existence.”[20] We must also attend to our own body’s demands. Harbin,



influenced by Weiss and Sara Ahmed, argues feeling disoriented, particularly bodily disorientation, aids ethical agency. Both Weiss's and Harbin's accounts are useful for discussing objectification because they turn troubling or negative experiences, such as illness, into increased insights and moral agency. Weiss and Harbin describe encounters that upset our habits of self-understanding but through which we gain ethical insight. Objectification, as Young's interaction with the wool advertisement shows, is disorienting because one feels oneself both object and subject. If properly attended to, our bodily feelings reject the denigrating narrative of objectification. In this case, the imperative arising from our own body is that we recognize the emotional experiences, testimony of our subjectivity, manifesting through it. While such an imperative is unlikely to receive uptake from an objectifier, I argue that cultivating habits of aesthetically appreciating the experiences that form such an imperative makes us better able to meet the imperative of our own body.

Weiss contrasts bodily imperatives with Kantian categorical imperatives and other abstract or transcendent moral claims. Bodily imperatives support a finely grained ethics, encompassing the "physical and emotional responses that rise out of our complex, concrete relationships with other bodies." [21] Bodily imperatives are moral commands that "emerge out of our intercorporeal exchanges." [22] For Weiss, our self-concept, body included, relies in large part on our relationships with other people. Weiss argues that relationships are bodily/embodied, not the communion of abstract selves at the mercy of their bodies or the bodies of others. Bodies are integral to personal identity and relationships. The effects of one body on other bodies are reciprocal, which is not to deny that they may be harmful and/or negative. Relationships and moral communities have special significance for practices of moral self-cultivation "that can only be experienced and enacted through bodily practices . . . that both implicate and transform the bodies of others." [23] Weiss begins from bodies in their diverse particularity, not bodies abstracted away from or universalized into iconography. Bodily histories and specific characteristics, like age, are "a source of respect both for the moral wisdom they can provide as well as for the that way they contextualize" our relationships. [24]

Exchanges in the social, rather than biological, world often seem to sideline bodily imperatives. Death and birth are instances when the biological intervenes in the social with undeniable force, and Weiss further contextualizes death and birth through parent-child relationships. Weiss argues that the relationship between maternal and fetal bodies is one case where bodily imperatives are generally acknowledged and understood

because “the intercorporeal exchanges between mother and fetus are too striking to be ignored.”[25] In other contexts, bodily interactions tend to be “described . . . in terms of relatively discrete bodies interacting with other discrete bodies.”[26] The bodily imperatives of a parent-child relationship include feeding and cleaning the child, the child’s need to be fed and cleaned, and the mother’s need to feed and clean, though of course not all mothers experience these imperatives. These bodily demands require embodied action. We cannot eat in the abstract any more than we can wipe our child’s or parent’s body clean of fecal matter in the abstract.

Weiss’s proposal aligns with other philosophies that view bodies not as obstacles to morality but rather as media for moral action. For example, classical Confucianism insists on responsiveness to the particularities of human personalities and relationships and communicates moral regard through bodily behaviors. We see this in advice given about how to behave with appropriate filial feeling and respect toward parents. Parents do not simply require that their children meet their basic needs, as “even dogs and horses are provided with nourishment. If you are not respectful, wherein lies the difference?” Differentiating your dogs and horses from your parents is important work and hinges, among other things, on the appropriate level of respect. “Respectful” is conceived robustly, clarified in the next passage, when Confucius says, “It is the demeanor that is difficult.”[27] Anyone can “go through the motions” but moral regard must be embodied. Bodily skill is expected for moral agency. That classical Confucianism is a philosophy for rich young men, people more likely to sexually objectify others than be objectified themselves, clarifies that bodily experience is morally relevant to dominant groups in addition to marginalized ones. [28] Confucian sources emphasize personal integrity, uniting moral requirements, emotional states, and bodily practice. Manners, comportment, and facial expressions are salient because these are aspects of our embodiment that give other people evidence of our emotional states. Primarily, they are visual evidence; visible signs are the most accessible to others, so it makes sense to focus on them thinking of interactions among groups of people. It doesn’t help so much with first-personal experience. How can we return to a consideration of *felt* experience, and what role might it play in our moral lives?

Ami Harbin’s work on bodily disorientation, influenced by Weiss, describes some of the possibilities for felt experience. Harbin describes disorientation as “experiences of shock or surprise, unease, and discomfort. They are often cued by feelings of being out of place, unfamiliar, or not at home.”[29] Recalling Saito and Irvin’s discussion of aesthetic experience, Harbin frames moral life in terms of “day-to-day practices of interaction:

with spaces, objects, living beings, events, projects, ideas, and norms." Harbin argues disorientation, "experienced through complex corporeal, affective, and cognitive processes," is vital to moral agency. Bodily disorientation changes our attentional patterns, highlighting aspects of our experiences that otherwise go unobserved:

disorientations often make more visible the ways my well-being relies crucially on the work of others . . . , and this can support morally better, potentially reciprocal, interaction with them. As disoriented, we are more likely to stand out to others, to depend on them, and to appreciate their power in our lives; this can bring us into closer relationships in some cases and distance us from parts of our communities in others.

Like Weiss and Saito, Harbin links attention and ethics: "we enact moral agency often through habits of attention and action." And it is important to keep the body in view, as "processes of cognition and emotion cannot be theorized apart from embodiment."<sup>[30]</sup>

If we understand objectification as a kind of disorientation, and Young's account gives us reason for doing so, then Harbin's argument that disorientation helps us direct our attention and critically evaluate our relationship with people and institutions around us. It also furthers our self-knowledge; specifically, it lets us know we are subjects who can be viewed as objects. This is not the same as learning we are objects! Alongside Confucian philosophy, Harbin and Weiss shine a bright light on the relationship between our bodies and the habitual and indicate ways this relationship is relevant to our moral interactions. Through their focus on bodies, they also suggest relevance for the aesthetic. I turn now to aesthetic attention as a way of valuing the habitual.

#### **4. Aesthetic experience and subjectivity**

The idea that paying attention is one way of acknowledging value recurs in philosophy of the everyday. I argue that paying attention to women's experiences of objectification is one way of counteracting everyday instances of gendered injustice. My focus here is not on women's testimonies about those experiences but on the phenomenology of objectification and the way attention to bodily feelings affirms subjectivity. Further, the aesthetic has a special place in the ongoing, many-layered project of counteracting gendered injustices and understanding one's own condition. So, the attention I advocate is, at least in part, aesthetic attention. I will start by explaining why this is a project for aesthetics, not just ethics or political philosophy.

There are three reasons for thinking we should understand my project as aesthetic, rather than merely moral. First, aesthetic values play a large role in processes of objectification, such that aesthetic norms signal the value of certain kinds of bodies. Second, deviation from or adherence to these norms makes one particularly vulnerable to objectification. In the spectrums of feminine self-presentation, the middle ground allows one to pass unremarked but “ostentatiously” feminine or notably androgynous or masculine self-presentation “provoke” comments. Certain bodies get classed as “extremely feminine” or “androgynous” without much agential action at all: people have relatively little to say about the size of their breasts or the width of their hips. Finally, the link between aesthetic attention and moral agency means there is a particular need to counter aesthetic oppression with aesthetic liberation. I use the ethico-aesthetic norm of sexiness to illustrate these points.

Aesthetic values inform our judgments about our own bodies and the bodies of others, sometimes enabling objectification. We consider bodies in light of norms like sexiness and altered bodies/bodily appearances, with respect to such norms. Though actual ideas about what “counts” as sexy are as diverse as the people who hold them, what A. W. Eaton calls our “collective taste” for/in sexiness is fairly limited.[31] It readily acknowledges white, able bodies. It makes room, sometimes, for racially and ethnically “ambiguous” bodies, provided they meet or better the standards of white sexual desirability. In the 1990s, bell hooks argued that Naomi Campbell “embodies an aesthetic that suggests black women, while appealingly ‘different,’ must resemble white women to be considered really beautiful,” while also being photographed in highly sexualized contexts.[32] Whatever racial progress has occurred since the 1990s, the sense that Lupita Nyong’o’s *Vogue* covers push the boundaries of mainstream beauty persists. *Vogue* covers, in general, track a slightly different kind of desirability than concepts of sexiness do, and Nyong’o and Campbell are not treated as desirable, beautiful, or sexy in the same way Kate Upton is. (They are high fashion in a way Upton is not).[33] However, the ideals intersect and overlap, such that women navigate their relationship to each. For women of color, sexual desirability and beauty are fraught and often dehumanizing, objectifying in a surprisingly narrow sense. For example, Robin Zheng, writing about “yellow fever,” or white men’s sexual “preference” for Asian and Asian-descended women, argues that “racial depersonalization inherent in yellow fever threatens Asian/American women with doubts as to whether they are or can be loved as individuals rather than as objects in a category.”[34] Asian/American women who find themselves outside the lines of “collective taste” for Asian/American female bodies might find themselves

with doubts as to whether they can be loved as objects in a category, let alone individuals. Desirability seems possible only through the lens of the exotic and the subhuman.

Sexiness is oddly positioned in the context of gender. It sometimes permits male bodies to be desirable *as bodies*, rather than as people.[35] However, the cultural content of sexiness still requires pouting lips, lush cleavage, and a dramatic hip-waist ratio, and none of these attributes traditionally fall within the domain of the male body.[36] Most female bodies *also* fail to realize these attributes, and so women-in-waiting “must” learn to counterfeit them through purchases (lip gloss, elaborate lingerie) or postures (shoulders back, one foot forward, back arched). The norm here is visual: the goal is to create an appearance of sexiness, contemplated at a distance. This appearance of sexiness happens to be pretty useless for reciprocal sexual activity; it’s very difficult to remain sexy while taking off your Spanx. Failure to learn how to mimic the norm of sexiness can have terrible consequences.[37] So, too, can success.

The mode of judgment, conformity to, and rejection of such ideals as sexiness is paradigmatically visual. This is particularly true of other-directed aesthetic activity but also of much self-directed aesthetic activity. Applying red lipstick, for example, does seem like an act of distancing me from my body; it sets up the kind of object/observer dynamic that got us into this problem in the first place. However, felt experience is less easily categorized according to objectifying norms. Indeed, I suggest that felt experience offers a strong counter to objectification. Paying attention to felt experience foregrounds subjectivity by making salient those parts of our being which are specific to us individually: our emotions, reactions, histories, and the nebulous, sometimes mysterious internal sensations that only we have (total) access to. Only I know what the drag of the lipstick feels like. Only I know if it dries my lips. This is as important to my experience of the lipstick as whether the lipstick looks “perfect.” In public, only other people can see if it does, and other people are not very good at noticing. While my choosing to wear lipstick is one clear expression of subjectivity, my own, private and specific knowledge of “what it is like to wear this lipstick” continues to confirm that what I am is not defined by social scripts around me.[38]

We do not need to wear lipstick to create or provide an aesthetic experience for observers. The earlier example of smiling raised the multi-dimensional aspect of unadorned embodiment. Our bodies already have visual and tactile features; they look like something, they feel like something, even at rest. Further, we can move our bodies in ways (smiling, or frowning, and

countless other movements) that produce additional aesthetic effects for observers. For us, these experiences are felt. An aesthetic appreciation of such feelings might entail, as Irvin suggests about itches and scratches, “acknowledging . . . how they call attention to our somatic experience and how they color that experience in certain ways.”[39] The way we experience our own embodiment matters, just as the way we experience other people’s embodiment matters. Some of that experience is, or can be, aesthetic.

Recognizing the aesthetic aspect of embodiment is, on some level, just a response to the bare facts of human existence. At the most basic level, aesthetic appreciation of embodiment just acknowledges that there are sensuous experiences specific to my embodiment I can attend to in ways that inform me about the world and myself. But making the aesthetic aspects of our experience salient alters our way of valuing them. Calling attention to something’s sensuous qualities and fully attending to the specifics of sensuous experience, rather than screening them out, is a way of giving that experience value and weight. Aesthetic experience pervades our lives – but value pervades aesthetic experience.

With this in mind, let me suggest a further arena where aesthetic attention to felt embodied experiences is morally valuable: when objectified by another. Objectification seeks to cut women down to size, reminding them they are first and foremost things for men to consider possessing. Receiving this kind of evaluation can be humiliating. That humiliation has its own bodily phenomenologies. In the face of an objectifying hiss, my nausea, hot cheeks, and curled lip “color my somatic experience,” as Irvin describes it, and reaffirm my personhood—if I let them. These bodily reactions push back against the gaze of ownership, affirming my sense that a moral wrong has been done to me. In communicating contempt through a curled lip and registering my anger by the heat in my cheeks, I redirect the negative emotional/moral reaction of shame away from my self and toward the person who has actually committed the violation. Simply noting my bodily responses is insufficient to make this shift; I must also appreciate the bodily responses. Without a way of valuing these responses, I do not have a reliable way to heed the evidence they offer. Lacking that cue to pay attention to the bodily testimony, I distance and alienate myself from the body that received this moral wrong. People who routinely navigate objectification risk habituated alienation of their bodies, negatively affecting moral functioning and well-being.

I hope that, in this way, I can respond to those who criticize Irvin and Saito for trivializing the term “aesthetic.” My account hits a

number of ideas that critics, particularly Christopher Dowling and Brian Soucek, worry about. Dowling worries accounts like Irvin's "equivocat[e] between 'aesthetic value' and 'pleasure;'" many everyday experiences are pleasurable without being aesthetic.[40] I'm not advocating pleasure in the bodily feelings that arise when we feel ourselves objectified, only appreciation. Dowling might very well worry that my account offers neither aesthetic value nor pleasure. Per Soucek, in the absence of "an object that is at least in principle publicly accessible, one simply lacks an aesthetic experience." [41] Felt bodily experiences are not in principle publicly accessible (that I know of).

I'm going to borrow Irvin's response to these critiques. She pushes against the privacy assumption: as "physiologically similar creatures, common stimuli produce similar sensations in us" and these sensations are, by virtue of our membership in a society, capable of being described, evaluated, and subjected to norms, including aesthetic ones.[42] Applying aesthetic norms to bodily experience, Irvin argues, does not differ wildly from applying them to artworks or nature. In both cases, one "observe[s] various non-aesthetic aspects" or facts about the world, and applies "norms available in the public domain" to those facts. Irvin's defense of itches seems applicable to the flushed cheeks that accompany shame or anger or to the disorientation Harbin and Young describe. I think I can borrow Irvin's reasoning to respond to Dowling, too. I don't feel pleasure when my cheeks flush but I may recognize the symmetry of anger and shame in response to a wrong. This anger alters my body in ways visible and invisible, and the invisible alterations have as many qualitative features, including emotional content, as the visible ones. Additionally, reasons I have offered for thinking the aesthetic aids us in resisting objectification push back against the worry that we lose something by expanding the scope of the "aesthetic." By developing new appreciative habits that affirm our subjectivity, we strengthen the aesthetic's relationship to justice.

Aesthetic attention is not the only attention that can achieve this effect but earlier arguments, about acknowledging and seeking out aesthetic experience in daily life, help explain why the aesthetic can make this kind of resistance more effective. Attending to the aesthetics of something and recognizing aesthetic experience as a possible response to our interaction with a thing is a way of valuing that thing. A key component of those earlier arguments was that seeking out and appreciating aesthetic experience in unexpected areas helps change our orientation toward those areas. So, as the earlier example went, appreciating the aesthetic experiences unique to vegetables can help us appreciate vegetables more, thereby facilitating a vegetable-centric diet. I am not suggesting we aesthetically

appreciate being objectified but rather that we cultivate an aesthetic appreciation of our bodily responses to objectification. Our bodies are the vegetables; aesthetically appreciating bodily responses, particularly felt responses accessible *only to us*, is a way of valuing the body and our affective reactions to the world around us. In situations of oppression, valuing our bodily counter-testimony helps us resist the forces structuring that oppression. Attending to the aesthetic facets of the testimony helps cultivate an attitude of value toward that testimony. Aesthetically attending to the body makes both object and subject experience salient, thereby preventing us from perpetuating the idea, on which some kinds of oppression rely, that subjects and objects are mutually exclusive.

Through such attention, I learn to appreciate my body as something that strengthens my subjectivity. Bodily experiences, in the totality of their *feeling*, are only accessible subjectively. They are not other-regarding but private. In their privacy and subjectivity, felt experiences render objectifying comments and gazes incomplete. Felt experiences offer immediate counter-testimony to the objectifying judgment and suggest other sources of self-understanding and value. In conditions of oppression, it is important to have ideas about what alternatives we have or make in opposition to oppressive structures. Subjective experiences that say, "but I *am* a person and it does matter how I am treated," offer one such alternative. Aesthetic appreciation of that subjective experience, because of its close relationship with value and worth, gives persuasive power to the counter-testimony of our embodiment.

Finally, attention to felt experience helps render bodies fully human rather than merely a precondition for objectification or impediment to moral action. It accomplishes this by adjusting our understanding of what having a body means. We remain vulnerable; but focusing on the aesthetic possibilities resulting from our embodiment that makes sensuous experience possible suggests new ways of approaching the experience. The body is central to our humanity, in that it features prominently and, at least sometimes, positively in our moral lives. The body is a rich source of meaningful experience, singularly available to embodied beings. Pointing out the conditions of human existence and suggesting new ways to relate to those conditions certainly is a philosopher's task.

## 5. Conclusion

By decentering the outward appearance of bodies and instead attending to the specificities of felt experience, we can foreground subjectivity and reframe the aesthetic in three ways. First, it makes the aesthetic an aid to our moral lives. Second, it unites aesthetics and ethics by using the aesthetic to redirect



attention to our own embodiment and, thereby, our own subjectivity. Aesthetic experience is put to ethical purpose. Third, it presents a positive link between aesthetic experiences and bodily experiences, rather than simply placing the body at the mercy of (often-corrupt) aesthetic values.

My argument further offers reasons to move beyond versions of our moral lives and our aesthetic experiences that, when they acknowledge embodiment's role at all, denigrate the body's role in moral or aesthetic processes. Instead, it suggests ways bodies positively contribute to our ethico-aesthetic lives and are worthy objects of moral and aesthetic attention. One key contribution is the embodied aesthetic experience's ability to facilitate resistance to oppression, by reminding us, when we experience certain kinds of oppression, of the counter-evidence we can marshal against oppressive narratives and structures. This resistance, as I understand it, is limited; it mostly has to do with constructing a self-understanding that allows us to reject the version of ourselves oppressive narratives and acts, like sexual objectification, propagate. Though it is clearly no replacement for political action and other forms of outward resistance, it may make outward resistance feasible.

Let me close by suggesting another issue I have not discussed here, partly for reasons of space and focus. What does a better understanding of our ability, as individuals, to resist objectification suggest for our moral prospects in community with others?[43] How can we use disorientation to understand not just ourselves but others, too? And how can we take up this question without expecting people vulnerable to objectification to bend over backwards to accommodate the perspectives of their objectifiers? It seems to me that these questions are the next step in a more diverse philosophical discussion of objectification and human bodies.

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## Endnotes

Author's note: This paper has benefited from the generosity and guidance of many philosophers, but I would particularly like to thank the reviewers, Sherri Irvin, and A. W. Eaton. I also thank attendees at the 2016 ASA Annual Meeting in Seattle, where this paper was first presented.

[1] *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing Like a Girl" and Other Essays* (Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 62-74.

[2] A robust philosophical literature exists on objectification but my intervention is about how we respond to objectification, not about what it is. For summaries of the disagreement on objectification, see Evangelina Papadaki, "Feminist Perspectives on Objectification," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Zalta, Winter 2015 and Kathleen Stock, "Sexual Objectification," *Analysis*, 75, 2 (2015), 191-95. For a critique of the discussion that offers another way of thinking about objectification, see Ann Cahill, *Overcoming Objectification: A Carnal Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 2011). In *Body Images*, cited elsewhere in this paper, Gail Weiss offers a similar but less developed critique to Cahill's. An odd feature of this literature, that I hope my paper helps address, is that there is less attention paid to people experiencing sexual objectification than there is to objectification.

[3] In Young's case, the objectification came from the company funding the ad, the people designing the ad, and the male figure in the ad, but sometimes it could be a much simpler onslaught of street harassment while jogging.

[4] For some critiques of gendered and racialized bodily ideals: Sandra Bartky, *Femininity and Domination* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Janell Hobson "The 'Batty' Politic: Towards an Aesthetic of the Black Female Body," *Hypatia*, 18, 4 (2003) 87-105; Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

[5] A project with more focus on historical sources would have the time to discuss the ways in which the same texts advocating a suspicion of the aesthetic as a sign of virtue *also*, generally, think aesthetic pleasure and activity (and even human bodies) have an important place in ethical projects. For example, in *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennet's aesthetic pleasure in Mr. Darcy's house and gardens tracks her improved opinion of him more generally, and also clue the reader into the fact that this improved opinion is the correct one.

[6] For contemporary work on humans as subjects *and* objects: Nancy Bauer, *How to Do Things with Pornography* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015) and Jennifer McWeeny

"Varieties of Consciousness under Oppression: False Consciousness, Bad Faith, Double Consciousness, and *Se Fair Objet*," in *Phenomenology and the Political*, ed. S. West Gurley and Geoff Pfeifer (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016), pp. 149-63.

[7] I am not interested in a hard and fast division between bodies-as-appearances and bodies-as-feelings; rather, I think the phenomenology of embodiment captures both visual and tactile sensation, both our experiences of what we look like and our experiences of being "in" our bodies. (You probably see parts of your body as you read this paper: maybe your hands, maybe the outline of your nose or cheeks.)

[8] Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 2.

[9] Saito, 2007, 55.

[10] A. W. Eaton, "Taste in Bodies and Fat Oppression," in *Body Aesthetics*, ed. Sherri Irvin (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 42.

[11] Shirley Anne Tate, *Black Beauty: Aesthetics, Stylization, Politics* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 18.

[12] Tate's project shares some similarities with Young's, though Young focuses on developing a women-centered account of clothing.

[13] Sherri Irvin, "The Pervasiveness of the Aesthetic Ordinary Experience," *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 48, 1 (2008), 25-35; ref. 30-31.

[14] Irvin, 2008, 40.

[15] This is not to say anything about who does the objectifying, just about who has to deal with it.

[16] For objectification of black men, see: Wesley Morris "Last Taboo: Why Pop Culture Just Can't Deal with Black Male Sexuality," *New York Times Magazine*, October 27, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/10/30/magazine/black-male-sexuality-last-taboo.html>, accessed November 15, 2019

[17] Irvin 2008, 42

[18] Saito 2007, 54ff.

[19] Irvin 2008, 42.

[20] Gail Weiss, *Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 5.

[21] Weiss 1999, 5.

[22] Weiss 1999, 158.

[23] Weiss 1999, 158.

[24] Weiss 1999, 158.

[25] Weiss 1999, 168. Of course, it's not clear that the general awareness of the close relationship between mothers and fetuses is always for the best.

[26] Weiss 1999, 168.

[27] Confucius, *Analects*, trans. Edward Slingerland, (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2003) 2.7, 2.8. See also *Analects* 2.4 and Book 10 and Hagop Sarkissian, "Ritual and Rightness in the *Analects*," in *The Dao Companion to the Analects*, ed. Amy Olberding (New York: Springer, 2014), 95-116.

[28] While my argument and focus are on objectification and people likely to experience them, we are all subjects-objects, and aesthetic attention to bodily feeling could be useful in other moral contexts. Richard Shusterman's work in somaesthetics similarly points to bodily experience's aesthetic and moral relevance: Richard Shusterman, *Thinking Through the Body* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[29] Ami Harbin, "Bodily Disorientation and Moral Change," *Hypatia*, 27, 2 (2012), 262-80.

[30] Harbin, 272, 273, 276.

[31] For a more thorough philosophical discussion of sexiness, see Sheila Lintott and Sherri Irvin, "Sex Objects and Sexy Subjects: A Feminist Reclamation of Sexiness," in *Body Aesthetics*, ed. Sherri Irvin (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 299-319. For ways judgments of taste in bodies align with or support oppressive structures, see Eaton 2016 and Sherri Irvin, "Resisting Body Oppression: An Aesthetic Approach," *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly*, 3, 4 (2017).

[32] bell hooks, "Selling Hot Pussy: Representations of Black Female Sexuality in the Cultural Marketplace," in *Writing on the Body*, ed. Katie Conboy (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 122-32.

[33] Though Upton has also been on *Vogue* covers, her career relies on her ability to please a very traditional version of the male gaze in a way neither Campbell's nor Nyong'o's does.

[34] Robin Zheng, "Why Yellow Fever Isn't Flattering: A Case Against Racial Fetishes," *Journal of the American Philosophical Association*, 2, 3, (2016), 408. See also Alexander Chee, "My First (and Last) Time Dating a Rice Queen," *The Stranger*, June 21, 2017, accessed November 15, 2019, <https://www.thestranger.com/queer-issue->

2017/2017/06/21/25227046/my-first-and-last-time-dating-a-rice-queen

[35] See, for example, the camera's treatment of John Abraham at the beginning of "Shut Up and Bounce:"

<https://youtu.be/0akqVN4ts0w> (accessed November 15, 2019).

[36] Sherri Irvin suggests it might be the case that there are simply different norms of sexiness for men. I think that's true—but sexiness full stop still seems to be feminized to me. If you want to talk about male sexiness, you have to specify that you're referencing an alternative mode of sexiness. The situation is the inverse of "woman writer" or "female comedian," phrases which signal, through the gender label, that the person being discussed is an exception to our cultural understanding that writers and comedians are male.

[37] This is of special poignancy for trans women, whether or not their self-expression leans toward traditional feminine aesthetics. A woman's safety might rely on her being "convincingly" a "real woman." But if she manages this *too* well, she risks hyper-sexualization and, perhaps, the assumption that she is a sex worker. And if she declines to present in a feminine way, she might increase her risk of encountering transphobic violence. See Talia Mae Bettcher, "Full Frontal Morality: The Naked Truth About Gender," *Hypatia*, 27, 2 (2012), 319-37.

[38] As the examples in this paper suggest, I do not think the general phenomena I describe is limited to experiences of objectification. I'm not sure, however, what its actual limits are and if its aesthetic limits differ from its moral limits. Probably, swallowing an allergy pill is something that I could appreciate aesthetically—but I doubt the experience is relevant to my moral life (in general).

[39] Irvin 2008, 30.

[40] Christopher Dowling, "The Aesthetics of Daily Life." *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 50, 3 (2010), 225-42.

[41] Brian Soucek, "Resisting the Itch to Redefine Aesthetics," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 67, 2 (2009), 223-226.

[42] Sherri Irvin, "Aesthetics and the Private Realm," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 67, 2 (2009), 226-230.

[43] My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this concluding point.

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