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Sheila Lintott
sl025@bucknell.edu

Sherri Irvin

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Sex Objects and Sexy Subjects

A Feminist Reclamation of Sexiness

Sheila Lintott and Sherri Irvin

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—probably impossible—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 demands 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 without any sensitivity 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** individual autonomous sexual agency.

Given the socialization of women to believe that sexiness is essential to their value as persons, and given the narrow conception of sexiness prescribed, it is not surprising that some feminists suggest we give up on sexiness altogether: calling a person “sexy” in the standard sense 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 is to reduce them to an object—a thing.

However, feminists are not in complete agreement here. For example, Martha Nussbaum (1995) 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 accepting the common notion of sexiness that links 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 (e.g. Garland-Thomson 1997, 2009). 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 (2011, 84) 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.

So, whereas many feminists express concern over sexiness because finding someone sexy often involves treating that person as an object, we are here concerned about the failure to notice 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 (2010, 107) 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.

Here we seek to make room for women as sexy subjects who are free to desire and pursue the sorts of pleasure they find worthwhile.

In this spirit of articulating an authentic notion of sexual pleasure and a holistic conception of autonomous sexual agency, for women in particular but not exclusively, we propose a revisionist notion of sexiness that treats people not merely as sex objects, but as sexual subjects. Our project is revisionist, not descriptive of 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. We are interested in the mutuality and respect invoked in Cahill's characterization of

the intersubjectivity of sexualizing another. We argue for a normatively infused conception of sexiness that accommodates respect for persons while remaining in touch with the core connection of sexiness to the idea of sexual pleasure linked to desire.

We argue that full-fledged sexiness, normatively conceived, is not a property that can be attributed to a person without attention to their subjectivity: sexiness is a way of being, a process, not a possession. Just as the truth conditions of “They are happy” include the status of some of the subject’s mental states and attitudes, so do the truth conditions of “They are sexy.”¹ Sexiness in our sense (as opposed to the appearance of sexiness), then, is most properly attributed to persons and only derivatively, tangentially, or metaphorically to other animate or inanimate objects.

Sexiness as we are conceiving of it here is a powerful aesthetic notion with necessary connections to ethics. Sexiness is an aesthetic notion because it is a property that we attribute through practices of appreciation, and it relates in part to the attractiveness of the person to whom it is attributed—though, as we shall argue, it should not be tied to judgments of conventional bodily attractiveness. 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 advocate an ethical imperative *to be sexually attracted to* others; indeed, the way of thinking about sexiness we advocate here is divorced from the instrumental, thus making sense of attributing the property of sexiness to persons to whom one is *not* sexually attracted.

16.1 The Biological Sense of Sexiness: Sexy as Fertile

Before developing our own revisionist conception, we engage in some descriptive analysis by introducing two 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 is often 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

¹ 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>> (accessed November 2015).

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. (1999, 72, 74)

Considering sexiness as tied to reproductive health helps to explain why youthfulness is often such an attractive trait. Women are youthful in appearance during their most fertile years. It also explains why pregnant, elderly, and disabled women are often excluded from the category 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. Similarly, some forms of disability are assumed, often wrongly, to involve infertility; and the further assumption is often made that the disabled 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. As Stephen Davies (Chapter 7, this volume) notes, it ignores the extensive interaction between social factors and attributions of sexual attractiveness. Insofar as it ties the judgment of sexiness to a “natural” 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 (2012, 35) 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.

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 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 men and women, regardless of one's own sexual orientation.

Even more problematic are the broader moral implications of the biological sense of sexiness. This way of conceiving of sexiness ties a woman'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 reevaluate them today (cf. Hall 2012, 32).

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." 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. (1999, 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 (cf. Davies, Chapter 7, this volume). 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 it 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. 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 in a reductive manner? We shouldn't, and we're right to resist this conception of sexiness for its inability to account for all the ways in which people can and do value one another sexually.

16.2 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 stimulating our prurient interests, stoking a *desire* for a sexual encounter. Attributing the property of sexiness in this sense to someone says something about the person described and 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 with seeing someone as a potential instrument for one's own sexual gratification.

Feminists should not 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 1995, 251).² 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, consensual encounter.

Yet current standards of prurient sexiness are unduly narrow, excluding many women. As did the biological notion, the prurient conception of sexiness classifies pregnant, disabled, and elderly women as asexual, as unable or unfit to engage in sexual intercourse and give or receive sexual satisfaction. Pregnant, elderly, or disabled women often aren't even considered candidates for being accurately described as sexy in the prurient sense. Sexuality and sexual pleasure are important aspects of many human lives; and given the importance people often place on their sexuality and the effort people often funnel into cultivating their sex appeal, ignoring the sexuality of an individual can involve a failure to recognize a central aspect of the full-fledged humanity of that person. As Nathaniel Adam Tobias Coleman³ 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

² Kathleen Stock (2015) agrees, and argues that the dispute among feminists over the acceptability of objectification is only apparent: Nussbaum uses the term to name both acceptable and problematic modes of engaging with others, while some other feminist thinkers use the term to name only modes that are ethically compromised.

³ 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>> (accessed November 2015).

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.⁴

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

16.3 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 a person with an assessment of their 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 animated by their own sexual identity. This will involve finding someone sexually appealing although not necessarily sexually arousing. In this sense of sexiness, sexuality can be divorced from fertility and the prurient interests of another.

Respecting sexiness involves seeing others not (only) as sex objects but necessarily as sexual subjects: human beings who are in charge of their sexual agency. Their appeal is intrinsic to them: it comes from them, rather than being defined by externally imposed standards, especially those associated with oppressive social forces. To sexualize persons respectfully, it may be necessary to work intentionally to expand, perhaps greatly, 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 standards and seek, instead, the magnificence⁵ that is manifest here and now. Ann Cahill (2011, 103) 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.

To make ethically sound attributions of sexiness, appreciation of the sexual particularity of a wide variety of bodies needs to be developed to ensure that our sexualized

⁴ 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.

⁵ We draw this term from Mia Mingus (2011), who sees the magnificent as more closely aligned with the “ugly” than with the conventionally beautiful.

awareness takes into account not bodies exclusively, but rather embodied subjects. To find someone sexy, in the respectful sense, is to recognize the sexualized subject animated in a body and to respect the subject in part for how they choose or choose not to infuse their own version of sexuality in their own body.

But when it comes to respecting subjectivity in sexuality, should we aim for universal appreciation, or is there a certain model of subjectivity that we should be drawn to? In adopting this revisionist notion of sexiness, we are trying to create space to value people as they are and strive to be rather than in virtue of conformity to narrow external standards. It makes sense, then, to cultivate sensitivity, awareness, and an ability to recognize the attractiveness of people on their own terms. Genuine sexual expression comes from and is for the sake of individuals, as opposed to aiming to conform to some external ideal. Obviously, in practice it can be difficult to ascertain the extent to which another person's sexual expression is genuine. Yet we can and do aim to detect genuineness (or lack thereof) in others in a broad range of contexts. Interestingly, we do this by trying to understand the person behind whatever expression or behavior is under consideration. Identifying genuineness in sexuality, then, involves empathy.

Genuineness is not an all-or-nothing achievement; 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, playfulness, 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—genuine expressions that hinge on exploitation or non-consensual sexual activity, such as that of the pedophile or rapist, must be partly repressed rather than allowed free rein—and this is underscored by the empathy requirement just mentioned. Understanding a child's perspective and feelings should impede the pedophile's comfort with sexualizing that child in ways a child cannot understand and would not independently desire. This allows for children's sexuality, which is an important although rarely discussed aspect of childhood. As Mark Vopat (2003, 157) insists: "Children are sexual beings, and that aspect of their lives requires the same type of care and concern that we attach to other aspects of their well-being."

In general, to appreciate the extent to which a person achieves a degree of self-understanding and comfort as a sexual being, and the ways they infuse energy and flavor into the self they are exploring, is to respectfully appreciate another's sexiness.

16.4 Considering Objections

Not every way of incorporating a person's subjectivity into assessments of their sexiness strikes 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.⁶ Attributions of sexiness that evoke narrow requirements to fit a compromised mode of subjectivity are not fully respectful; they are more akin to the prurient judgments discussed earlier. 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. Much mainstream pornography also provides an illustrative example of precisely what we want to diminish: that is, when it depicts sex acts that are seemingly painful and degrading to the woman involved while conveying that her negative feelings—her pain and shame—are irrelevant or, if relevant, serve to increase the pleasure of male participants and viewers. If someone is presented as sexy in this manner, it is not in the sense we are advocating here, as 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.

One might wonder whether it is really possible to shape what we find sexy. Can we come to *experience* as attractive kinds of bodies that we don't already experience in this way? Can we learn to *experience* as sexy not just 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.

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.⁷ 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

⁶ We are grateful to Amy Coplan for this point.

⁷ An analyst for the dating web site OkCupid found gender differences in how dating preferences change with age: women, as they age, tend to indicate a preference for and send messages to men within their own age group; men, on the other hand, continue to indicate a preference for and send messages to women who are significantly younger. As the author suggests (and, indeed, recommends), it is open to men consciously to change their dating behavior in order to rectify the resulting decline in dating opportunities for women as they age (Rudder 2010).

ourselves. As Davies (Chapter 7, this volume) notes, “When we become aware of the way biology generates the preferences that pull and push us, we can interrogate those preferences. If we choose not to own them, we can frequently override them, having higher preferences more generally about the kind of person we want to be.” The same, we suggest, is true, and probably a fortiori, for preferences that are culturally shaped.

As Coleman (unpublished, 15–16) argues, societal support may be helpful or even necessary as we attempt to reshape our preferences. 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 mainstream media typically fails to do so.

The objection that we cannot reshape our conception of sexiness 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, the responsibility falls to individuals to demand 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 even feel aversion to them. We would hold this person, in adulthood, responsible for whether they go beyond their upbringing 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. Not just the actions, but their motivating desires and feelings are morally inappropriate (cf. Cahill, Chapter 15, this volume). Of course, the actions and the feelings are not morally identical. But in a culture that increasingly sexualizes young girls and eroticizes violence against women, society bears part of the responsibility for the violence—sexual and otherwise—and degrading attention that befalls girls and women.

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? 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 allows their admiration to be directed toward a certain narrow range of bodies, 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 anyone will magically find themselves

with a different desire set. Instead, the aim of our 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 and habits 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, but this is not reason to reject our view.⁸ 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, attributions of sexiness in a respectful manner are not always linked to the attributor's own experience of sexual desire. As Davies (Chapter 7, this volume) notes, once we acknowledge the broader social role of sexual attractiveness, "it becomes possible to decouple the notion of sexual attractiveness from the desire to have sex or mate, so that it can be a common assessment of oneself and others without being tied to a disposition to display overtly sexual behavior." 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 be a recognition that another would be sexually attracted to him. 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, or if I were in a different mood, or if I had the energy, and so on, I imagine I would experience desire for him, or that I can fully understand why and how someone sexually desires him even if I do not.

⁸ Perhaps this malleability is, on average, more difficult for men than for women, but we aren't sure. It is possible that research on the malleability of female sexual desire is driven in part by a heterosexual male interest in 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. See Diamond (2008) for related discussion.

However, the possibility of appropriate attributions of sexiness without experiencing desire does not mean that we need not concern ourselves with our desires 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 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 by going beyond postulating an abstract hypothetical appreciator and actually engaging in practices of appreciation of sexual subjects embodied in diverse bodies; 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; we suggest that gender is one of the boundaries we should aim to stretch as we reshape whom we find sexy. Conventional standards of attractiveness are unduly constraining by requiring compliance with rigidly defined gender roles. Withholding or diverting sexual attention from gender noncompliant people is a form of punitive social control functioning as a strong incentive to refrain from exploration ~~at~~ or beyond the socially acceptable gender presentation associated with our assigned gender. Space constraints don’t allow us the room to argue for all of the ways this form of social control is undesirable, but we can note a few. First, it sustains patriarchal power structures by conveying a sharp distinction between women and men, thus creating competition, insecurity, and distrust. Second, it disproportionately inflicts undesirable constraints on women, as women’s bodies and appearances are most fervently and frequently policed. Third, it harms anyone who is unable or unwilling to stay within the “middle ground” of a particular gender identity, or who experiences great discomfort there. Finally, it forces self-denial and even self-deception because in reality we are each gendered (and classed, racialized, etc.) in diverse and constructed ways. Reshaping our sexual attractions so as not to contribute to the policing of gender boundaries is thus ethically and personally desirable.

Moreover, attending to embodied persons in all their physical and subjective particularity, moving attention ~~from to~~ the highly gendered conventional markers of attractiveness, ~~one might instill~~ the freedom to move ~~themselves~~ away from the “middle ground” of ~~their~~ assigned gender. The “center” of conventional attractiveness and the “middle ground” of gender can be oppressive and stultifying. For example, the most conventionally attractive women are also those seen as most feminine and vice versa, leaving women little room for playfulness or creative expression. Enjoying the appreciation of particular embodied subjects on their own terms, seeking the rich complexities manifest in different ways of being, ~~one might find permission~~ and even inspiration ~~to transcend~~ gender boundaries previously experienced as unforgiving and unsurpassable.

The prospects for such shifts in taste and presentation will vary from person to person and from group to group based on a range of factors, including motivation to

change and openness to exploration. This does not support empirically debunked phenomena such as “ex-gay” therapies, which standardly aim to extinguish attractions to people of one’s own sex and/or establish attractions to people of another sex, while also reinforcing conventional connections between assigned sex and gender presentation. Our focus is on appreciation, not attraction. And our motivation is to enlarge the domain of sexiness, not prescribe any one way anyone ought to feel and behave. 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 greater appreciative abilities for a diversity of ways in which personhood might be embodied sexually.

Other questions remain about the morality of the work ~~one must do~~ to shape desires in the ways 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, 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 critical scrutiny. To be seen as a sexualized being, as a candidate for sexiness, can be 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 people who present as asexual or nonsexual, for instance. But to think that there is always something inherently troubling about even respectful sexualized attention, sensitively and empathetically directed in appropriate contexts, excessively curtails a fundamental ground of human social interactions.

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 toward a remedy here is to see subversions of sexiness as unique and personal expressions of sexiness and to recommend then that to appreciate such an individual's sexiness appropriately *is* to ignore it.

Another, more specific version of this worry is that some people, women mostly, find the sexual attention already directed at them excessive and unwanted. Will encouragement to reshape sexual tastes, especially as these pertain to women, eventuate in even more excessive and unwanted sexual attention?⁹ A first thing to note is that ~~any~~ expression of respectful sexual attention ~~would~~ cease with any indication it is unwelcome. It is not a lecherous sexual attention that is necessarily tied to desire. In most contexts, it will be quite subtle, perhaps so subtle as to be undetectable by the person toward whom it is directed. In addition, persons who feel the weight of excessive sexual attention are likely those whose self-presentation conforms to present standards aligned with biological or prurient sexiness. Therefore, an expansion of the domain of sexiness promises to give them the relief they desire by directing sexual attention to a wider array of sexually appealing persons. 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.

Virtual appreciation is also an option. In the age of the Internet, there are sexualized still and moving images, pornographic and otherwise, 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 object. We can guard against this by expressly focusing on the subjectivity of the person depicted. Endeavors such as *Sins Invalid*,¹⁰ 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. The appreciative practices we advocate could also be supported by pornography that features a diverse array of both bodies and subjectivities.

~~One might wonder whether~~ reshaping sexiness ~~is~~ relevant for people who are stably partnered in sexually exclusive relationships. Are they, due to commitment to their partner(s), exempt from the duty to examine and perhaps reshape their tastes? Do they 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.

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

¹⁰ <<http://www.sinsinvalid.org/>> (accessed November 2015).

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, the attention we recommend need not be experienced as more than it is: an interest in the person as a genuine embodied being.

Persons in sexually exclusive relationships have an obligation to cultivate the ability to experience others as sexy in the respectful sense, even leaving aside the reality that relationships change. Insofar as people who are exclusively partnered participate in discourse about sex and attractiveness, they help reinforce or resist the prevalent norms. Attitudes about a variety of matters have recently been shown to be subject to social contagion effects,¹¹ and this suggests that shifting attitudes about sexiness in a positive direction may affect the attitudes of others, 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 support for the ethical importance of revising our conceptions of sexiness.

We also have specific duties to our partners that generate a duty to expand and reshape our notion of sexiness. After all, 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, indeed because of, our faults and blemishes. So, in a monogamous relationship, although we may have a duty to our partners not to cultivate sexual interest in others in the prurient sense, we may also have a duty to our partners to cultivate sexual interest in others in the respectful sense.

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. This is a reason to cultivate respectful experiences of sexiness, so this attitude may become more habitual than those associated with the less respectful notions of sexiness. 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. Moreover, as Davies (Chapter 7, this volume) notes following Etcoff 1999, “Treating people as attractive gets a better social performance from them.” These are not benign effects; they influence people’s concrete social and professional lives and are a force through which racial

¹¹ Christakis and Fowler 2007; Fowler and Christakis 2009. Thanks are due to Amy Coplan for pointing out the relevance of these contagion effects.

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.

16.5 The Aesthetics of the Respectful Notion of Sexiness: Sexy as Subjective

Having discussed some of the ethical implications, we turn 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?

Let's 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 (2001, 53, 54–5):

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.

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” (2001, 55).

For Zemach, the connection with our interests is inevitable. Furthermore, noticing aesthetic properties primes us to behave in certain ways. That is, appreciating a property readies us for certain complex forms of behavior. The relevance of this analysis to sexiness as an aesthetic property is clear: attributions of sexiness occur through appreciative practices and involve perceptual salience, relevance to the self, emotional responses, and behavioral dispositions.

Obviously, 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 is unproblematic from an aesthetic perspective: admonitions to cultivate one's taste are common in the

aesthetic tradition. More troubling from a traditional aesthetic perspective is that we advocate a situation in which attributions of sexiness branch out in many different directions, tracking appreciation of the particularities of a diverse array of subjects, rather than one in which everyone's experiences and attributions of sexiness converge on some set of sexy persons. We address this worry [later in the chapter](#).

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.

But, in fact, ethical considerations interact extensively, and appropriately, with and within aesthetic experience. If in the midst of enjoying a delicious meal with you we announce that we are all dining on human flesh, your reaction will predictably be one of aesthetic revulsion. The very taste you were savoring a moment ago is now repulsive. Further, if convinced that eating animal flesh is no more acceptable than eating human flesh, one would lose, partly or wholly, the taste for meat.¹² 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 loosestrife: once one learns of its invasive tendencies, its little purple flowers can come to appear much less attractive.¹³ 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).

There are also ethically relevant assumptions influencing many failures to appreciate an individual's sexiness. For instance, associations between evil and bodily disability (reinforced in scores of Hollywood films among other places) dehumanize ~~the~~ disabled person. [Rejecting this stereotyping](#) reasserts the humanity of disabled people and may allow for the recognition and appreciation of their sexiness.

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 chapter. 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 (e.g. Cohen 1993; Melchionne 1998). Second, there is a significant emphasis on objectivity in our proposal. Attributions of sexiness, on our view, should be responsive to the person as they actually are, not merely as they seem to us. These attributions are objective in the sense of being object-directed (to a person including their subjectivity). Respectful attributions of sexiness are based on relevant aspects of the subject, especially of their subjectivity, and celebrate the person's manifest

¹² We are grateful to Danny Nathan for discussion of this response.

¹³ For insightful discussion of "the purple loosestrife problem" and its implications for the disinterested tradition of aesthetic appreciations, see Marcia Muelder Eaton (1999).

complexities, without reducing them through projection or 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 may be more likely to be appropriate, because it is easier to respond to a genuine person as they truly are.

In conclusion, appreciating the sexiness of others in the respectful sense is both an aesthetic and an ethical practice. It is also a site of political resistance, given that our society inculcates narrow and oppressive conventions of sexiness. To put it plainly, appreciating sexiness is part of recognizing a person's 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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¹⁴ We are grateful to the three anonymous readers of this volume for helpful comments, and 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 discussion.

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