Sex Objects and Sexy Subjects: A Feminist Reclamation of Sexiness

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Feminists frequently lament the fact that women are too often viewed primarily, and in some cases exclusively, as sex objects and valued primarily or exclusively in terms of an externally dictated and generalized conception of sexiness. Sexual objectification in a male-dominated and heteronormative society functions to reduce women to objects to be used at the discretion of men. Women are socialized to believe that sexiness is essential to their value as persons and are moreover socialized to accept a narrow conception of sexiness, one that excludes large portions of the female population from being considered sexy. Under these conditions, sexiness is not something a woman can secure for herself; it is not "up to her." To be sexy, in this ordinary sense, is to satisfy a set of standards for appearance and behavior that are the outgrowth of a specific, societally shaped heterosexual male gaze. It is extremely unlikely that any particular woman will fully satisfy all of these standards, and more unlikely still that she'll be able to sustain the ideal throughout her lifetime. Even if embodying the ideal were possible, many women would not wish to shape themselves in the required ways, as doing so will demand considerable effort, cost, sacrifice, suffering, and conformity. Even those who "willingly" strive to shape themselves to meet the ideal of sexiness will incur these costs. As sexiness is commonly understood its ultimate arbiter is not the woman herself and not even her most intimate and loving partners; rather it is an externally dictated, fixed standard that is set for all women, insensitive to variable factors that help distinguish women from one another, such as age, race, size, interests, and personality. Thus, the kind of sexiness expected of women leaves little room for and basically ignores her autonomous sexual agency.

Given the socialization of women to believe that sexiness is essential to their value as persons and the narrow conception of sexiness prescribed, it is not surprising that some feminists have suggested that we give up on sexiness altogether, proclaiming it an inherently dangerous notion that should be jettisoned in the attempt to forge a nonsexist society because calling a person "sexy" at best ignores and sometimes even denies the person's agency, subjectivity, and autonomy. In other words, to say someone, especially a woman, is sexy has been thought to reduce them to an object – a thing.

However, feminists are not in complete agreement here. For example, Martha Nussbaum has argued that sexual objectification is not necessarily incompatible with respect and egalitarian interaction. Though we argue along different lines than Nussbaum, we too believe that completely giving up on sexiness is a mistake: we maintain that, rather than acquiescing in the equation of sexiness with objecthood, feminists should reclaim *and* redefine sexiness and its domain. This is not a new idea: disability theorists have long been talking about the tension between feminism and disability theory concerning women's differing relationships with beauty standards relative to how

"normal" they are read as being.[1] Whereas some women rightly find sexual attention objectifying, others, such as disabled, elderly, or pregnant women, may find a lack of sexual attention disturbing and dehumanizing. A persistent failure to apprehend another's sexiness can be tantamount to a failure to recognize them as a subject—as a person. As Ann Cahill points out,

> Because sexuality necessarily entails intersubjectivity, and because sexuality is a crucial element of selfhood, to be on the receiving end of a sexualizing gaze can enhance one's sense of self. To have that gaze skip over you, to be rendered sexually invisible by society at large, is to have your full personhood denied. (Cahill 2011, p. 84)

So, whereas many feminists express concern over the apprehension of sexiness because such apprehension often involves treating another person as an object, we are here concerned about the failure to apprehend a person's sexiness because it can involve ignoring that another person is a subject.

Admittedly, we should resist the prescribed standards of sexy looks and sexy behavior, such as those prevalent in contemporary media. As Gail Dines argues in *Pornland: How Porn Has Hijacked Our Sexuality*:

> With headlines every month promising "Hot New Sex Tricks," "21 Naughty Sex Tips," "Little Moves That Make Sex Hotter," "67 New Blow-His-Mind Moves," "8 Sex Positions You Haven't Thought Of," and so on, women seem to experience no authentic sexual pleasure; rather, what she wants and enjoys is what he wants and enjoys… In *Cosmopolitan*, as in much of pop culture, her pleasure is derived not from being a desiring subject but from being a desired object. (Dines 2010, p. 107)

We seek to make room for women as sexy subjects desiring and pursuing authentic pleasure. And the domain of our concern exceeds the bounds of hedonism to reach an existential level (although hedonism alone would be sufficient to compel us).

In this spirit of articulating an authentic notion of sexual pleasure and a holistic conception of autonomous sexual agency for women, we put forward a revisionist notion of sexiness that treats people not merely as sex objects, but as sexual subjects. We are not trying to describe what people typically mean when they make attributions of sexiness: we agree with the feminist critique that there is very often something ethically corrupt at work in such attributions and thus our project is revisionist, not descriptive. In this context, we are not interested in apologizing for or defending the sort of evaluations a subject makes of an object, which are the more typical subject matter of philosophical aesthetics. We are interested, instead, in the mutuality and respect invoked in Cahill's characterization of the intersubjectivity of sexualizing another. We argue for a normatively infused conception that does a better job securing respect for persons while remaining in touch with the core connection of sexiness to the idea of sexual pleasure linked to desire.

Full-fledged sexiness, in our view, is not a property that can be attributed to a person without attention to their subjectivity – sexiness is a way of being, not a possession. Just as the truth conditions of "They are happy" include the status of some of

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[1] See, e.g., Garland-Thomson 1997, 2009.

the subject's mental states and attitudes, so do the truth conditions of "They are sexy."[2] Sexiness (as opposed to the appearance of sexiness), then, is most properly attributed to persons[3] and only derivatively, tangentially, or metaphorically to other animate or inanimate objects for their association with or anthropomorphism by humans.

Thus, we understand sexiness as a powerful aesthetic notion with necessary connections to ethics. We argue there is an ethical imperative to shape one's aesthetic judgments regarding the sexiness of others so as to respect their subjectivity, rather than just assessing their physical attractiveness or their appeal as objects for sexual use. This is not to suggest that there is an ethical imperative *to be sexually attracted to* others; indeed, the way of thinking about sexiness we advocate here, which is divorced from the instrumental, makes sense of attributing the property of sexiness to a person to whom one is *not* sexually attracted.

I. The Biological Sense of Sexiness: Sexy as Fertile

Before developing our own conception, we introduce two other conceptions of sexiness that are in common usage: the biological sense, and the prurient sense. The biological sense of sexiness links the attribution of sexiness to the ability to reproduce. This is the sense that one would expect to hear espoused by evolutionary psychologists. Their analyses rely on speculation (sometimes on rather dubious grounds) about how our aesthetic standards and related attitudes and behavior have been shaped by evolution. This notion of sexiness is implicit in many attempts to explain and justify our sexual attractions. In *Survival of the Prettiest,* Nancy Etcoff explores the evolutionary roots of human attractiveness:

> Evolutionary psychologists suggest that men are automatically excited by signs of a woman who is fertile, healthy, and hasn't been pregnant before….
> A man may have no interest in getting a woman pregnant, he may take elaborate precautions not to, but his mate detectors are still firing, and he is still inexplicably turned on by the woman who flashes abundant evidence of her fertility. And women are still imitating the appearance of this visually preferred age group, even if they never want to be pregnant at all. (Etcoff, 72, 74)

Considering sexiness as tied to reproductive health helps to explain why youthfulness is such a seemingly attractive trait. Women are youthful in appearance during their most fertile years. It also explains why pregnant, elderly, and disabled women are often left out of the class of sexiness. A woman who is obviously pregnant cannot be impregnated again; for the time being at least, she is unavailable for that purpose. Elderly women are likely to be past their fertile years. Some forms of disability are assumed, often wrongly, to involve infertility; and the further assumption is often made that the disabled

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[2] We here and at various other points use 'they' and 'their' to indicate a singular subject regardless of gender. "[T]he use of plural pronouns to refer back to a singular subject isn't new: it represents a revival of a practice dating from the 16th century." http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/words/he-or-she-versus-they (retrieved May 15, 2014).

[3] The focus of the present investigation is on sexiness in the adult domain, not on whether or under what circumstances attention to a child's sexuality is appropriate.

individual is incapable of and/or uninterested in sex. Notably, this latter assumption is based on reductive understanding of sex as heterosexual, genital, and penetrative. If pregnant, elderly, and disabled women are ever rightly considered sexy, as we hold they are, the biological sense of sexiness does not explain when or why. It leaves women who are or are generally taken to be infertile out completely. The biological sense of sexiness is thus clearly insufficient as a full conception of sexiness.

Other problems, too, confront the biological conception of sexiness. Insofar as it ties the judgment of sexiness to a desire, albeit possibly unconscious or disavowed, to reproduce, this notion of sexiness seems to render same-sex attribution of sexiness nonsensical. Indeed, it appeals to an unconfirmable heteronormative evolutionary past with a rigid gender identity binary. But this appeal is speculative, not scientific, as Kim Hall argues:

> The fact that there were female evolutionary ancestors who had sex with male evolutionary ancestors does not preclude the possibility that they also had same-sex sexual relations. Moreover, it does not preclude the possibility that at least some had exclusively same-sex sexual relations. Did our female and male evolutionary ancestors understand themselves to be "women" and "men"? Were they recognized by other members of their group as "women" and "men" to the extent that they conformed to then-existing gender norms? Were there some "females" and "males" who were not recognized as (and did not understand themselves to be) "women" or "men"? Were there intersex members of ancestral environments who were perceived to be (and who perceived themselves to be) neither "male" nor "female"? My point is that the complex relation among sex, gender, and desire is precisely that for which no evolutionary evidence exists. Evolutionary psychology can only speculate about the gender and sexual identities of our evolutionary ancestors. (Hall 2011, 8)

At worst, the biological account ignores and at best it vastly underplays the cultural and learned aspects of standards of personal appearance and comportment. As a result, it cannot explain the sexiness that, in our culture, is often attributed to extremely thin women. The representations of emaciated supermodels whose photoshopped images perpetuate the ideal of the impossibly thin female body make them appear unlikely to be able to conceive a child, and they certainly do not advertise fertility via any of the signs evolutionary psychologists appeal to in this context (large breasts, fleshy buttocks, a curvaceous figure, and so on). Indeed, infertility is one of the earliest and most typical outcomes of eating disorders and excessive diet and exercise. This account not only precludes the possibility of elderly, pregnant, and/or disabled women's sexiness; it also leaves unexplained current widespread beauty standards and the familiar practice of noticing sexiness in members of one's own sex, whether one is gay or straight.

Even more problematic are the broader moral implications of the biological sense of sexiness. This way of conceiving of sexiness ties a women's sexiness to her perceived ability to serve a particular function. Regardless of whether the evolutionary psychologist is correct about the roots of sexual attraction, the fact that certain behaviors and attitudes were perpetuated in our past hardly justifies a failure to examine them today (cf. Hall 2011, 5).

Etcoff admits that the "medical science of fertility and reproduction now makes it possible for women to have babies into their sixties." She wonders if "these changes

altered our tastes in beauty and made age and fertility cues in women obsolete." Her answer to this rhetorical question is unsatisfactory. She says,

> In a world guided solely by thought, not instinct, the answer would be yes. But we are products of evolution and cannot change instincts as quickly as we can change our tastes or update our information. The frenzy over beauty and the enormous business in mimicking youth show that we are still turned on by the usual suspects. (Etcoff, 74)

Though Etcoff is correct that this is not a world guided solely by thought, it is equally correct (and perhaps more important) to point out that this is not a world guided solely by instinct. Human beings are social, cultural, and intelligent beings, and social, cultural, and intellectual factors heavily influence – some would say all but determine – what we find sexy. Moreover, the appeal to evolutionary roots to explain our current tastes ignores the fact that there is no universal, cross-cultural agreement about sexiness. There are cultural differences in preferences for faces and bodies, and even where we find commonalities in taste, the underlying cause of preference may differ from culture to culture (Cunningham et al. 1995).

There is also good reason for feminists to resist this notion of sexiness precisely because of its emphasis on reproduction. The feminist movement is in part a movement to earn reproductive freedom – including freedom *from* reproduction – for women. It is perfectly reasonable, then, for women to resist being considered sexy in this manner since such consideration is based on, and perhaps even reduces women to, their reproductive fitness. Sex and sexuality are not reducible to reproduction; women are more than reproduction machines, even when considered as sexual beings. We feminists have worked and continue to work hard to divorce sex from reproduction. Why should we accept a notion of sexiness that, when applied to us, reinstates that connection?

II. The Prurient Sense of Sexiness: Sexy as Arousing

The second notion of sexiness in common currency is the prurient sense. Sexiness in this sense has to do with sexual pleasure and satisfaction and does not necessarily appeal to biology or reproduction (although it may). It understands sexiness as immediately captivating and stirring our prurient interests, stoking a *desire for* a sexual encounter. Attributing the property of sexiness in this sense to someone tells us something about the person described, but also about ourselves: they are sexy; we are aroused. Whereas seeing someone as sexy in the biological sense doesn't necessarily entail one's own arousal, an attribution of sexiness in the prurient sense is definitely linked with arousal and involves seeing someone as an instrument for one's own sexual gratification.

We do not think that feminists should reject this sense altogether. As Nussbaum, following Cass Sunstein, points out, in such matters, context is everything: "Under some specifications, objectification… is always morally problematic. Under other specifications, objectification has features that may be either good or bad, depending upon the overall context" (Nussbaum 2005, 251). Whereas a woman being presented in a submissive or degrading manner to the general public as an object to stoke prurient interests is objectionable, it may be perfectly appropriate for such interests to be stoked in a variety of ways in the context of an intimate encounter and/or a loving relationship.

Current standards of sexiness in the prurient sense are unduly narrow, excluding many women. On this account, again, pregnant, disabled, and elderly women are often

viewed as asexual, as unable to engage in sexual intercourse, and unfit to serve as instruments of sexual satisfaction. Given this, pregnant, elderly, or disabled women often aren't even candidates for being accurately described as sexy in the prurient sense. As sexuality and sexual pleasure are important aspects of human life, ignoring the sexuality of an individual can involve a failure to recognize the intrinsic worth, adult rationality, and full-fledged humanity of that person. And, as Nathaniel Adam Tobias ~~Coleman~~[4] argues in "The Political Power of Sexual Preference," such failures can reinforce stigmas, particularly race-based ones, that diminish people's self-worth and reinforce their subordinate social position. As he says,

> [O]ne's capacity as a sexual being for affirming the sexual attractiveness of another sexual being is, in the hands of a member of some social group that is dominant in society, not merely a personal privilege, but a significant political power. It is significant because it can contribute to ending a trend of social stigmatization in that society.[5]

For these reasons, another notion of sexiness is needed, one that allows for the appreciation of a plurality of bodies, sees sexiness as tied to subjectivity, and is not morally suspect in the ways that the other two senses are. To this end, we suggest a conception of sexiness that emphasizes that sexiness is a matter of both embodiment and subjectivity and accords sexual beings the respect due to all persons.

III. The Ethics of the Respectful Notion of Sexiness: Sexy as Subjective

The respectful notion of sexiness merges a concern for the subjective and embodied life of the individual with an assessment of the person's body as a sexualized one. To find a person sexy in this sense is to see their body as infused with an expression of self, and to find this embodied personhood sexually appealing although not necessarily sexually arousing. They are seen not necessarily as a sex object but necessarily as a sexual subject: a human being who is a sexual agent. When they are seen as sexy in this sense, their sexuality appears at least to some extent independent of their fertility and of the prurient interests of another.

To see someone as a sex subject is to see their appeal as intrinsic to them rather than defined by externally imposed standards, especially those associated with oppressive social forces. To make appropriate judgments of sexiness, we must work to expand the kinds of bodies we find appealing. It is important to be clear about what kind of expansion is relevant: it is not just starting from the "center" of conventionally attractive bodies and moving outward in concentric circles to detect the appeal of bodies that resemble these along various dimensions. The idea is, rather, to distance ourselves from the very standards that define some bodies as conventionally attractive; to jettison those

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[4] For an explanation of ~~Coleman~~'s choice to strike through his surname, see here: http://www.ucl.ac.uk/philosophy/people/nathaniel-adam-tobias-coleman-explanation.

[5] ~~Coleman~~ (unpublished, 1). ~~Coleman~~ argues, for this reason, that white men have a duty to divest themselves of sexual aversions to black women. He does not argue for a duty to cultivate sexual attraction toward them. We, on the other hand, do argue for a duty to cultivate a habit of recognizing sexiness, although not necessarily a subjective sexual desire for or attraction toward, when sexiness is properly understood in the respectful sense.

standards and seek, instead, the magnificence[6] that is manifest here and now. Ann Cahill expresses the idea as follows:

> [O]ne must look with wonder. One must take bodies on their own terms, without imposing a pre-existing standard upon them. The ethical sexual gaze hungrily seeks out the particular, the surprising, the nowhere-else-but-here-ness that marks each incarnation of the sexed human. (Cahill 2011, p. 103)

If we are concerned to make ethically sound attributions of sexiness, we must attempt aesthetic appreciation of the sexual particularity of a wide variety of bodies, ensuring that our sexualized awareness takes into account not bodies, but embodied subjects. To find someone sexy, in the respectful sense, is to recognize and respect the sexualized complex of a body and the subjectivity that infuses it.

But when it comes to subjectivity, what should we be striving for? Is there a certain model of subjectivity that we should be drawn to? Should we aim to expand the kind of subject, the kind of person, we are attracted to; and if so, in what direction?

What we are trying to create, in adopting this revisionist notion of sexiness, is space for people to be valued as they are rather than by virtue of conformity to narrow external standards. In this context, it makes sense to cultivate an ability to recognize the attractiveness of people whose way of being seems genuine. The sexual expression of the genuine or authentic subject appears to come from them rather than originating in or aiming at some external ideal. Obviously, in practice it can be difficult to ascertain the extent to which another person's sexual expression is genuine. But compare the case of morality: it can be difficult to ascertain whether another person is genuinely moral, but we don't conclude that we shouldn't encourage and appreciate the morality of others. Furthermore, genuineness in any context is not an all-or-nothing achievement; rather it is best understood on a continuum. Although there will admittedly be unclear cases, there will also be expressions at or approaching either end of the spectrum that are pretty obviously genuine or not. Evidence of genuineness will be found in originality, comfort, confidence, and a sense of improvisation, whereas conformity, discomfort, insecurity, and strict adherence to norms will be evidence of a lack of genuineness in sexual expression. Celebrating genuine sexiness will then result in a greater diversity of embodied expressions of sexuality. Of course, there are limits here: some genuine expressions, such as that of the pedophile, must be partly repressed rather than allowed free expression. But, in general, ways of being in which the subject has achieved a degree of self-understanding and comfort, and infuses their activity with the energy and flavor of the self they have uncovered, are sexy.

IV. Considering Objections

Not every way of incorporating a person's subjectivity into assessments of their sexiness strike the target we are indicating here. As Susan Bordo (1999) argues, much objectionable pornography functions not by objectifying women, but by attributing to them a form of subjectivity that expresses active desire for whatever treatment a male sexual partner might choose to offer, no matter how degrading.[7] Attributions of sexiness

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[6] We draw this term from Mia Mingus (2011), who sees the magnificent as more closely aligned with the "ugly" than with the conventionally beautiful.

[7] We are grateful to Amy Coplan for this point.

that require the sexy agent to fit such a narrow and compromised mode of subjectivity are not appropriate. Ethical attributions of sexiness should look for flexible but self-possessed subjectivities, just as they should take into account the magnificence of a wide variety of bodies. Pornography also provides an illustrative example of precisely what we want to diminish when it depicts sex acts that are seemingly painful and degrading to the woman involved while conveying that her feelings – her pain and shame – are irrelevant or, if relevant, serve to increase the pleasure of male participants and viewers. If the woman is presented as sexy, it is not in the sense we are advocating here, since the scenes incorporate no respect for her subjectivity; indeed, it may be that respecting her subjectivity would interfere with deriving sexual pleasure from the scene in the prescribed way.

We are arguing for an ethical imperative to shape what we find sexy. This involves both expanding which bodies we find attractive and incorporating the person's subjectivity within what we are assessing when we find them sexy. But one might wonder whether this is really possible. Can we come to *experience* as attractive kinds of bodies that we haven't experienced in this way previously? Can we, if it is not our current tendency, learn to *experience* as sexy not bodies, but embodied persons? We have spoken of the requirement to expand the scope of the sorts of bodies we find attractive to encourage the appreciation of a larger complement of embodied beings. Some might balk at the suggestion that we should do anything of the sort, claiming that since we can't control to whom we are attracted, we can't be held morally accountable when we are or are not attracted.

Interestingly and anecdotally, we have encountered far more skepticism from men than from women regarding the prospects for reshaping our sexual attractions. There has long been a dominant discourse in US society regarding sexuality as fixed and unchanging. As Lisa Diamond (2008) discusses, this may be because most of the relevant research was done mainly or exclusively with male subjects; current research suggests that "the developmental pathways that operate for men are probably different from those that operate for women" (Diamond 2008, 18). There may be limits on our ability to shape what we experience as sexy; these limits probably differ from person to person, and may be shaped in part by gender.

But the effects of media on beauty standards and the contours of sexualization are evidence that sexual desire does not arise unmediated in us. People can take an active role in shaping their desires rather than just passively acquiescing to desire as a simple given. Which bodies are found attractive is influenced by society, and can change over time for a variety of reasons. For example, as we age we may naturally come to find older people sexy. We can come to find someone sexually attractive after initially being drawn to their personality and only then turning our attentive and receptive gaze upon their body. We may have a casual sexual encounter with someone we did not find especially attractive, but find the sex so satisfying and pleasurable that their body now presents itself to us as highly desirable. The fact that these changes happen suggests that there are levers for the shaping of sexual desire, and once this is admitted there is no reason to think that we cannot work to manipulate some of those levers ourselves. As ~~Coleman~~ (unpublished, 15-16) argues, societal support may be helpful or even necessary as we attempt to manipulate these levers. Media can assist in this endeavor by reinforcing healthy and

diverse sexuality, exposing audiences to diverse manifestations of sexuality in diverse groups of persons, though current mainstream media typically fail to do so.

So this objection relies on a naïve and ahistorical view of taste that fails to realize the extent to which our aesthetic tastes, broadly understood, are mediated by various cultural and personal factors. Our tastes come from our individual and cultural histories, and when such histories fail to expose us to or to encourage us to value broad and diverse objects of appreciation, each of us has a personal responsibility to aim to acquire such exposure and encourage others to do the same. If a person's family of origin and community are racially homogeneous and the race with which the person identifies is the dominant race (which is also the race most often and most favorably represented in the media), they may be less likely to find persons of other races attractive, and may feel aversion to individuals of other races. We would hold this person, in adulthood, responsible for going beyond their upbringing, for working to unlearn the prejudice they were surrounded by, and, importantly, for encouraging others to do the same.

Moreover, we clearly do hold people accountable for their sexual tastes, for example, when we maintain that the pedophile or the rapist ought not only not molest or sexually assault, but not *want* to molest or assault. Such desires and feelings are morally inappropriate and the individual should work towards eradicating them. Of course, the responsibility doesn't fall solely on the individual but also on society. In a culture that increasingly sexualizes young girls and eroticizes violence against women, the responsibility falls to society to stop sensationalizing and capitalizing on these inappropriate desires.

If we can accept the idea that we are rightly held morally responsible for certain tastes that we *ought not to* have, why is it so difficult to accept the idea that we are rightly held morally responsible for certain tastes we *ought to* have but do not? Each time one sexually admires a body, whether in person or in an image, one is both *expressing* one's current sexual preferences and *reinforcing* them. When one chooses to direct one's admiration toward a certain narrow range of bodies (perhaps in part because these are the only ones made available or presented as desirable in mainstream media), one reinforces an association between those bodies and sexiness. But it is in one's power to make different choices: one can choose to admire or contemplate real or imagined bodies that do not fit the narrow mold of attractiveness that has been societally inculcated. Our suggestion, here, is not that one can simply change one's desires by fiat through rational argument: we do not expect that after reading this paper you will magically find yourself with a different desire set. Instead, the aim of argument is to supply motivation to engage in a form of ethical and aesthetic *practice*: a practice by which one consciously and gradually explores and expands the boundaries of taste and desire. Such practices of cultivating taste succeed in other domains: people can learn to appreciate foods and forms of art that were previously distasteful or foreign to them, and people can also learn to shift their preferences from one set of objects to a different set for expressly ethical reasons, as the life history of many vegetarians attests.

Perhaps this project is more difficult for sexual desire than for gustatory taste, and perhaps it is, on average, more difficult for men than for women.[8] From our perspective,

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[8] We wouldn't want to overstate the latter point: it is possible that research on the malleability of female sexual desire is driven in part by a heterosexual male interest in

this is no objection to the view for which we are arguing. What we advocate is an ethical/aesthetic practice that is geared toward expanding and shifting one's desires, not a practice of self-deception, of masochistic self-denial, or of pursuing sexual interactions with those to whom one is not attracted. The fact that some people may experience smaller or slower shifts in their tastes and desires is not a reason to think that the ethical imperative to undertake the practice does not apply.

Another important question, related to the issue of lability of taste and desire, concerns sexual orientation and gender. Should heterosexually or homosexually identified individuals work to reshape their desires only in relation to members of the sex or gender they experience themselves as attracted to? Or does the project extend to coming to experience sexual attraction to people they understand as being outside that sex or gender?

Two issues arise here. First, it does not appear that attributions of sexiness are always linked to the attributor's own experience of sexual desire. A lesbian can say of a man that he is sexy, meaning not necessarily that she experiences desire for him but that she recognizes that he is desirable. Likewise, to say appropriately of someone that he is sexy, if I do not myself feel sexually attracted to him, is to say that I recognize that he possesses physical features that are magnificent in their particularity (in the sense discussed earlier), and that I recognize his body as infused with his sexual subjectivity. Such an attribution might be indexed to the desires of some other subject: it might imply that a subject whose sexual orientation is different than mine, if she were attending to these features, would or should experience him as sexy. Or it might be cued to a counterfactual version of myself: to say of him that he is sexy might be to say that if I were sexually interested in men, I would likely experience desire for him, or that I can fully understand why and how someone sexually desires him even if I do not.

The possibility of appropriate attributions of sexiness without experienced desire does not mean that we need not work to reshape our experienced desire as well. It will not do to say, "He is sexy, and by that I mean that I would experience sexual desire for him if I were attracted to fat men"; "She is sexy, and by that I mean that a person who finds it possible to experience desire for elderly women would (or should) desire her." Such attributions of sexiness keyed to counterfactual or hypothetical desire do not secure true sexual recognition for people who do not satisfy conventional standards of attractiveness. We must genuinely do the work of reshaping our desires; this is the primary way of adopting a more ethically and aesthetically adequate notion of sexiness.

This leads us back to the second issue related to sexual orientation and gender, which pertains to whether gender is one of the boundaries we should aim to stretch as we reshape whom we find sexy. We suggest that it is. One of the ways that conventional standards of attractiveness constrain people is by requiring that they comply with rigidly defined gender roles in their appearance and behavior. The exclusion from sexual attention of genderqueer people who do not comply with these roles is a form of punitive

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lesbian sex, and the appearance of fixed male sexuality may be due as much to the strong social policing of male sexual preference as to any innate mechanism. Everything we say here is compatible with the possibility that the difference between male and female sexual malleability is either a fiction or a reality that is socially rather than biologically constructed.

social control that keeps all of us in line, giving us a strong incentive to stay in the "middle ground" of our assigned gender and not explore the boundaries. It is beyond the scope of this paper to argue for the undesirability of this form of social control, but we can note a few things about it. It serves the needs of patriarchy by keeping women and men sharply distinct, and it disproportionately inflicts undesirable constraints on women. It also harms people who for a variety of reasons are unable to stay within the "middle ground" of a particular gender identity, or who experience great discomfort there. Finally, it aims to force each of us to deny aspects of ourselves, as we are each gendered in diverse and contextually constructed ways. Reshaping our sexual attractions so as not to contribute to the policing of gender boundaries is thus ethically desirable.

Moreover, as one attends to embodied persons in all their physical and subjective particularity, moving away from attention to the highly gendered conventional markers of attractiveness – as one appreciates embodied persons in all their individual magnificence – it makes sense that one might move away from the "middle ground" of gender. The "center" of conventional attractiveness and the "middle ground" of gender, especially for women, are co-defined in our culture: the most conventionally attractive women are also those seen as most feminine. And as one attends to a particular embodied subject on that subject's own terms, seeking out whatever richness is manifest in their way of being, one may approach, and perhaps even cross over, gender boundaries one previously found salient.

We are not claiming that everyone – or, indeed, anyone – will experience a radical shift in the way that their sexual attractions are tied up with gender. It stands to reason that some people might experience a gentle shift through the practice we advocate; but as we have already noted, the prospects for such shifts may vary from person to person and from group to group. We do not take this to give any support to such empirically debunked phenomena as "ex-gay" therapies, which standardly aim to extinguish attractions to people of one sex and/or establish attractions to people of another sex, while also reinforcing conventional connections between assigned sex and gender presentation. We advocate neither extinction of attractions nor an aim of igniting attractions to members of a sex or gender one is not attracted to; rather, we advocate cultivating appreciation for embodied sexual personhood and seeing where that takes one. And we actively oppose the reinforcement of conventional gender roles and sexual orientation.

Other questions remain about the morality of the work one must do to shape one's desires in the way we advocate. Presumably, this work will involve real and/or imaginative engagement with others: shaping what we experience as sexy seems to involve looking at and contemplating actual people with an aspiration to appreciate them as embodied sexual persons and, in at least some cases, to experience some desire. Is there something troubling, or even creepy, about this sort of sexualized attention? Does such a project inappropriately sexualize too many of our interactions? In directing "aspirational" sexual attention toward people we don't yet find sexy, do we run the risk of wronging or offending them? Is it just wrong to go around directing sexualized attention toward people regardless of whether they notice it or not?

These worries can be defused, we think, if the project of shaping what one finds sexy is undertaken, and understood, in the right way. The fact is that we are public entities in a public world, and we do direct sexualized attention at each other. This

attention is sometimes subtle and fleeting, other times overt and flirtatious. It is often unconscious and not critically examined. It is problematic when it comes in the form of an objectifying gaze, treating the individual as though their only value for us is in the sexual use we might make of them. But directing sexualized attention toward someone seen as a full, embodied person rather than a mere body, with an aim of respectfulness, is not, in general, a particularly problematic form of interpersonal engagement. Moreover, consciously directing this sort of attention has the advantage of making our sexual attractions and repulsions available to us for critically scrutiny. To be seen as a sexualized being, as a candidate for sexiness, is part of being recognized as a full person, as disabled people and disability theorists (e.g., Wilkerson 2002) have often pointed out. This doesn't mean that every moment, every person or every relationship is well suited to sexualized attention; there are good ethical reasons not to direct sexualized attention toward one's employees, one's patients, one's students, or anyone's children, for instance. But to think that there is something inherently troubling about even respectful sexualized attention, sensitively directed in appropriate contexts, is, it seems, to reject a fundamental ground of human social interactions.

Another version of this worry is more specific. Many women experience the amount of sexual attention already directed at them as excessive. Is a prescription for people to reshape their notions of sexiness, especially as these pertain to women, likely to eventuate in a further undesired sexual attention for women?[9] A first thing to note is that we advocate respectful sexual attention, which is, among other things, sexual attention that ends as soon as one has an indication that it is unwelcome. It is sexual attention that, in most contexts, will be quite subtle, perhaps so subtle as to be undetectable by the person toward whom it is directed. And it is sexual attention that is kept out of unequal workplace relationships and other arenas where there are substantial power differentials that determine people's life prospects.

This picture is complicated by the realization that some individuals will present themselves in ways that subvert received standards of sexiness in order to avoid becoming objects of sexualized attention. Given that we recommend aiming to appreciate bodies that do not fit neatly into norms of sexiness, we run the risk of calling sexual attention to those very individuals who do not want it. One way to think towards a remedy here is to see subversions of sexiness as unique and personal expressions of sexiness and to recommend then that to appropriately appreciate such an individual's sexiness *is* to ignore it.

Moreover, it is worth noting that women who feel overwhelmed by excessive sexual attention will often be those who satisfy conventional standards of attractiveness to a high degree. It seems that our view might actually hold out a benefit of less sexual attention for such women. If people come to appreciate a broader range of body types, then their attentions should be dispersed over a larger class of persons, with the result that some of the excessive attention now directed to a few would be more evenly distributed.

Another thing to note is that in this happy age of the internet, there are sexualized still and moving images of a wide variety of bodies, often freely released by the people whose bodies they are, that we can access without interaction. There is, of course, the danger that in using such images to retrain our own desires, we reduce the person to an

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[9] We are grateful to Anne Eaton and Aili Bresnahan for raising versions of this concern.

object. But we can guard against this by expressly focusing on the subjectivity of the person depicted. We should clarify that we are not speaking exclusively about pornography, though our project could be extended into an argument for pornography that features a diverse array of both bodies and subjectivities. Endeavors such as Sins Invalid (http://www.sinsinvalid.org/), a performance project in which disabled performers present themselves as sexual subjects, provide non-pornographic resources for expanding our conceptions of who is sexy without objectification.

One might wonder whether this project of reshaping sexiness is relevant for people who are stably partnered in sexually exclusive relationships. Do they have any obligation to adopt and internalize this revisionist notion of sexiness, when they aren't in the market for new sex partners? Do they, due to their commitment to their partner(s), have a moral obligation not to direct sexual attention toward others? Is it, perhaps, even misleading or cruel for them to direct sexual attention toward others whom they do not see as real candidates for sexual relationships? The latter worry, we think, is misplaced. Directing respectful sexual attention toward those whom we don't intend to form relationships with, for any number of reasons, can be playful and flirtatious. It can be pleasurable for the recipient of the attention and boost their self-esteem. Indeed, when such attention comes from a person known to be "off the market," it can be enjoyed without the pressures and uncertainties of sexualized attention that may lead somewhere. This mode of sexual interaction may, at times, be valuable precisely because the element of stress that often comes with sexual attention is absent. Moreover, the kind of attention we are recommending need not involve an invitation or willingness to engage in sexual relations, as perhaps sexualized attention based on the prurient sense would. Therefore, it is likely that the attention we recommend will not be experienced as more than it is: an interest in the person as a genuine embodied being.

We also believe that even persons in sexually exclusive relationships have an obligation to cultivate the ability to experience others as sexy in the respectful sense. Stable partnerships don't always last forever; it is not uncommon for the members of such a partnership eventually to become available for sexual relationships. Even leaving that aside, though, insofar as they participate in discourse about sex and attractiveness, they will help to reinforce or overturn the prevalent notions. Attitudes about a variety of matters have recently been shown to be subject to social contagion effects,[10] and this suggests that if one of us manages to shift their attitudes about sexiness in a positive direction, this may affect the attitudes of others in their social network, including friends of friends whom they have never met. The power each of us has to shape the attitudes and related behaviors of others lends further weight to our claim about the ethical importance of revising our conceptions of sexiness.

We also have specific duties to our partners that may, somewhat surprisingly, help to generate a duty to expand and reshape our notion of sexiness. We all age, and our bodies are vulnerable to change as a result of factors such as pregnancy and childbirth, injuries, illnesses, and environmental exposure. We all want to be known, loved and desired by our partners in our particularity, despite and even in part because of our faults and blemishes, even as these evolve over time. We may have a duty to our partners not to

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[10] Christakis and Fowler 2007; Fowler and Christakis 2009. Thanks are due to Amy Coplan for pointing out the relevance of these contagion effects.

cultivate sexual interest in others in the prurient sense, and a duty to cultivate sexual interest in others in the respectful sense, in which we take others (including our partner[s]) seriously as persons.

Moreover, we send each other messages of sexual validation (or the contrary) all the time, even when we are not seeking out sexual partnerships or aiming to communicate sexual messages. Our attitudes toward people leak out around our overt words, gestures and actions, and this is a reason to cultivate respectful experiences of sexiness, so that this attitude becomes more habitual than those of the less respectful notions of sexiness. Finally, as Laurence Thomas (1999) argues, our sexual attractions influence our overt behavior, with powerful consequences: if we are attracted to a job candidate, we are more likely to see them as the better hire independent of their qualifications or interview performance. We pay more attention to people we are attracted to and are more likely to notice their positive contributions. These are not benign effects; they influence people's concrete social and professional lives and are a force through which racial injustice is reinscribed. For these reasons, the ethical imperative to cultivate respectful experiences of sexiness applies to everyone, not just to people who are actively seeking, or expect to be seeking, sexual partnerships.

V. The Aesthetics of the Respectful Notion of Sexiness: Sexy as Subjective

Having discussed some of the ethical implications, we now return to aesthetic questions. One might wonder whether sexiness, in the respectful sense we advocate, is really an aesthetic notion at all. Are we stripping away the aesthetic content by advocating the cultivation of attraction to types of bodies that do not satisfy conventional standards, and the incorporation of the person's subjectivity into the experience of sexiness? Does the fact that attributions of sexiness are usually tied up with sexual desire disqualify them from the aesthetic realm?

We begin with the second question. Traditional understandings of aesthetic judgment as involving disinterest and distance appear to rule out the idea that attributions of sexiness, interwoven as they are with sexual desire, could be aesthetic. But there has been a move over the last several decades to reject this restriction. We belong to the camp of those who think that the aesthetic is, or at least can be, a matter of engaged attraction and desire. According to Eddy Zemach,

> Aesthetic predicates … describe the degree to which, and the manner in which, objects are good qua objects: what features make them perceptually salient (or non-salient) and to what degree they achieve that salience…. What makes an object perceptually salient? Obviously, the single most potent enhancer of salience of an object is relevance to us. We see things in terms of their significance to us, and that is why we perceive the situations we encounter as having some emotion-properties…. The same is true of things we perceive: an adorable thing is one that we see as justifying adoration, a delicate thing is a thing that we see as justifying care, a pitiful thing is a thing we see as justifying pity, and so on. (53, 54-5)

Zemach doesn't speak of sexy things, but one might translate his views on aesthetic properties as they relate to sexiness as follows: a sexy person is one that we see as justifying one's (perhaps not the observer's) wishing to have or actually having a sexual

encounter with that person. Noticing that an entity has a certain aesthetic property, according to Zemach, "displays it at the heart of our human sphere of interests and immediately invokes complex strategies and manners of appropriate behavior with respect to it" (55).

For Zemach, the connection with our interests is inevitable. Furthermore, noticing aesthetic properties primes us to behave in an appropriate manner. That is, the property appears to ready us for and to justify certain complex forms of behavior. Evidently, aesthetic properties thus construed have ethical implications.

It is for ethical reasons that we advocate the cultivation of experiences and attributions of sexiness that differ from those that may "come naturally," but this doesn't seem problematic from an aesthetic perspective either: admonitions to cultivate one's taste are not uncommon in the traditional aesthetics literature. But, in addition, we advocate distancing oneself from conventional standards of sexiness, and we do not replace these with a new, improved set of standards. We are not arguing for a situation in which everyone's experiences and attributions of sexiness converge on some more appropriate set of objectively sexy persons; the ethically preferable situation, we think, is one in which people's experiences of sexiness branch out in many different directions and are sensitive to the particularities of persons.

A related question concerns whether the ethical case for altering aesthetic tastes is misdirected insofar as ethical reasons aren't relevant to aesthetic taste: telling someone that x is *ethically* compromised does nothing to show it is not *aesthetically* valuable. Reasons for thinking that factory farming is ethically abhorrent are not prima facie reasons for thinking that tofu is tasty or that the *flavor* of meat is disgusting.

In fact, ethical considerations do interact extensively, and appropriately, with aesthetic experience. If in the midst of enjoying a delicious meal with you we announce that we are all dining on human flesh, we predict that your reaction will be one of aesthetic revulsion. You will now detest the taste in your mouth—the very taste you were savoring a moment ago. If we could convince you that eating animal flesh is no more acceptable than eating human flesh, we again predict you would lose, partly or wholly, your taste for meat.[11] Other examples of the role of knowledge and ethics in aesthetic judgment can be found in environmental aesthetics. Take, for example, the invasive plant, purple loose strife: once one learns of its invasive tendencies, its little purple flowers can come to appear less attractive, maybe even hideous.[12] And there are many examples where the appreciation of a natural entity on its own terms can increase its aesthetic appeal: bats, wetlands, and carnivorous plants, just to name a few. (Lintott 2006)

We also find ethical and ethically relevant assumptions behind many of the cases of a failure to appreciate an individual's sexiness. For instance, associations between evil and bodily disability (reinforced in scores of Hollywood films) lead people to fail to fully humanize the disabled person. Learning to see pregnant, elderly, and disabled people as fully human, a moral requisite, will help increase the likelihood of appreciating their sexiness.

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[11] We are grateful to Danny Nathan for discussion of this response.

[12] For insightful discussion of "the purple loose strife problem" and its implications for the disinterested tradition of aesthetic appreciations, see Marcia Muelder Eaton (1999).

Does the absence of objective standards undermine the status of the respectful notion of sexiness as aesthetic? To give a full answer to a question with deep meta-aesthetic underpinnings is beyond the scope of this paper. But we note, first, that it is not uncommon, in contemporary aesthetic thought, to celebrate aesthetic responses that reflect divergent individual sensibilities rather than widely shared tendencies or standards.[13] And, second, there is an element of objectivity in our proposal. Attributions of sexiness, on our view, should be responsive to the person as they actually are. They are object (or rather subject) directed. These attributions should not ignore relevant aspects of the subject, especially of their subjectivity; and should embrace and appreciate the subject's actual, manifest richness, not reduce them to an object of projection and fantasy. Attributions of sexiness, then, can be either appropriate or inappropriate: they are appropriate when they emerge out of the appreciation of an embodied person in all their sexualized particularity, and they are inappropriate when they neglect the person's subjectivity and/or impose external standards of attractiveness. For this reason, attributions of sexiness to people who are relatively genuine, in the way discussed earlier, are more likely to be appropriate: it is easier to respond to a genuine person as they truly are.

We conclude that appreciating the sexiness of others in the respectful sense is both an aesthetic and an ethical practice, and one that we have an obligation to pursue given that our society tends to inculcate narrow and oppressive standards of conventional sexiness. Appreciating the sexiness of others is part of recognizing their full humanity. Cultivating one's own sexiness, too, is a worthwhile aesthetic and ethical project – but one whose exploration we must leave to another occasion.[14]

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[13] See, for example, Ted Cohen (1993) and Kevin Melchionne (1998).

[14] We are grateful to audiences at the 2011 Annual Meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics, the 2012 Graduate Conference in Aesthetics, the 2012 London Aesthetics Forum, and in the philosophy department at Texas Tech University for helpful discussion.

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