

On the Wellbeing of Aesthetic Beings¹

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As aesthetic beings, we are receptive to and engaged with the sensuous phenomena of life while also knowing that we are targets of others' awareness: we are both aesthetic agents and aesthetic objects. Our psychological health, our standing within our communities, and our overall wellbeing can be profoundly affected by our aesthetic surroundings and by whether and how we receive aesthetic recognition from others. Being aware of and responsive to how others aesthetically experience us shapes our sense of self and our ability to function in a world with others who are also both agents and objects. Likewise, how we respond aesthetically to others shapes their sense of self and ability to function as, and in a world of, aesthetic beings. Our aesthetic interactions constitute a multitude of feedback loops in which we project our aesthetic values to and on the world and its objects and in which we too are subject to the projections of others. When our embodied selves and our cultural products are valued, and when we have rich opportunities for aesthetic experience and for the exercise of aesthetic agency, the aesthetic can foster and sustain wellbeing and help to make our lives worthwhile. But when we are subjected to aesthetic blight, restriction of our aesthetic agency, and aesthetic devaluing of our embodied selves and our communities' cultural products, the aesthetic can do great harm.

In this essay we will explore the notions of aesthetic objects and aesthetic agents, their relations with each other, and the unique affordances of persons' status as simultaneously aesthetic objects and aesthetic agents. We will explore the prospects for bodily aesthetic experience to promote wellbeing and, at the end, consider how the aesthetic might play a role in establishing forms of mutual vulnerability and recognition to combat oppressive social hierarchies.

Aesthetic objects

To be an aesthetic object is to be an object of experience. We may have aesthetic experiences of enjoying or taking an interest in the form of an object – a sculpture, a house, a canyon – or in the unfolding of an event, as when the wind continually rearranges the configuration of leaves and branches seen through a window. Aesthetic experience often focuses on the sensory qualities of a thing, but examples from literature, mathematics, and conceptual art recommend the view that ideas and concepts, too, can be objects of aesthetic experience (Dutilh Novaes 2019, Schellekens 2007). Aesthetic objects enliven our experience by imparting color, flavour, and texture, whether literal or metaphorical. An aesthetic object may be in the foreground or the background of our experience: the environment that surrounds us both contains aesthetic

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objects and is itself an aesthetic object, even if it does not stand out to us at every moment (Carlson 1979). The aesthetic thus plays a crucial and comprehensive role in shaping how we experience our lives and is a key contributor to wellbeing (Irvin 2008b).

An aesthetic object is a potential target of appreciation that identifies the object's aesthetic properties and assigns it aesthetic value. Appreciation, in this context, does not imply enjoyment or positive assessment: aesthetic appreciation may involve detecting the ugliness of something, finding it unpleasant, and judging it to have negative aesthetic value. Aesthetic appreciation may focus primarily on perceptual or structural features or may also involve knowledge of features such as the object's functions (Parsons and Carlson 2008). When it eventuates in aesthetic judgment that makes a claim to intersubjective validity, aesthetic appreciation typically involves comparison of the object to others in a relevant category (Walton 1970). Responses to aesthetic objects often carry positive or negative affective valence, even if subtle. But aesthetic appreciation can take the form of exploring an object's aesthetic features without aiming to issue a judgment and while suspending confidence in one's experience of their valence (Irvin 2017).

There are community practices of aesthetic appreciation and community norms for what counts as aesthetically valuable. For this reason, communities often converge in their judgments that certain objects are highly valuable while others are aesthetically blighted. As in many domains, community members with more social and political power and capital have outsized influence on norms of aesthetic appreciation and valuing. Where communities are arranged hierarchically, aesthetically valued objects tend to be those associated with dominant or empowered cultures and identities. The objects valued by disempowered communities are sometimes disvalued as kitsch or acknowledged as merely agreeable or pleasant rather than truly beautiful, to use the Kantian distinction (Kant, 1790/1987). Where an aesthetic object deviates from cultural norms, if it is associated with an empowered person or community it is more likely to be acknowledged as a creative innovation, whereas if it is associated with a disempowered person or community it is more likely to be dismissed as aesthetically inferior and explained as the product of inadequate resources or unsound aesthetic judgment.²

More broadly, the value of an aesthetic object is not merely its value as a perceptual object considered in isolation. In our everyday lives, aesthetic objects are positioned and perceived in relation to other things and to aesthetic agents and users, and the value we recognize in them may be deeply influenced by context. Which sensory appearances are most relevant to aesthetic assessment may depend on what the object is most used for: aesthetic assessment of a casserole served for family dinner may be tied more to olfactory and gustatory than to visual properties, while aesthetic assessment of a knife may be tied to tactile properties and effectiveness at performing its function. Aesthetic assessment of a garden plant may be connected to how it fits into a broader environment and contributes to an overall effect.

² In *The Cultural Promise of the Aesthetic* (2014), Monique Roelofs offers a detailed study of the way in which the aesthetic constitutes and reinforces sociopolitical hierarchies including those of race, gender, and class.

Assessments of aesthetic value shape how an aesthetic object receives uptake within the community. Objects judged to have higher aesthetic value are esteemed, collected, displayed, and protected. People are drawn to these objects and wish to engage with them and spend time in their presence. Objects judged to have less aesthetic value are not esteemed and are often targeted for revision, removal, or at least concealment. Empowered communities tend to have greater ability to enforce the modification or removal of objects they aesthetically devalue; communities with less economic and political power are more likely to be stuck with aesthetically blighted objects in their environments, and the presence of such objects may serve as a constant reminder that the social and political standing of one's community is compromised.

As we will explore below, aesthetic objects may be not merely appreciated but shaped by aesthetic agents. An aesthetic object may be created by an aesthetic agent, or modified or recontextualized in a way that alters its aesthetic value. When agents make aesthetic judgments about objects that they have rights over (or, sometimes, even in the absence of such rights), they may take action that brings an object or environment into line with their aesthetic assessment, producing what they take to be greater aesthetic value.

These observations have multifaceted implications for wellbeing. First, our wellbeing is affected by the aesthetic value of the objects in our environment. Access to aesthetically interesting and valuable objects and environments may greatly enhance quality of life. Being surrounded by aesthetically disvalued objects, on the other hand, is unpleasant and has adverse consequences for both mental and physical health. Moreover, insofar as a community's relegation to an aesthetically blighted environment signals disempowered social status, it may be one of the mechanisms for the adverse effects of racism and other forms of social marginalization on wellbeing (Garvin et al. 2013).

Second, as we will explore in greater detail below, we ourselves, by virtue of our physical and behavioral presence in the world, are aesthetic objects continually targeted for aesthetic assessment by others. Whether others value our bodies aesthetically affects our access to a wide variety of goods: social and romantic relationships, employment, health care, fair treatment in the criminal justice system, as well as general kindness and respect for our human dignity (Irvin 2017). Bodies that are aesthetically valued, and the people whose bodies they are, tend to be prized and protected; those whose bodies are aesthetically disvalued are also socially marginalized and excluded, subject to abuse, and sometimes violently attacked (Frazier in press, Siebers 2010). Our status as aesthetic objects, then, has pervasive effects on our wellbeing across many domains.

Aesthetic agents

To be an aesthetic agent is to be capable of experiencing aesthetic objects and taking various sorts of actions in relation to them. Aesthetic agency encompasses at least three kinds of engagement with aesthetic objects: engagement that constitutes the agent's own aesthetic experiences, engagement that affects the existence or nature of the aesthetic object, and

engagement that shapes the aesthetic experiences and values of other aesthetic agents. Let us consider these in turn.

As an aesthetic agent, I am capable of aesthetically experiencing and responding to aesthetic objects, whether in art or in everyday life. I may have an experience of bliss in response to a great work of opera, an experience of disgust in relation to a scene in a horror film, or an experience of pleasure and comfort when settling on the couch in a cozily furnished domestic interior. My experiences of these objects are complex, with cognitive, emotional, and somatic components: the opera's clever interplay of score and libretto may engage my intellect; the horror movie may cause my body to tense and shudder; and settling on the couch may ease my stress and inculcate a sense of calm. To the extent that I have the time and resources to do so, I am likely to select aesthetic objects to produce the kinds of experiences I desire in a given moment. I watch a horror movie when I welcome and feel prepared to handle the intense somatic and emotional responses I know will ensue; I seek out the couch when I long for gentleness and ease, perhaps to temper the effects of the horror movie. As John Dewey notes, our choices to seek out particular aesthetic stimuli are on a continuum with the behaviors of animals, who monitor their internal states and seek inputs that will rectify any unease and produce a more satisfying state of being (Dewey 1934/1980). I can also choose to attend to the qualities of an object that are more satisfying while ignoring those I find less appealing or interesting (Irvin 2008a).

My experience of aesthetic objects may involve judging their quality: I may judge objects to be of high quality if they consistently produce satisfying experiences in me, or I may be influenced by cultural factors to assign high value to aesthetic objects that satisfy communal norms regardless of whether I enjoy them. Where my preferences diverge from communal norms, I may feel ambivalent about the aesthetic objects that give me pleasure, adding a tinge of guilt or shame to experiences I otherwise enjoy. For those who belong to a disempowered cultural group whose aesthetic products are devalued, this devaluing may play an important role in stigmatizing the group and leaving its members feeling a persistent unease, since their very enjoyment of their own cultural products is treated a sign of inferior judgment.

Not surprisingly, the effect that aesthetic objects have on my own and others' experience may lead me to take actions that affect those objects' nature or very existence. I may choose to create new aesthetic objects, to modify or rearrange existing objects to create new aesthetic effects, and to preserve the aesthetic objects I value while allowing others to deteriorate. My choices in this domain have both aesthetic and ethical significance, since they may profoundly affect the experiences of others. The kinds of representations that are available affect what we are able to imagine and to what extent we can empathize with or understand others' cognitive and emotional states (Nussbaum 1990). They also affect how we cognize members of a group, particularly when that group is socially disempowered: representations can reinforce stereotypes and reductive tropes about a group or open up new ways of seeing and valuing its members (Collins 2000; Eaton 2016; Frazier forthcoming; Siebers 2010; Taylor 2016).

Even without taking actions that affect the existence or nature of aesthetic objects, I can shape the experiences of others through my choices about which representations to distribute or share and by engaging in critical discourse. If I commend an aesthetic object to others, this may cause them to engage with, value, and preserve it. We often give special attention to aesthetic objects that we know to be valued by our community or by people with whom we have relationships of trust and care. Through discourse, I can shape others' encounter with an aesthetic object, drawing their attention to features they might otherwise have overlooked or highlighting relationships to other artworks or allusions to non-art content. I might thereby cause them to have a more satisfying aesthetic encounter and to value the object more highly, or by drawing attention to negative features I might diminish their enjoyment of and care for the object.

In addition to shaping each other's experiences of particular objects, aesthetic agents shape each other's aesthetic tastes and tendencies. The cultural norms associated with aesthetic appreciation are taught: children learn what is pretty and what is ugly and learn to cultivate pleasure in the experience of pretty things and displeasure in the experience of ugly things.³ We engage in forms of discipline designed to incentivize the production and maintenance of aesthetically valuable objects and the elimination or concealment of aesthetically disvalued objects. Whoever is judged responsible for an aesthetically disvalued object may receive criticism, penalties, harassment, and threats designed to induce negative affect and motivate action to remove the (purported) aesthetic stain on others' experience. Legal and quasi-legal structures enforce these norms: local statutes and homeowners' association rules maintain aesthetic standards related to landscaping, laundry, and home renovations, while employment rules and dress codes maintain aesthetic standards related to clothing and hairstyles. A sense that one is in compliance with community aesthetic norms regarding one's person, one's domestic environment, and one's possessions may produce wellbeing, while a sense of being out of compliance may produce shame and distress in addition to whatever discipline one is subjected to. Discipline regarding the aesthetic qualities of bodies is particularly acute. The mere public presence of people deemed unsightly, often due to disability or poverty, has been criminalized in some contexts.⁴ As Tobin Siebers notes, when a person's body is disvalued they may be subject to 'aesthetic disqualification': 'a symbolic process [that] removes individuals from the ranks of quality human beings, putting them at risk of unequal treatment, bodily harm, and death' (Siebers 2010, 23).

Aesthetic agents have the capacity to engage collectively in social aesthetic projects which may be either oppressive or liberatory. When an empowered group disvalues the aesthetic products

³ This is not to deny that we are naturally disposed to find some kinds of stimuli pleasant and others unpleasant: babies, for instance, manifest more attention to some visual arrays than others. But cultural aesthetic norms extend far beyond our natural response tendencies and may even recommend their modification or suppression, as when we learn to take pleasure in the bitterness of coffee, the astringency of whisky, or the dissonance in a passage of music.

⁴ In her survey of so-called ugly laws, Susan Schweik (2009) notes that laws prohibiting the public presence of unsightly bodies were enforced up to the 1970s in the US.

of a disenfranchised group, they may undermine or drive underground the group's ability to produce and enjoy their own cultural products, and thereby to sustain and celebrate their collective identity. But aesthetic agents may also resist oppression through aesthetic mechanisms. Members of disempowered groups may express dissent or assert political belonging or ownership through aesthetic interventions like street art or the destruction of sculptural monuments, and members of empowered groups may engage in allyship (Fried 2019). Generally speaking, collective aesthetic projects can either reinforce or resist broader social and aesthetic norms. This will be explored further below.

Aesthetic objects and wellbeing

As aesthetic agents, we are susceptible to both subtle and intense effects of aesthetic objects on the quality of our experience and thus on our wellbeing. We may experience exquisite pleasures from beautiful or sublime objects, or everyday pleasures and a sense of comfort from tasty food, interesting clothing, or a warm cup of coffee in a mug that perfectly fits our hand. The aesthetic features of our environment, such as quality of light, textures, or the sound of wind or running water, may affect the tenor of our experience and improve or diminish our wellbeing in ways we do not consciously notice. Empirical research supports the idea that the aesthetic qualities of our environment have a significant impact on our wellbeing (Sternberg 2009). The results related to nature and green space are particularly robust: people who spend at least two hours per week in natural environments experience gains in physical and mental wellbeing including reduced stress and anxiety, improvement of immune functioning and mood, and reduced risk of aggression and attention deficit disorder (White et al. 2019). People who live in rural, suburban, or urban areas rated as more scenic report better levels of health, controlling for socioeconomic factors (Seresinhe et al. 2015).⁵ A simple view of green space through a window has been found to reduce both the length of hospital stay and the need for pain medication, and green space in one's neighbourhood is linked to life expectancy (Ulrich 1984; Kuo 2015).⁶ Spending time in nature also appears to have cognitive benefits by virtue of shifting how we pay attention to our surroundings or enhancing our working memory (Bratman et al. 2015; Kaplan and Kaplan 1989). Some healthcare providers have even taken to "prescribing" time spent in nature as part of medical care (Robbins 2020).

Aesthetic objects trigger emotional and somatic responses, sometimes through learned cultural associations. At times, this may happen even when our direct attention to the aesthetic object is limited or absent (Berridge and Winkielman 2003). Music, for instance, can make us feel cheerful, create a somber mood, or cause us to feel anxious or on edge, capacities often drawn upon by filmmakers (Cohen 2010). Music can also trigger distinctively pleasurable emotional states of 'being moved' and 'aesthetic awe' (Konečni 2008). Research demonstrates that we manifest physiological signs of emotion, such as facial muscle activation and skin conductance, when we listen to music, and that different forms of music have different effects: music usually described as 'happy', compared to music described as 'sad', activates both self-reported

⁵ As Seresinhe et al. (2015) note, self-reported health is a meaningful measure, since it is strongly inversely correlated with subsequent mortality.

⁶ See Hamilton 2016 for a discussion of results complicating Ulrich's 1984 analysis.

happiness and physiological signs associated with happiness (Lundqvist et al. 2009). Some of the emotional and aesthetic effects of aesthetic objects are mediated by somatic response: when we see dancers in motion or regard a sculpture of a human form, we may experience subthreshold muscular activation that simulates what we see, leading us to attribute aesthetic qualities to the object (Freedberg and Gallese 2007; Montero 2006).

Aesthetic objects may be used to form a sense of intimacy and cohesiveness among a group of people, such that being exposed to those objects creates a sense of belonging, community, and home (Nguyen and Strohl 2019). When aesthetic objects that are culturally specific to us are included and even celebrated in different or broader cultural contexts, this conveys respect for the worth and humanity of our community and for us as members of that community. Due to cultural associations, the same object may signal belonging, comfort, and home to one person while standing out as surprising and unique to another.

While they are sometimes a source of belonging and comfort, in other situations aesthetic objects can induce moderately or intensely negative experiences. Katya Mandoki refers to ‘aesthetic abuse’ (2007, 42) and ‘aesthetic poisoning’ (2007, 38), while Arnold Berleant (2010, 155) notes that aesthetic objects may be ‘unsatisfying, painful, perverse, or even destructive’. For these reasons, Yuriko Saito (2017), even in advocating that we recognize positive aesthetic value in imperfection in many cases, urges us to maintain our negative evaluation of imperfections that cause or indicate the suffering of disempowered groups of people. Notoriously, negative aesthetic experiences can be used to punish: hard surfaces, loud noises, bright lights, rough textures, and untasty food are staples of carceral spaces such as prisons and death camps. As Mandoki (2007, 38) notes, ‘Cruelty is not only a moral category but an aesthetic one: it always targets sensibility.’

How aesthetic objects affect us depends on many aspects of background and context. The same aesthetic stimuli that may be sought out and enjoyed in some contexts are used to enact punitive social control, as when classical music is used as an anti-loitering tactic or when the US Central Intelligence Agency used music to torture detainees at Guantánamo Bay (McKinney 2014). The ability to control our experience and exercise agency may play a crucial role in whether exposure to an aesthetic object is experienced as desirable, neutral, or painful, especially when the object impinges strongly on our senses.

Because we are aesthetic agents, we have the capacity to make choices that moderate the effects of aesthetic objects on our wellbeing. We may be able to enhance the aesthetic quality of an environment or leave an unpleasant one; and we may be able to change what we focus on, or even cultivate different tastes, so as to have more positive aesthetic experiences of an aesthetic object or environment (Eaton 2016; Irvin 2017; Lintott and Irvin 2016). Our ability to exercise these choices depends on sufficient resources including money, time, energy, and social power. Socially or economically disempowered people are more likely to have aesthetically blighted objects in their environments and may have less control over whether and when they experience particular aesthetic stimuli, resulting in adverse effects on wellbeing. Shifts in focus or modifications in taste may not be viable or desirable ways of coping with

aesthetic blight: people experiencing aesthetic blight due to socioeconomic disempowerment are more likely to experience stress-related cognitive demands that would make it difficult for them to shift how they respond to aesthetically devalued objects, even if such a shift were possible (Mani et al. 2013). Moreover, it is a societal responsibility to alleviate blight that affects disempowered communities, not the responsibility of these communities to dampen its effects on them.

What it means to be both aesthetic agent and aesthetic object

As aesthetic agents, we are affected by aesthetic objects and have the capacity to make aesthetic choices that contribute positively to our wellbeing. But our status as simultaneously aesthetic agents and aesthetic objects has its own affordances and challenges related to wellbeing. First, I am an aesthetic object for myself: I can aesthetically assess and appreciate my own appearance and embodiment. This relationship has the potential to produce deeply pleasurable and satisfying experiences, since bodies are aesthetically rich and complex objects with fascinating formal structures, movement potential, and functionality (Irvin 2017). But our ability to appreciate the positive affordances of our own bodies is complicated – and sometimes thoroughly undermined – by social processes. Because public aesthetic norms for how bodies should look, move, and be adorned, and public practices of disciplining people to comply with these norms, are so pervasive, the aesthetic lens through which we see our own bodies is typically profoundly influenced by community standards and practices. Some of us – especially women, people of color, and fat, disabled, queer, or gender non-conforming people – are more likely to be socially identified with or reduced to our bodies, and are disproportionately subjected to aesthetic discipline related to our bodily appearances (See, e.g., Bartky 1990, Frazier in press, Hobson 2018, Kozak 2021, Siebers 2010). The compound effects of occupying more than one of these identities are complex and make one even more susceptible to adverse consequences for wellbeing. Even those not occupying disempowered social identities may experience a strong identification of themselves and their value with their bodily appearance. For these reasons, we are likely to be acutely aware of how other aesthetic agents are viewing us as aesthetic objects. For members of disempowered groups especially, it may be impossible to form a bodily self-conception that is independent of disciplinary gazes targeted at the body. Frantz Fanon's (1967) *Black Skin, White Masks*, in particular the chapter 'The Fact of Blackness', is an essential study of the transformative experience of realizing one is a racialized aesthetic object in the eyes of others. As Sachi Sekimoto and Christopher Brown (2020, 2) succinctly put it, 'race functions as a visual economy of difference in which visible phenotypes are coded into hierarchical social relations.'

The regime of aesthetic discipline around bodily appearance, especially for socially disempowered groups, can generate constant hypervigilance related both to our bodily appearance itself and to signs that someone else has noticed our appearance and is preparing to discipline us for it. We may experience a perpetual undercurrent of anticipatory shame, guilt, and dread, since our bodies always have the potential to go awry: advertising and media keep us constantly on alert for ways that our skin, hair, weight, and other bodily features might manifest sudden unruliness. And since bodily aesthetic value is defined partly in terms of youth, especially for women and femmes, the body's aesthetic deterioration is relentless. Even

compliments on appearance may be double-edged, especially in contexts where our achievements should be central: they help to maintain the scheme of aesthetic discipline by reinforcing the idea that our appearance as aesthetic objects for others is the most important thing about us.

This situation produces, as Bartky describes it, ‘an estrangement from [one’s] bodily being: On the one hand, she *is* it and is scarcely allowed to be anything else; on the other hand, she must exist perpetually at a distance from her physical self, fixed at this distance in a permanent posture of disapproval’ (1990, 40). Such estrangement may obtain for people of any gender who manifest one or more socially disempowered identities. The ‘pervasive feeling of bodily deficiency’ produced by aesthetic discipline (1990, 81) often yields to ‘a pervasive sense of personal inadequacy’ (1990, 85) extending beyond the bodily realm, especially given the tendency to reduce socially disempowered people to their bodies. Undermining human worth is a central consequence of oppressive aesthetic disciplinary schemes: as noted earlier, ‘aesthetic disqualification’, as Siebers (2010) describes it, makes people eligible for forms of adverse treatment including violence. Because people subjected to ubiquitous forms of bodily aesthetic discipline often internalize the relevant aesthetic standards and participate openly in practices that reinforce them, the harms of constant aesthetic self-surveillance are concealed or, if acknowledged, blamed on those on whom they are inflicted: it is their own fault for choosing to prioritize the supposedly trivial matter of bodily appearance (Bartky 1990).

In addition to undermining the pleasure one might take in one’s own embodiment and positioning people for disqualification, aesthetic disciplinary schemes that target disempowered groups play a powerful role in distorting the lens through which one is seen both by oneself and by others (Collins 2000, Hobson 2018, Taylor 2016). George Yancy (2008) describes this, in contexts of anti-Blackness, as the ‘confiscation’ of the Black body by the white gaze. But these distortions are not totalizing: and recognition of the gap between how one is culturally represented and how one understands oneself can be the foundation for resistance (hooks 1992). Our status as aesthetic agents rather than mere objects creates the potential for practices that push back against aesthetic inferiorization, distortion, and disqualification.

Some calls for resistance take the form of admonitions to develop bodily self-love even in the face of oppressive social forces. But bearing in mind Bartky’s (1990, 55) cautionary note about the ‘failure of a politics of personal transformation’, aesthetic agents may also engage in collective and coalitional forms of resistance. bell hooks (1992) discusses the development of the ‘oppositional gaze’ as a collective project of Black women, noting that ‘Even in the worst circumstances of domination, the ability to manipulate one’s gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency’ (1992, 116). hooks argues that once such agency is claimed, interrogating and deconstructing oppressive images can be an aesthetic pleasure for Black women (1992, 126). Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2009), too, argues for the importance of the gaze as a form of resistance: both looking and being looked at are central elements of human experience, and people who attract the stares of others due to their unusual embodiment can exercise agency through their gazes and other choices about how to respond. She describes the photographic project of Kevin Connolly, who was born

without legs and navigates on a skateboard: he has taken thousands of pictures all over the world of people staring at him, a project that re-establishes his role as aesthetic agent against the reduction to object status that is threatened by the pervasive stares of others (Garland-Thomson 2009, 89ff).

The creation of new cultural products that better represent disempowered social groups can make a great contribution to individual and collective wellbeing, both by facilitating more positive self-conceptions for individuals and by reshaping cultural perceptions and treatment. Janell Hobson (2018) discusses the crucial need for Black women to gain control of the means of cultural production and distribution so that they can create and circulate aesthetic products that push back against distorted and truncated representations that remain culturally prevalent. She notes the success of Carrie Mae Weems, Kara Walker, and Beyoncé in exposing and correcting cultural distortions targeting Black women (Cf. Davidson's 2016 discussion of Walker.). Cheryl Frazier (forthcoming) argues for the importance of better practices of representing fatness to eliminate the reductive and harmful tropes that reinforce stereotypes and mistreatment. Anna Malinowska (2018) reflects on the many pitfalls that must be avoided in representing disability, especially in contexts of sexuality: narratives of pity and of triumphant overcoming are both harmful, as are those that, in an attempt to restore a sense of normalcy, erase the distinctive embodiment, experiences, and needs of disabled people. Even those not involved in the creation of new cultural products can engage in individual or collective projects that enhance wellbeing by consuming representations that upend harmful tropes and expanding our ability to appreciate and enjoy non-normative bodily appearance (Eaton 2016, Irvin 2017, Lintott and Irvin 2016).

Creativity in embodied self-presentation is another way for communities to engage their agency in resisting harmful aesthetic norms and practices. Queer communities often develop and celebrate forms of aesthetic appearance and expression that subvert mainstream expectations.⁷ Shirley Anne Tate discusses Black women creatively appropriating white fashions – and, in a continuous loop, remixing white appropriations of Black fashions – to create a 'Black beauty cut-and-mix' that asserts their belonging in the realm of beauty from which they have historically been excluded (2009, 32). Frazier (in press) argues that beauty labor, when performed with an at least nascent awareness of harmful norms and intention to resist them, is a way for fat people to reclaim aesthetic space and resist practices that treat them as unworthy of being seen.

Aesthetic agency and bodily experience

As we have discussed, our embodiment makes us an aesthetic object both for ourselves and for other aesthetic agents: we evaluate each other's bodies aesthetically in ways that may be either affirming or harmful, especially given the entanglement of aesthetic practices with social hierarchies. But our embodiment also contributes to a second sense in which we are simultaneously aesthetic agents and aesthetic objects: we have access to our own felt bodily

⁷ Jack Halberstam has explored queer and trans aesthetics in a series of works, most recently *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire* (2020).

experience, which may be a rich wellspring of aesthetic encounters. Because bodily experience can be explored in private, away from disciplinary gazes, attending to such experience is a way of connecting with one's own body (and occasionally the bodies of others) that is less subject to, though not exempt from, the mechanisms of social hierarchy.

Barbara Montero (2006) argues that proprioceptive experiences can be aesthetic: one can feel the grace of one's own movements, and through forms of neurophysiological mirroring that are triggered by seeing someone else move, one can even have proprioceptive aesthetic experiences of the movements of others. This raises the prospect of aesthetic agency that enhances wellbeing through movement that is intended only to be felt: one can move with the intention of producing aesthetically satisfying bodily experiences for oneself, regardless of how the movement looks. Moreover, those who experience pain, or disability that impedes control over their movement, need not be condemned to negative bodily aesthetic experiences: attending directly to our bodily experience and suspending judgment can sometimes shift its valence or open our awareness to positive aesthetic qualities associated with its complex and ever-changing structure (Irvin 2008a).

Madeline Martin-Seaver (2019) argues that aesthetic attention to one's bodily experience, as felt from the inside, can support resistance to oppressive objectification. An aesthetics of the body that relies principally on visual appearances, which is the kind of bodily aesthetics that we are socially encouraged to adopt and that is most theorized, leaves us vulnerable to the forces of aesthetic discipline described earlier. Attending more to what it feels like to exist and move in the world as an embodied being 'from the inside', as it were, allows us to cultivate aesthetic satisfactions that do not rely on external standards and conventions and a sense of aesthetic agency that resists the reduction to objecthood.

Attention to the tactile, rather than merely visual, qualities of bodies may be another strategy for aesthetic wellbeing. Because discourse about what we 'should' feel in tactile or haptic encounters is less developed than discourse about norms for visual appearance, bodies that tend to be aesthetically disqualified based on their visual features may nonetheless be sources of great aesthetic pleasure when other senses are deployed. Tactile experience of the textures and contours of a body, one's own or someone else's – as when giving a massage or having a sexual encounter – may allow one to have free-flowing aesthetic experiences of exploration, enjoyment, and surprise that are less tied to normative expectations about what bodies should be like.

The aesthetics of the tactile and proprioceptive realm has received far less theoretical attention than the aesthetics of the visual and auditory; touch is often treated, along with smell and taste, as a 'lower sense' that can give rise only to crude pleasures. While the aesthetics of taste and smell have received sophisticated critical defenses (Korsmeyer 1999 and Shiner 2020, respectively), experiences of touch continue to be dismissed as mere pleasures or displeasures that are too simplistic to rise to the level of the aesthetic. However, recent discussions of the aesthetics of touch by Tom Roberts (2022) and of the neuroscience of touch as deployed in aesthetic contexts by neuroscientists Alberto Gallace and Charles Spence (Etzi, Spence, and

Gallace 2014; Gallace and Spence 2014a and 2014b; Spence and Gallace 2020), as well as Rachel Zuckert's (2009, 2019) examination of the role of touch in Johann Gottfried Herder's 18th-century aesthetics of sculpture, suggest that the tactile may be ripe for broader recognition as a realm of aesthetic experience.

Regardless of whether we count it aesthetic or not, touch plays a tremendous role in wellbeing (Gallace and Spence 2010). Constructing satisfying tactile and haptic experiences for ourselves is a form of aesthetic agency that deploys our body, the most readily available aesthetic object. While any physical activity can be pursued with attention to the aesthetic affordances of bodily experience, the construction of satisfying tactile experiences is particularly central to the realm of sexuality. Here as in other domains, oppressive social norms intrude on aesthetic agency: normative sexuality is expected to prioritize penetrative heterosexual activity culminating in a male orgasm, and alternative sexualities explored by queer and disabled people, as well as others who choose to ignore this narrow script, are dismissed as deviant or treated with objectifying fascination. People of color of all genders, and women who choose to pursue sexual agency, have often been subject to social control that targets them as sexually pathological. The pervasive stigma surrounding sexual exploration may explain why 'philosophers tend to insistently exclude [sexuality] from aesthetic experience' (Shusterman 2006, 218).

The sexual and sensual realms offer rich opportunities to explore the complexities of bodily experience, and aesthetic agency that deploys the body as a source of sensual pleasure and cultivates awareness of the nuances of experience has great promise in contributing to wellbeing. To fully realize this potential, we will need to unlearn societal messages that the sensory affordances of our bodies are beneath serious attention and that we are bad or wrong for exploring them. We may also need to orient our sexual exploration less toward specific acts and outcomes and more toward immersive attention to sensory experience.

Aesthetics, wellbeing, and mutual vulnerability

The aesthetic realm has rich promise for physical and psychological wellbeing. We can engage in aesthetic agency to seek out and create aesthetic objects, environments, and experiences that enhance quality of life for ourselves and others. But forces of political hierarchy and social control disrupt aesthetic wellbeing in a variety of ways: by inhibiting the exercise of aesthetic agency by disempowered people, subjecting them to higher levels of aesthetic blight, and devaluing their cultural products; by channeling agency in ways that limit the prospects for aesthetic enjoyment; and by undermining the ability to recognize the positive aesthetic affordances of one's own and others' bodies. To enhance wellbeing, aesthetic agency must be deployed not only in pursuit of certain kinds of aesthetic objects and experiences, but also in collective projects of reconstructing both aesthetic norms and the practices of appreciation that underpin and sustain them.

Because the aesthetic implicates cognitive, emotional, and somatic responses, aesthetic reconstruction and revision is deep and important work to promote wellbeing. Monique Roelofs (2014, 52) notes that the aesthetic has 'a prominent role in enabling survival,

sustenance, community, meaning, critique, pleasure and creativity in the face of racial, gender, and economic oppression’, even as it has been instrumental in constituting that oppression. Mariana Ortega (2016, n.p.) remarks, elaborating on Roelofs’ point, that ‘the aesthetic is intertwined with various modes of living informed by a vast web of relationships of being-in-the-world that ultimately make our life and our world livable, enjoyable, and pleasurable or miserable, painful, and deadly’.

Due to our dual status as aesthetic agents and aesthetic objects, we have a profound mutual vulnerability: we have the capacity to exercise care by aesthetically treasuring each other and the capacity to harm or destroy through aesthetic disqualification. Because of the formative role that the gaze of others plays in one’s own sense of self, it can fairly be said that we co-constitute each other’s selfhood through aesthetic engagement. Nicholas Whittaker argues, in this regard, that the very conceptual division between agent (or subject) and object is harmful and promulgates anti-Blackness and other forms of oppression. Whittaker describes, after artist and philosopher Adrian Piper, ‘the catalytic aesthetic’, which ‘creates or depends on a sense of the self’s basic being as intertwined with that of that of the “object” of perception so as to be relevantly indistinct’ (2021, 458). We should, Whittaker suggests, cultivate a recognition that our ‘ownmost being’ is deeply interpenetrated with the being of others, not separable. Elsewhere, Whittaker calls into question the view that there is a right to be left alone and aesthetically unaffected: ‘This is a logic that insists on the necessity and desirability of *policing the sensuous being of others*: their sound, their smell, their flesh’ (2022, n.p.; emphasis in original).

Whittaker’s suggestion recalls George Yancy’s proposal for an aesthetic project of ‘un-suturing’: rather than keeping our selves tightly knit and impenetrable, shoring up our independence, distinctness, and agency against others whom we construe as aesthetic objects and (as in the case of anti-Blackness) potentially as threats, we must un-suture ourselves to acknowledge and welcome our mutual vulnerability, recognition, and responsibility for care. ‘As an aesthetic gesture/site,’ Yancy says, ‘un-suturing is a form of exposure, an opening, a corporeal style and a dispositional sensibility that troubles the insularity of whiteness, that troubles and overwhelms the senses, revealing our somatic porosity and instigating instability, that sense of being thrown off balance, off center, and exposing different (and counter-hegemonic) ways of being attuned to our intercorporeal existence, our mutual touching’ (2016, 259).

Far from a trivial or decorative matter to be addressed once more ‘basic’ needs are met, the aesthetic gets to the heart of what we experience and how we engage with one another. Attending to the aesthetic in our design of institutions, the built environment, and social relationships, and providing opportunities for the development and exercise of aesthetic agency, are strategies with great promise to enhance wellbeing.

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