

## Is Beauty Objective?

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### **ABSTRACT**

In discussions of “beauty” as an aesthetic and evaluative term assessing and describing people’s looks, very often people use the term as if there is a shared objective standard of beauty. This mistaken conception of beauty as objective can be understood in three layers: firstly, the term “beauty” is used as if it means that a certain set of objective standards has been met; secondly, it is presupposed that these standards have existed throughout human history and will continue to exist as such even despite what appear to be significant changes to these standards; thirdly, it is often presupposed that we are all equally capable of achieving these standards and that we should all aim to meet these standards. However, this conception of beauty as objective is mistaken. I seek to make clear that: the aesthetics of people’s looks is very often shaped by racism, patriarchy, heteronormativity and other systematic oppressions in our society. The term “beauty” is much more of an oppressive tool than an innocent realist appraisal or aesthetic judgment.

### **KEYWORDS**

Aesthetics, Feminist Aesthetics, Feminist Philosophy, Feminism

## INTRODUCTION

In discussions of “beauty” as an aesthetic and evaluative term assessing and describing people’s looks, very often people use the term as if there is a shared objective standard of beauty. To justify this, people appeal to a variety of mechanisms and instincts that are taken to underlie the objectivity of beauty. People argue that attributes such as “small waists”, “big eyes”, “pale skin” are just “naturally beautiful.” The word “naturally” here is used with an implication that beauty is part of nature and therefore, objective.

This mistaken conception of beauty as objective can be understood in three layers: firstly, the term “beauty” is used as if it means that a certain set of objective standards has been met; secondly, it is presupposed that these standards have existed throughout human history and will continue to exist as such even despite what appear to be significant changes to these standards; thirdly, it is often presupposed that we are all equally capable of achieving these standards and that we should all aim to meet these standards. However, this conception of beauty as objective is mistaken.

In what follows, I will present a variety of reasons for understanding beauty as socially constructed, rather than objective. In particular, there are several constructive forces that shape what beauty is and its vast significance within society. I seek to make clear that: the aesthetics of people’s looks is very often shaped by racism, patriarchy, heteronormativity and other systematic oppressions in our society. Discrimination based on looks falls into a bigger picture on the societal and historical level. The term “beauty” is much more of an oppressive tool than an innocent realist appraisal or aesthetic judgment.

In the First Part of this paper, I will spell out the example of the intellectual construction of “aesthetics.” I will draw examples from Chinese literary traditions, contemporary evolutionary science as well as Western philosophy of “taste” to illustrate the biased nature of the concept as it is conceived of in different intellectual traditions.

In the Second Part of this paper, I will showcase examples of the social force “aesthetics” carries in contemporary societies. I will draw on examples such as Ugly Betty and cosmetic surgeries in China to illustrate how beauty is corrupted: it is a tool of oppression. Most importantly, we are not afforded equal status in the accumulation the social capital endowed by beauty. This section will develop the

point that beauty should not be treated as a common natural or good goal that everyone should be striving for.

In the Third Part of this paper, I will spell out the racialized nature of the aestheticization of women of color. With Jari Jones and "Mulan" as my illustrations, I will showcase how their races affect people's aesthetic judgment. This section will fully develop an argument against the perceived consistency of "natural" beauty throughout human history.

In the Fourth Part of this paper, I propose to think beyond the existing frame of beauty. I will incorporate the example of Radical Body Positivity to challenge the presupposed progressiveness of the Body Positive Movement. I intend to reveal the neoliberal nature of the Body Positive Movement, as well as the new pedagogy of beauty in this era. In the end, I propose that we should aim to abolish the authority we grant beauty, given that very little good has come from the pursuit of beauty throughout human history.

## **THE FIRST PART: THE INTELLECTUAL CONSTRUCTION OF "AESTHETICS"**

In this section, I will lay the groundwork for the basic concept of "aesthetics" as a form of intellectual oppression. I will do so by way of three illustrative examples, which I do not take to be unusual or special, in regard to their underlying conceptions of aesthetics as objective. In each case, I will argue that these conceptions are incorrect: they fail to recognize the social forces at play in their own intellectual accounts of the objectivity of aesthetics. In the first illustration, I will reveal the sexism in the concept "aesthetics" itself by showing how women have been treated as aesthetic objects within the Chinese literary tradition of "sickly beauties." In the second illustration, I will further elaborate the "objectivity" of aesthetics as perceived by people and find reason to object to a common argument based on evolutionary theory (such as explaining appreciation of small waists and big buttocks as attraction of fertile women). In the end, I will illustrate the authority of "taste" in the philosophical tradition. From this section, it will be very clear that aesthetics is constructed by a male-centered intellectual world. Literature of "sickly beauties", science of "evolutionary theories", philosophy of "taste", they are all but part of the general patriarchal oppression in terms of human knowledge, only in the name of "aesthetics."

### **"Aesthetic" as projecting females as objects**

A common appreciation of beauty comes from appreciation of femininities as weaker, inferior and fragile. Immanuel Kant openly appreciated "his fair sex" as agreeable to "human nature", or indeed, men's nature (Korsmeyer and Weiser 2021). He even differentiated "sublimity" from "beauty" with a gendered glance: how ordinary "prettiness and elegance" is inferior to, for example, Beethoven's music (Zangwill 2021). The subjectivity of male viewers presupposes the objectification of female bodies, and what's more, the "feminine beauty" is wedded with lesser traits –sublimity could only come from men's creation, no matter how "enjoyable" or "agreeable" Kant's "fair sex" are (Korsmeyer and Weiser 2021). And such a cultural tradition is not unique to the West. In this section, I will incorporate the aesthetic of "sickly beauties" in late imperial China to illustrate how "aesthetic", besides casting women in a light of objectification because it was dominated by a male-centered intellectual world, also manifests as an appreciation of female weakness, disease and distress. The unhealthy fetishism of "sickly beauties" in late imperial China illustrates the innate sexism in aesthetics as a discipline as well as the cross-cultural nature of intellectual oppression in the name of "aesthetics."

Gender is crucial to perception of illness in Chinese cultural tradition. In Charlotte Furth's *A Flourishing Yin*, she discusses how gender and illness presuppose each other in the Chinese medical tradition. The feminine element Blood is inferior to the masculine element qi in Chinese medicine: "Blood was feminized as secondary and dependent in the hierarchy of bodily energies, unable to stand alone as a primal body vitality as qi did." (Furth 1999, 74) The social gender is wedded very well with the biological difference as well as the cultural interpretation of such difference. Menstruation, understood as the most feminine issue in medicine, is "identified with ideal normality" (Furth 1999, 77). Menstruation is supposed to be on a regular basis, presupposing fertility and good health. Deviance from such a norm, though, may be understood in many ways: it could be a sign of failure to fulfill various social roles as a woman. Cheng Congzhou, a famous Chinese medical practitioner in the 17th Century, wrote about a case in which he was frustrated about a woman's irregular menstruation: "Why can't she be regulated?" (Furth 1999, 256) Upon observation of the woman's social interactions, he concluded that the woman's disease came from her reluctance to take the medicine provided to her by her sister-in-law, and it was a "negative

emotion" as well as social dysfunctionality that caused her disease (Furth 1999, 256). Medicine as a male-centered intellectual discipline interprets diseases already in a gendered way, and such medical knowledge laid a foundation for literary tradition of "sickly beauties."

With the notion of "sickly beauties", illness in women is commonly fetishized as an aesthetic object in the Chinese cultural tradition. In *A Dream of The Red Mansions*, Lin Daiyu, a female leading character, is constantly ill with her sensitivity and passion. As Zhang Xinjun and Liu Qizhi's wrote, "her illness originates from her own physical and psychological states and constitutes her existential condition. Lin embodies the kind of Morbid Beauty composed by her illness, grace, talent, perfectly to the taste of feudal Chinese scholars" (Zhang and Liu 2015, 60). The patriarchal control implied by her disease could not be more obvious: her weak body could not physically escape masculine power, and on top of that, her constant romantic imagination and passion toward a male lover created an emotional chain. As Janice Radway wrote in *Reading the Romance*, the emotional needs fulfilled by merely reading romantic stories may consolidate patriarchy because it jeopardizes the future "that might otherwise be formulated as demands in the real world and lead to the potential restructuring of sexual relations" (Radway 2009, 213). Lin, and many other passionate female characters, are perfectly described by Radway: their emotional dependence on men is reinforced by their engagement with literature, which constitutes a major aspect of the image of "sickly beauties."

What's more, given that *A Dream of The Red Mansions* was written by two male authors in late Imperial China, it is safe to conclude that Lin Daiyu as a sickly beauty was a cultural creation. Female characters such as her – graceful, lonely, talented, loving, ill – are but a mirror of the mental state of male scholars and intellectuals. Just as how Louise Edwards noted: "Young women are imprisoned in both realms by discourses of feminine purity, whereas men can exploit or transcend moral/immoral and mythic/mimetic boundaries." (Edwards 1994, 58) Aestheticization of her and her disease reveals the nature of human knowledge, cultural traditions and the intellectual world being dominated and written by men. Just as how Cornelia Klinger has argued on the overall masculine production of art: "The idea of the artist as genius contains a marked intensification of the belief in the subject's sovereignty, autonomy, and creativity." (Klinger 2017, 344) Such belief of male artists as well as intellectuals just manages to conceal the deep deprivation of sovereignty, autonomy and creativity of women as artistic objects.

### “Aesthetic Objectivity” as defended by evolutionary theory

Besides the Chinese medical and literary tradition that describes “gendered illness”, Western science has also been a major force in terms of intellectual oppression in the name of “aesthetics.” One “scientific” justification for appreciating women with small waists and big hips is that: the physical attractiveness of such female bodies suits the need for evolution because men appreciate more fertile women. In this case, not only is a woman with a smaller waist and a bigger hip “objectively beautiful or attractive”, such attraction is justified by the natural mechanism studied by science, and thus, should hold true throughout human history and in the future. In the Introduction, I outlined three layers of the conception of the objectivity of beauty: firstly, “beauty” is used as if it means a certain set of specific standards; secondly, these standards exist throughout human history as constant and will remain constant in future; thirdly, we are equally capable of achieving these standards and should aim to achieve them. Here we see the first two layers of objectivity: appreciation of small waists and big hips is “constant scientific truth.” I will take issue with this claim using a critical-feminist perspective on science to show a fundamental male-centeredness in the discussion of female fertility and mate value.

The common appreciation of small waists and big hips is theorized as a small Waist-to-Hip Ratio (WHR), which is believed to be aesthetically preferred because it purportedly implies the good health and fertility of women. In Jeanne Bovet’s study of Evolutionary Theory and Men’s Preferences for Women’s Waist-to-Hip Ratio, she went through the entire literature of evolutionary biology that has attached “mate value” to women with smaller WHR. It was commonly believed by scientists that “a woman with a high mate value will increase the reproductive success of her mate(s).” (Bovet 2019, 2) If such logic works, then it is concluded that women who have smaller waists and bigger hips “increase the number and quality of descendants a man will have (including the ones he has with other women).” (Bovet 2019, 2) She further analyzed a variety of claims such as that in the discipline of evolutionary biology. In the end, Bovet appraised the use of WHR in many analyses, if not all.

I argue that in the discussion of WHR, “mate value” as a result of low WHR, as a scientific term, is fundamentally erroneous. The definition of a woman’s mate value is supposed to simply means her own place in the sexual marketplace. However, it becomes at the hand of the reproductive success of her mate, even

when the mate does not have children with her. WHR is supposed to be relevant to fertility and health in pure biological terms. However, it becomes a tool to measure her “ability to reproduce for men” –fertility is conceived as “useful to men” in this sense.

Not only is the term embedded with a patriarchal assumption of women’s reproductive behaviors, the term itself is not that useful to explain intimate partner violence in a more gender-equal society. In Khandis Blake and Robert Brooks’ study of men with high mate value, they surprisingly find out that: “When mate value was high, gender equality increased men’s support for male-to-female IPV (intimate partner violence)” (Blake and Brooks 2018, 7). Namely, most wanted men in most gender-equal societies could be potential abusers because of the loss of privilege he could have had in a gender-inequal society, and yet, they are considered “men with high mate value.” If we take the meaning of “high mate value” as indicator of reproductive success of one’s mate, then men with high possibilities to enhance the reproductive success of his mates simultaneously endorse domestic violence. Given a general patriarchal structure in our society, the children his mates bear should be more likely his than not. It is argued that: “Both the high mate value partners of paired high-value men and their greater resource investment means that female defection and infidelity are far more costly” (Blake & Brooks 2018, 3). That is to say: “mate value”, a seemingly gender-neutral term in evolutionary science, does not measure the potential good a man could bring to his female spouse. “High mate value” male is perceived with higher IPV endorsement and more offspring, but “high mate value” female is perceived with more offspring her male partner could potentially have.

In Sharyn Clough’s *Beyond Epistemology: A Pragmatist Approach to Feminist Science Studies*, she acknowledged the long-rooted male-centeredness in evolutionary biology by tracing back to Charles Darwin. Sharyn Clough summarized that: “Expanding his theory of natural selection to include sexual selection, Darwin hypothesized that secondary sexual characteristics do indeed have a biological function because they better enable the individual to attract a mate, fend off competitors for that mate, and/or provide for the care of offspring.” (Clough 2003, 47) Incorporating a Victorian mindset, Darwin attempted to explain away the fact that in nature, males tend to have “secondary sexual characteristics” in order to attract females, whereas in human society women are more trained to attract men. Darwin wrote extensively and somehow contradictorily on the

subject, arguing for the superiority of men with their "superior secondary sexual characteristics" (Clough 2003, 50) because the masculine characteristics symbolize courage and intelligence. He would argue that a civilized white male of his time is of great physical attraction to women, ignoring the fact that female appearances are far more emphasized among his contemporaries (resulting in some horrible inventions such as corsets).

Such a biased approach to nature underpins evolutionary theory. Scientists such as Darwin turned a blind eye to female oppression in human society in contrast to female superiority in nature. Moreover, Darwin and his precedents attempted to justify superiority of human males with coined terms such as "superior secondary characteristics" and "mate value", presenting male as the center of sexual selection. Aestheticization of low WHR becomes part of the patriarchal judgment on women. There is no gender-neutral discussion of reproduction, attraction and bodily traits. The seemingly objective tone in describing women's body shapes does not neutralize the fact that it is a one-way judgment from men to women and it comes from a male-centered scientific tradition. "Aesthetics", on top of such construction and justification, could not be argued as objective.

### Authority of "taste" in philosophy

In this section, I will primarily take issue with David Hume's "Of the Standard of Taste", given the authority this essay carries in the argument for a fixated standard of taste constituted by judgments of well-cultivated viewers. I argue that his idea of "better or worse aesthetic judgment" is prevalent in the Western tradition of philosophy and thus, contributed to a general intellectual oppression.

Hume asserted the authority of "Standard of Taste" very early on in his piece. He argued that: "It is natural for us to seek a Standard of Taste; a rule, by which the various sentiments of men may be reconciled; at least, a decision, afforded, confirming one sentiment, and condemning another." (Hume 2006) As a philosopher of subjectivism, Hume did not abolish the natural differences of people's aesthetic sentiments towards objects. However, sentiment and judgment are perceived very differently in Hume's philosophy. Hume defended his idea of a normative judgment of taste by incorporating some of his rivals that are against the standard of taste: "There is a species of philosophy, which cuts off all hopes of success in such an attempt and represents the impossibility of ever attaining any standard of taste. The difference, it is said, is very wide between judgment and



sentiment. All sentiment is right; because sentiment has a reference to nothing beyond itself, and is always real, wherever a man is conscious of it." (Hume 2006) Appreciating each and every one's sentiments as "real", Hume did argue for a "rule" or "decision" which is normative enough so that we could judge people's sentiments with it. People's ideas of pulp fictions being nicer than Shakespeare is not denied, but rather judged and ignored by the mainstream: "Though there may be found persons, who give the preference to the former authors; no one pays attention to such a taste; and we pronounce without scruple the sentiment of these pretended critics to be absurd and ridiculous. The principle of the natural equality of tastes is then totally forgot, and while we admit it on some occasions, where the objects seem near an equality, it appears an extravagant paradox, or rather a palpable absurdity, where objects so disproportioned are compared together." (Hume 2006)

Following the absolute standard of taste, Hume also argued for a good critic. "It is impossible to continue in the practice of contemplating any order of beauty, without being frequently obliged to form comparisons between the several species and degrees of excellence and estimating their proportion to each other. A man, who has had no opportunity of comparing the different kinds of beauty, is indeed totally unqualified to pronounce an opinion with regard to any object presented to him." (Hume 2006) In Hume's opinion, only a man with sufficient opportunities of "comparing the different kinds of beauty" can be trusted to remain "in the practice of contemplating any order of beauty." A person who is immersed in pulp fictions and popular culture is thus not at a place to appreciate or judge Shakespeare. A good critic, after being exposed to a variety forms of sentiments and thus well cultivated, form a sentiment that is "right" or that adheres to the "Standard of Taste."

Hume's argument left many ambiguities. "So what are the rules of taste, over and above any rules or principles involved in sound judgment about the object of taste? Surprisingly, Hume never offers a clear case of one." (Gracyk 2020) The first ambiguity lies in his inability to analyze or describe the absolute standard of taste. According to Timothy Costelloe: "The standard, rather, as a general rule in its second influence, is an abstraction from actual practice that articulates how one ought to judge if one is to judge correctly in matters of beauty." (Costelloe 2007, 14) Interesting enough, such an explanation fails to address anything concrete as to "how one ought to judge." One may use as many examples as possible,

comparing Harry Potter to Shakespeare, comparing *The Lord of the Rings* to *Divine Comedy*, but the line between “popular culture” and “classics” remains debatable, because classics to our times were sometimes considered inferior to older texts in their own times.

The second ambiguity lies in the arrogant tone of his argumentation. Unable to describe or analyze fully what defines an aesthetic sentiment, Hume seemed to attach the absolute standard of taste to his own standard of taste as “how one ought to judge.” When he argued that: “The same Homer, who pleased at Athens and Rome two thousand years ago, is still admired at Paris and at London.” (Hume 2006) Hume seemed to attach absolute aesthetic value to Homer given that he is widely accepted in the Western societies. Similarly, when he compared Ogilby and Milton, or Bunyan and Addison, he also gave credit to the latter authors without any hesitation and argued that “Though there may be found persons, who give the preference to the former authors; no one pays attention to such a taste” (Hume 2006). One may have to notice his abruptness. Nothing has been developed as the criteria between a good author and a bad author, only because he took for granted that his social group, as cultural elites, have better tastes; the former authors are denounced. What Hume manifested here is the arrogance of an educated man: “No one pays attention to such a taste” –a taste of working class, a taste of uneducated public, a taste of other cultures. It is compatible that Hume argued that aesthetic judgment should be made by “good critics”, a person with enough cultivation and thus, belongs to Hume’s own social group. Monique Roelofs argues in her book *The Cultural Promise of the Aesthetics* that Hume has an exclusive nature in his “Standard of Taste” by “contrasting genuine taste with a range of inferior ones (those of Indians, women and blacks)” (Roelofs 2014, 152), and I fully agree to such a comment.

In the First Part of my thesis, I have used three useful illustrations from literature, science and philosophy to prove the biased nature of “aesthetics” from the very root of it –the intellectual construction of “aesthetics” was at hand of multiple social forces, and most importantly, patriarchy. “Sickly beauties” are fetishized with a deep fetishism of power over a weak female body; aestheticization of women with low WHR is justified by a problematic tradition that exaggerates male power in sexual selection in human societies; Hume’s “Standard of Taste” was wedded with his own social power to issue and perpetuate the taste of his own social group. I have also showed that the first layer of the objectivity of beauty

incorrect – namely, beauty is meant to meet certain objective standards, but since the standards themselves are corrupted in such intellectual traditions, it is incorrect to characterize beauty as objective. My argument provides a groundwork for the revelation of the social force of aesthetics in contemporary societies.

## **THE SECOND PART: CONSTRUCTIVE FORCES IN CURRENT SOCIETY THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THE CONSTRUCTION OF BEAUTY AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BEAUTY**

In this section, I will present analyses and examples of the different constructive social forces involved in aesthetics. The goal of these analyses and examples is to make clear that society consists of a variety of systems that contribute to the construction of beauty itself, and its mistaken status as objective. Beautiful looks are significant in our society, not because of an innocent manifestation and pursuit of beauty, but because of the hierarchies it creates and societal systems it contributes to. The current beauty standard is constructed in order to, not only oppress some people with less preferred looks, but also to justify existing oppressions of other forms. I will give three examples that best spell out the systematic oppression and privilege.

### **The Detested Ugliness**

In this section, I will draw on examples from popular culture. In these examples, popular culture reinforces the detestation of ugly people and it attempts to evict ugliness from the public sphere. These examples make clear that our society is systematically detesting and subordinating ugliness in order to consolidate the significance of beauty.

“Ugly people are unwanted in the public space”: one way to consolidate the doctrine of spatiality of ugliness is to justify mockery and annihilation of ugly people in our daily life. “Ugly laws” are historically significant, but no longer exists to ban people with “offensive looks” from public places (Przybylo & Rodrigues 2018, 5). However, our popular culture does so nowadays by making fun of people’s looks. In Yeidy Rivero’s analysis of telenovela *Yo soy Betty la fea*, a Latin-American adapted version of the U.S. comedy *Ugly Betty*, the narrative “re-articulated colonial, gendered, class, and Eurocentric dominant discourses of female aesthetics” (Rivero 2003, 65). Why is *Ugly Betty* ugly after all? Is it because

she is non-white? Is it because she is a working-class woman? Is it because she is fat? One cannot give a clear-cut answer to the abovementioned questions, but it is worth noting that: the complex fabrication underlying a seemingly objective judgment of her looks is laid out to audiences almost instantly when they compare her with "beautiful women." People are nudged into believing that if you're like Ugly Betty, you should really change yourself.

Despite open mockery of women's looks, popular media nowadays tends to annihilate fat bodies. In Dina Giovanelli and Stephen Ostertag's analysis of "primetime programming on the major television networks" in the U.S. (Giovanelli and Ostertag 2009, 291), they shockingly found a lack of fat women on TV. There were only two fat women on television primetime programming in March and October 2005, and they were very often "devoid of any sexual and romantic desirability or interest" (Giovanelli and Ostertag 2009, 291). By being fat, these women are taken to be not feminine enough. By being fat, these women are taken to be not wanted by men. By being fat, a woman's only mission in life should be to lose weight. It is safe to say that our media is consolidating the significance of beauty and heterosexual attraction almost every day by means of deeming fat, ugly, non-white, poor people as unworthy of public attention or an object of mockery and judgment by a generalized public.

### The Mythologized Beautification

"To be beautiful is to be successful", such a doctrine is internalized by modern people no matter how we define "success." Women in China have been keen on plastic surgeries in order to add value to their "sexual capitals." Beautification and building up one's body are seen as equivalent to climbing up the social ladder – a myth that is perpetuated by popular culture and media. The value added on beautification in our society is not natural: it is meant to justify the privilege that we give to beautiful people. After all, if it "takes effort" to be beautiful, then beauty can be naturalized as a form of capital that everyone is free to accumulate, despite unequal conditions to do so.

Beautification is a gendered practice that constrains femininity. We live in a society that commodifies and spreads people's anxiety over their bodies and looks, especially women's. In Wen Hua's studies of Chinese women who received plastic surgeries, she was astonished to see the increasing number of students as recipients of plastic surgeries, whose parents actually supported such decisions.

In her account, parents believed that: "A pretty face is a worthwhile long-term investment for my daughter's future" (Wen 2013, 77). It is worth noting that: to those parents, they didn't want their children to "live on their looks", but still recognized a great deal of value to the beautification of their children. Sexual capital is ranked inferior to other forms of capitals. The young girls described here in no way intended to commodify their bodies to the extent of a prostitute or mistress. However, they do believe that a beautiful face "eases things" for women in society. Good looks get you good jobs, good husbands, good social rankings, etc. And plastic surgeries, as if magical, would suddenly beautify a face to such extent. It is not only a blind belief in the technologies, but also a huge trust in the value of beautification. They invested so much in their daughters' looks because they are nearly certain that beautification would bring more positive outcomes in the future. And the truth is such a belief is justified: in China, job descriptions sometimes specify "'above-average looking', 'good-looking', with 'an elegant demeanor', 'height over 1.65m'" as their requirements (Wen 2013, 87-88). The outcome of beautification, though mythologized and exaggerated, is still largely positive.

This example illustrates to us how beautification has been made into a wholesome industry that conforms to patriarchy. In a prevalent advertisement slogan: "There is no ugly women. There are only lazy women." Women are encouraged to dislike their unaltered looks, treat themselves as an underdeveloped project, and beautify themselves through a variety of means. They are convinced that beauty is a useful tool and capital. They internalize the effect of beautification as possibilities of social mobility and pay for it. Such acts are acts of submission. Though we are thrown into a complex social fabrication and hierarchies of people that we do not and cannot choose, active beautification should be treated as an act of submission and conformity. Conformity on an individual basis is consolidation of significance of beauty in our society, because faced with discrimination based on looks, people choose to look better to diminish the negative effect instead of showing defiance or protests. This is exactly how social aesthetics gains its power over people.

Even though women seem to buy the narrative of magical beautification with their investments on their looks, men are more anxious with the connotations of social status of their bodies. Beautification to men is more or less related to building up an ideal, muscular body in order to claim a place in society. In Susan

Bordo's analysis, "well-muscled body has become a cultural icon; 'working out' is a glamorized and sexualized yuppie activity" (Bordo 1993, 195). If one fails to build up his body, then he is immediately judged to be less assertive and lack of discipline. This is a moral judgment triggered by aesthetic assessment.

In some ways, the aesthetic judgment of looks seeks to explain one's failure or success by means of laying emphasis on beautification. It is as if saying: "If you don't beautify yourself, then you are lesser. Just because you are lesser, you become such a loser at your job." We often overlook the socio-economic context of a person's success or failure, but in turn appeals to aesthetics to explain a person's situation. It is treated as if beauty is a capital that everyone can freely accumulate, but indeed we do not have the same conditions to accumulate it. Not only are we born differently with natural looks and genes, we are also born into different families and different situations. We are socially conditioned to have more or less leisure time and freedom to care for our bodies. However, in Susan Bordo's analysis of popular media portraying beautification: "The ability of the (working-class) heroine and hero to pare, prune, tighten, and master the body, operates as a clear symbol of successful upward aspiration, of the penetrability of class boundaries" (Bordo 1993, 195). It is treated as if an over-focus on body, despite the lack of conditions to do so, is a showcase of character which preconditions a person's future success.

I have explained how individual choices to beautify themselves contribute to the significance of social aesthetics in our society. From the examples, it should be clear that the beauty of looks is not the ultimate goal for many people. Beauty becomes a "means" or "signifier" of success, capital and social status. The hierarchy based on looks is meanwhile the hierarchy already present in society in general. We can easily conclude from here that beauty is no longer an intuition. Or even if it is something a priori, it is as a priori as other forms of subordination. Beauty, though claimed to be natural and objective, merely serves the interests of privileged minorities that benefit from its social capital.

### **"Beauty" as a Tool of Oppression**

As I have explained, "beauty" has become the "means" or "signifier" of success, and therefore serves to perpetuate oppressions in our society. Following this line of thinking, I will explore the privilege people claim because of their "beautiful looks", and the discrimination based on "ugliness." From

such examples we can easily see the nature of “beauty” as an oppressing tool instead of an objective, harmless judgment. To illustrate the situation better, I want to use the term “interlocking oppression” (a term that was inspired by Robin James who used it as “broader interlocking systems of patriarchy, whiteness, and heteronormativity” 2013, 102), namely that the significance of beauty we described before as interwoven with racism, sexism and heteronormativity, colonialism, etc.

I will raise an example from Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber’s *The Cult of Thinness* to explain the interlocking nature of oppression in the name of beauty. Hesse-Biber, in order to illustrate the “cult” nature of keeping thin in modern America, interviewed Delia, a 90-pound college cheerleader for her ideas on body control. Delia said to Hesse-Biber:

Going in, I know I weighed like 93 or 94 pounds, which to me was this enormous hang-up, because I’d never weighed more than 90 pounds in my entire life...I knew people were going to be looking at me...So I would just not eat, work out all the time...and when we would do lifts he’d (my squad partner) always say, ‘Delia, go run. Go run, you’re too heavy.’ I hadn’t been eating that day. I had already run 7 or 8 miles and he told me to run again. And I was surrounded by girls who were all so concerned about their weight, and it was just really this horrible situation...When I was eight I wanted to be president of the United States. As I grew older and got to college I was like, ‘Wow, it’s hard for women.’... As I just figured, God, how much easier would it be for me to get married to somebody I know is going to make a lot of money and just be taken care of... (Hesse-Biber 2007, 13-14)

In Delia’s case, the interlocking nature of beauty as an oppressing tool is quite clear. Delia, an already underweight college girl, fearing what people might say on her 3-4 pounds extra weight, “would just not eat, work out all the time” (as cited in Hesse-Biber 2007, 13). As Hesse-Biber has noticed: “Her greatest stress at college had nothing to do with academics.” (Hesse-Biber 2007, 13) It is fair to judge from existing information that Delia would put all her energy in keeping thin and attractive and thus let go of her academics. And Delia openly said struggling in a job market is too hard and she would love to “get married to somebody I know is going to make a lot of money and just be taken care of” (as cited in Hesse-Biber

2007, 14). Having put almost all her energy in body control, Delia very likely loses her competitiveness as a worker but increases her sexual capital. Delia's beauty, having cost her energy and time, becomes an oppressing tool on her, because she has thus lost ability to earn her livings independently. Meanwhile, one may notice such a "choice" on body control could not be interpreted as her own freedom of choice: when Delia's squad partner could so easily pass judgment on Delia's body to cause her anxiety. It is safe to say: Delia is trapped by a patriarchal judgment on her body and, in order to fulfill the judgment, her choice of beautification costs her opportunities to economic independence. Just as Hesse-Biber has argued: "Women may choose to spend thousands of dollars on body-work instead of investing in a purchase with a higher economic, educational, or intellectual return. In fact, by obsessively perfecting their bodies, they also are buying into a set of patriarchal values that may make them ever more dependent on men for approval and success." (Hesse-Biber 2007, 22) This is the oppressing nature of beauty on women in a patriarchal society.

This is what I want to apply to the oppression related to looks. We can hardly argue that by virtue of being ugly, someone is denied basic rights openly and causally (nowadays, we don't have Ugly Laws). But given that ugliness is very often unwanted, and that beautification is a symbol of good character and success, contemporary people can use the word "beauty" or "aesthetics" as justification for their prejudice. After all, if ugliness is detested and objective, and beautification is mythologized as objective, what is the reason for not looking good or at least trying so? In the past, when the richest guy in a TV series managed to date a girl, we think it was because of the attraction of his wealth, but nowadays, if the same thing happens, we would be convinced that it is because of his personality or looks. Seldom do we reflect on the fact that: without a privileged socio-economic status, how could he work out so often? He would have had to work. Without a privileged family, how could he remain his innocence and kindness? He would have had to survive. His privilege is transformed and expressed fully by his looks, or the "aesthetics" we use innocently. When we grant him favor, we seldom notice that such a favor is not for our own appeal, but rather for his social status. And such privilege consolidates his advantage in society and transforms back as a form of social or economic capital. In this way, oppression based on looks is perpetuated.

We can view the interlocking oppression from another angle: the actual manifestation of fat oppression in the name of "aesthetic instincts." In Anne Eaton's



studies of “fat oppression” in contemporary society, she draws our attention to “the role of aesthetics in instituting and maintaining oppression” instead of the other way around (Eaton 2016, 38). It is very often heard that people who dislike and detest fatness or overweightness out of its “unhealthiness”, as if we first make judgment on people’s health status and then make aesthetic judgment that they are ugly because “we are displeased by the state of unhealth and its causes” (Eaton 2016, 44). But Anne Eaton would like us to think: given that there are a variety of beautification activities that imply health risks (e.g., over exposure to sun light, over-dieting, wearing corsets), why would people choose not to “diminish the aesthetic value of the outcome” (Eaton 2016, 46)? It is as if we already have two tracks of thinking when evaluating these projects. We are astonished by its beauty (such as a tanned body, a slim body, a small waist), and then after our reason comes back, we begin to question ourselves: is it worth it? Is it worth taking so many efforts to achieve beauty? Even at this stage, we seldom object to the notion of “beauty”: we only question the means but not the ends. But when it comes to fat people, we immediately think: “Losing weight is the best thing to do. It is for the health and for our eyes.” Seldom do we reflect on which is more primary and fundamental. Such implicit judgment changes our perception of fat people. We refuse to make adjustments on facilities to cater for their needs but request them to fit in the facilities we have. We refuse to present more plus-size models but react with anger to anyone overweight on screen and call him/her “promoting overweightness.” Just as Eaton has argued: “This notion of collective taste is meant to acknowledge the important fact that some ethnic, racial, and sexual minorities, as well as some individuals, do not adhere to the dominant aesthetic, and that this is sometimes on purpose as a result of having cultivated strategies of resistance” (Eaton 2016, 41).

In the Second Part of my thesis, I have clearly illustrated the social forces behind “aesthetics” in contemporary societies. The distaste of fat bodies, the mockery of non-white Ugly Betty as well as the justified privilege we give to beautiful people are all interwoven with each other. “Beauty” is no longer an innocent aesthetic term in such contexts –it becomes a tool that oppresses the ugly and justifies the privilege that the beautiful enjoy. I have successfully developed that: we are not equally capable of being beautiful, and I thus refuted the third layer of objectivity of beauty.

### **THE THIRD PART: THE ARBITRARINESS OF BEAUTY WITH WIDE SCOPE: HISTORICAL, RACIAL AND POLITICAL FACTORS**

After spelling out the nature of “beauty” or “aesthetics” of people’s bodies and looks as a tool of oppression, I would like to draw from some real-world examples to show the outcomes of these mechanisms. The arbitrariness of aesthetics is apparent by noting the constantly changing standards of beauty. The standard of beauty changes within the scope of history, cultures and values. I explain the racialized aesthetics of a hypothetical Asian woman Jenny and of Jari Jonnes during the Black Lives Matter movement. Such examples help illustrate the fact that “beauty” is not a stable set of standards throughout history and among cultures. The nature of aesthetics as a tool of oppression could not be more obvious with the Asian woman Jenny and Jari Jones here: when people’s race is interwoven with their status in the hierarchy of beauty, as well as the preferred traits of their looks, one can hardly justify aesthetics as objective: aesthetics is in itself racialized or even racist.

#### **Aesthetics as Racialized Identities: a hypothetical case of “Mulan”**

Aesthetics of bodies vary from country to country, but such divisions are never superficially a “cultural difference.” In Monique Roelofs’s account, “racialized aesthetic nationalism” is “a position comprising modes of address and embodiment that recruit aesthetic forms, meanings, and experiences in the service of racialized, nationalist conceptions and attitudes and in turn, bear the imprint of these understandings” (Roelofs 2014, 151). In a sense, a lot of racialized misconceptions and prejudices are perpetuated by a specific taste from certain cultures because “racialized aesthetic nationalism” “concerns a privileging of the culture that is ascribed to a given nation or ethnic group over cultures that are attributed to other nations or ethnic groups” (Roelofs 2014, 152). As the example of Ugly Betty shows, aesthetics could work as a mechanism to ensure the superiority of whites in post-colonial Latin-America. However, the subjectivity is more of a consideration to Roelofs: “Racialized aesthetic nationalism is a matter of embodied, relational existence.” (Roelofs 2014, 152)

I want to raise an example as a hypothetical woman named Jenny as an example of racialization of aesthetics. She travelled to America from China.

Her name is Jenny. She comes from China and suffers hugely because of her refined jawlines, small eyes, thick lips and tanned skin.

People in China denounce the looks of Disney Mulan as “countryside women” and Jenny resembles greatly Disney’s Mulan. This is a nationalistic aspect of Chinese aesthetics of women’s looks: the detest of Mulan is a way to counter Hollywood’s mode of understanding Chinese beauty.

However, after she travelled to the U.S., people appreciated her “countryside looks” and called her “Asian Princess” or “Mulan.” People did that of course out of pure kindness and as compliments, but however, there were non-Asian men with an unhealthy fetishism of Asian women among the group.

There is a particular racialized aspect to their taste in the way Jenny looks, because Americans never appreciate the same traits on white people. Just as how Roelofs spells out: “...the disposition to seek out preferred qualities such as purity, order, or formal novelty in artworks by white Europeans and Anglo-Americans, coupled with the tendency to read for devalued or ambivalently valorized features such as embodied rhythms, sexualized passions, and fantastic contents in the works of black diasporic, Latin American, and Latino/a artists” (Roelofs 2014, 152). Similar to the art world in which people look for “devalued” traits of white artists from black artists, the usually detested traits of a face, after transferred to an Asian face, seem ideal. The otherwise unfavored small eyes are appreciated by white viewers on an Asian face. The racialization of her looks is deeply embedded in a post-colonial, racist society in which her less preferred looks contribute to the manifestation of white superiority.

Jenny liked being favored in such a society. With huge pride, she began posting selfies on social media, signifying her boosted confidence. It all went well until she saw Beth, a chubby Chinese girl, promoting “Body Positive.”

## compos mentis

She began to body shame Beth because she was certain that herself, as an "Asian Princess", was preferred, whereas Beth would not be. She was so proud of being deemed "beautiful" that she called other people unlike her, "ugly."

Here we see how racialized aesthetics becomes part of the identity of Jenny. After benefiting from a certain hierarchy of aesthetics, Jenny chose to perpetuate the system in which she benefited most and contributed to subordinating other people. That is because: "Racialized aesthetic nationalism represents powerful currents of aesthetic desire and passion at the heart of individual's daily aesthetic life worlds." (Roelofs 2014, 153) Jenny would not support "Body Positive" even though she benefited from a tolerant, diverse society that appreciate her, only because she was proud of her own body shape. Her aesthetic life world is shaped by such applause that she could not see things beyond it. After witnessing a gap between different systems of aesthetics, Jenny did not choose to disbelieve or deconstruct them but rather chose to consolidate one of the systems. The racialized taste of her looks becomes part of her identity: she saw herself merely as an "Asian Princess" from a white American man's point of view, instead of from the point of view of a fellow Chinese immigrant woman in relation to Beth. The aesthetics system of her surroundings changes her self-positioning in the society.

From the example, we can see clearly how aesthetics manifests itself arbitrarily in a racist society. The different standards of beauty across cultures (Chinese culture and American culture) could be explained by cultural relativism or pluralism, but different standards of beauty on white people and Asian people within a single culture could not be explained easily. The racialized aspect of aesthetics manifests in a racist way: the oppressed racial group in society are assigned with less favored traits. Even while foregrounding Asians and appreciating Jenny's looks, the overall aesthetic environment is still deeply discriminatory to Asians. Social aesthetics as such contributes to the perpetuation of racism, because the beauty of a racial group is defined and appreciated by a presupposed white audience with a "top-down" attitude. Americans' appreciation of an ugly woman by Chinese standards naturalizes racial hierarchy: after all, if "beautiful Asians" look similar to "ugly whites", then it is totally justifiable that "whites are naturally superior."

Meanwhile, the arbitrariness of beauty manifests subjectively and contributes to the oppression of beauty. "Racialized aesthetic nationalism is grounded in everyday aesthetic patterns of meaning making and experience we enact as we

conduct relationships with one another and the environment.” (Roelofs 2014, 156) Jenny’s own privilege gained by a “Mulan look” is justified by herself in her own meaning making process, and then she turned a blind eye to the fetishism and embedded discrimination of Asian women who are her fellows. The so-called beauty we gained in a racist, sexist, heteronormative society corrupts our subjectivity with the abovementioned values, just as how Jenny distancing herself from her fellow Chinese women is mainly because of her higher position in a racist patriarchy.

From this illustration it is clear that beauty is not a fixed set of standards among cultures. The predominant social groups tend to attach higher values to the aesthetic features of their own culture, and lower values to other cultures. In terms of social aesthetics, racialization contributes to a major part of aestheticization of Asian women. The “lesser” traits such as small eyes are attributed to the “lesser” social groups. Besides the innate hierarchy, the “racialized aesthetic nationalism” in this process becomes an existential situation of people involved.

### Is Jari Jones Ugly or Beautiful? a case of “politicized aesthetics”

During the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, Calvin Klein chose Jari Jones, a black transgender plus-sized model to appear on a massive billboard in Manhattan. Such an act is by all means political, but the act went from “a politicized commercial activity” to “politicized aesthetics.” This section will draw from the history of imagery representation of African Americans to explain the importance of images to minorities. Meanwhile, I will incorporate debates about the aesthetic judgments of Jari Jones in Chinese social media and illustrate the nature of aesthetics as politicized.

Throughout the history of African Americans, the image of them being a fellow human occurred relatively late. In Celeste-Marie Bernier’s analysis of Frederick Douglass, a famous African American abolitionist living in the 19th century, she found out that the representation of runaway slaves up until 1863 was still circulating “an object of bleeding, suffering humanity” (Bernier 2012, 288). Douglass, being an African American himself, challenged such image with his own appearances as a cultural elite and intellectual. Meanwhile, he appraised photography to a great extent because “pictures enable us to see ourselves as if from the outside and, from this more distanced view, to contemplate and access ourselves, drawing up plans for improvement” (Wallace and Smith 2012, 7). Such

objectification of photography to Douglass is not a bad thing, because instead of white viewers, he “imagined a much more autonomous African American viewer... African Americans are the primary and most important viewers of their own images” (Wallace and Smith 2012, 8).

Jari Jones’ occupation of a Manhattan billboard was a heated topic in China, because it brought up the debate of how beauty is “sacrificed” to politics. Given the history of such representation of black people, it made perfect sense for people to be surprised when Jari Jones occupied the massive billboard in Manhattan: after many long years of seeing representations of bleeding objects, now a black model can righteously claim a place in the middle of New York. It makes full sense when we see such pictures as progress. However, with Douglass’ presupposition of a self-reflective black viewer of their own images, he somehow neglected the polysemic nature of photography. When Jari Jones was met with Chinese viewers, what we saw was commentary such as the below: “‘Beautiful is beautiful, weird is weird,’ a male user commented on the Twitter-like Weibo. ‘I am not going to buy CK anymore. This kind of model makes me want to vomit.’” (Zhou 2020) Such outspoken misogynistic views do not dominate Chinese media. The debate about whether “political correctness” went too far was also a voice: a debate about whether Calvin Klein “sacrificed” the standard of beauty for political purposes ensued. However, it is worth noting that, the entire debate hinges on one big assumption: “Beautiful is beautiful, ugly is ugly” and, “Jari Jones is ugly.”

Just as I’ve argued previously, aesthetics is almost always subjected to political factors. Hiring Jari Jones certainly amounts to a strong level of outspoken support for the Black Lives Matter and LGBTQ Pride movements, but the silent endorsement of underweight and white models almost always serves the interest of dominant sexist, racist ideologies. Very few people with a firm aesthetic judgment on Jari Jones’ body have displayed enough self-reflective thought towards their own default judgments of beauty. And just as I argued about fat oppression: such judgments of “beauty” contribute to oppression.

In this section, I have examined the aestheticization of women of color in order to prove the racialized nature of aesthetics. It is quite clear that “beauty”, though being conceived of as “objective” when Jari Jones is denounced as ugly, is to the contrary and to a great extent subject to historical, racial and cultural factors. The understanding of the objectivity of beauty as a fixed set of natural standards throughout history and across cultures is thus totally misguided.

## THE FOURTH PART: DOES BEAUTY EXIST "ELSEWHERE"?

The abovementioned examples illustrate a clear picture of the arbitrariness of beauty as constituting and being constituted by racism and sexism in society. Beauty has been corrupted as a tool of oppression and is interwoven with other forms of oppression. I am whole-heartedly against the use of the word "objective" when it comes to discussion of beauty. As I have said, by "objective" is implied a natural, stable set of beauty standards that is constant despite social change. Beauty is clearly not constant through social change as I hope the examples above have illustrated. The concept of "objectivity" neutralizes oppression based on looks, which I hope was revealed by the examples I considered in Part 2. However, even despite these examples, an objection could be raised based on a realist view of aesthetics: the so-called beauty we have gone after throughout human history, though may not reveal beauty to us now, may show us the way to "real", "essential" or "true" beauty later. The disputes of the content of "beauty" does not make it less objective. Beauty still exists but exists "elsewhere" as a mind-independent entity waiting for us to pursue. In this section, I will argue that: aesthetic realists, by overly focusing on what "beauty" is, overlook what it does and has done in human societies.

### Aesthetic Realism and its objections

In this section, I will take issue with aesthetic realism in the following way: firstly, I want to refute the idea of abolishing the significance of viewers in aesthetic evaluations; secondly, I will argue against the authority of "beauty" as a concept granted by aesthetic realists, even without a clear definition of it.

Aesthetic realists would argue that beauty as a mind-independent entity is irrelevant to disputes of people's opinions and about how it is that people apply the term or concept. To a realist, beauty exists despite my viewing in a "mind-independent manner" (Joyce 2016). For example, Jenny seems to uphold a realist ideal of beauty in which she stands high up in the hierarchy. To her, her own look as approved by her surroundings brutally equals beauty, while Beth's does not. It is by all means the audiences, as in herself and her surroundings, that creates this aesthetic hierarchy, but her belief would be that such hierarchy is the "right one", "a priori" or "a fact." As to the different standards of beauty in China and America, Jenny may agree to how Inês Morais has argued: "aesthetic disagreements need

not imply an error or misapprehension on the part of any of the disputants... but only a difference in sensibility towards the same features" (Morais 2019, 87). To Morais, "the same features" matter more than "different sensibilities" of the spectators. She builds her aesthetic realism on a premise that what we talk about beauty is solely about "features" instead of "subjective preferences" (Morais 2019, 88). However, one may notice how the same traits, such as small eyes, are perceived differently on an Asian face and a white face as I pointed out before. The seemingly objective discussion of "features" does intertwine with subjective racism. The external audience and judgment that constitutes the arbitrariness of beauty in our society to her is just ignored. The implicit racist aesthetic judgment to her becomes a mere "dispute of opinions." In general, realists seem to believe in "taste", "a capacity that permits good judgments about art and the beauties of nature" (Korsmeyer and Weiser 2021).

Secondly, aesthetic realists argue that beauty does exist, only "elsewhere" as beyond human knowledge. Inês Morais argues that: "(the disputes of what beauty is) ...need not count against there being a genuine, non-mental, reality that we can know even though only in part... In effect, the limits in our knowledge of an area should not lead us to claim that there is not an independent reality." (Morais 2019, 88) One cannot ignore the similarity of this account to a religious one, when believers argue that their pursuit to God or supreme beings though not yet succeed, certainly will, because God as a mind-independent entity is waiting for their discovery, even after thousands of years of religious disputes and warfare. I will not take issue with the absolute existence of beauty beyond human intellectual reach here, just as I will not take issue with disputes about whether God exists. The only question here is the authority of such concepts and what they have done to human society, as a matter of fact. I have illustrated the historical change of aesthetics of African Americans based on Fredrick Douglass' and Jari Jones' avant-garde representation of their group. Just think of their contemporaries, think of the hegemony of corset-wearing European ladies and underweight Victoria's Secret models, and think of the disputes Douglass and Jari Jones underwent when they subverted the "standards" of beauty. I do agree that their acts enrich the notion of "beauty" and expand our knowledge of aesthetics, but is it worth it? Do we have to be dominated by a racist, sexist, heteronormative standard of beauty for so long until we rebel against it only to "expand our knowledge"? Do we really want to call such historical change, together with oppressions in the history (such



as feet-binding and corsets) part of a pursuit of “true, real or essential beauty” as “a genuine, non-mental, reality that we can know even though in part” (Morais 2019, 88)? The oppressing nature of beauty in our society comes from an implicit notion of its objectivity, just as how churches do wrong things in the name of God. No matter whether God or beauty exists out of human reach, there is full reason why we should be cautious against the claim of their authority as implied by its “mind-independent objectivity.”

All in all, I have pointed out a fundamental error of aesthetic realists: even with an absolute concept of “beauty” in mind, people may form erroneous judgments because of their own racism, sexism and other negative social factors. Following such an argument, it is very erroneous to grant authority to the “absolute beauty” because human activities in this pursuit may cause many harm (such as feet-binding, wearing corsets, over-dieting). The aesthetic realists have undermined the effect of aesthetic disputes, and thus should be taken issue with.

### Counterforce or new hegemony? Beauty in the Body Positive Movement

“Beauty exists elsewhere”, such a statement could be understood as a realist appeal to unreachable beauty or an intention to create new hegemony of beauty. One example I will raise is the appreciation of plus-sized models during Body Positive Movement. If the traditional white, underweight Victoria Secret’s models are an embodiment of racism, sexism and heteronormativity, then will someone just the opposite come to the rescue? If our subjectivity is corrupted by sexism, racism and heteronormativity, then will more aesthetic experience with underprivileged groups such as those represented by the black, transgender, plus-sized model Jari Jones help? By presenting Jari Jones in Manhattan, is Calvin Klein trying to create a new hegemony of beauty? Will the counterforce of such media representation actually help deconstruct the presumed objectivity of beauty or vice versa?

By casting Jari Jones’ image as “promoting overweightness”, many people interpret her possession of attention as a pedagogy of beauty in a Body Positive era. Helana Darwin and Amara Miller categorize the Body Positive movement as further divided into “Mainstream Body Positivity, Fat Positivity = Body Positivity, Radical Body Positivity, and Body Neutrality” (Darwin and Miller 2020, 1). While Mainstream Body Positivity activates “self-love” in a generalized postfeminist language (Darwin and Miller 2020, 7) and Body Neutrality activates “body

acceptance" as a mental state (Darwin and Miller 2020, 11), Fat Positivity activists "advocate for a focus on the systematic discrimination that fat women experience instead of the body image issues that women experience more generally" (Darwin and Miller 2020, 8). Such attention to overweightness is very easily understood as "promoting fatness" and overlooking women with BMI under 30. It is safe to say that Jari Jones' positive stare is a footnote to this movement: a movement with an exclusive highlight on plus-sized women in a positive, confident manner. One of the most famous mainstream Fat Positive models is Ashley Graham. But the difference between Jari Jones and Graham is obvious: Jari's appearance is also deeply wedded with Radical Body Positivity, a movement in which all remaining judgments on bodies are removed. Hairless, white, cisgender plus size models with hourglass bodies such as Graham were replaced by people such as Jari Jones: black, transgender, "totally out of shape." Even among body positive activists, she is the "ugly one." As I have said, such representation upsets the objectivity of beauty from the root: her daring look symbolizes a returned gaze by what has been perceived as aesthetic objects. But the issue still remains: the judgment of her body will not cease because of her subversion of aesthetic hierarchy. She was considered "brutally ugly" by some, "an expanded version of beauty" by others, but her media presence is nevertheless judged in terms of some "objective" notion of beauty. The pedagogy of her existence does not come from presenting her as beauty itself, but rather comes from the basic fact that she is an aesthetic object: how could an object subvert the aesthetic system it lives in? Her look is, thus, just perceived as "pure ugliness", or "sacrificing true beauty to political correctness."

Jari Jones' media presentation is not only objectification, but also conformity to a new hegemony in the Body Positive era. As I've said earlier, the issue of body image is very prevalent in modern societies, but Fat Positive advocates seem not to correctly consider the roots of body hatred and alienation. By presenting overweight models in a confident manner in contrast to a presupposed status of low self-esteem, people are generally convinced that the real issue of body acceptance lies in the gap between mainstream hegemony and bodily realities. If the unhappiness of fat women comes from their deviance from Victoria's Secret, then what do thin women feel bad for? If people like Jari Jones, whom is totally unfavored by our society, could embrace herself, then why couldn't I? Whereas in reality, there are endless cases of woman with BMI between 18 to

30 cast themselves in a negative light. The hegemony of such images does not teach people “what beauty is”, it rather teaches people “an ideal attitude toward mainstream aesthetics.” In a traditional narrative, the central change of an obese body to a normal body lies in not only the change of physicality, but also curation of emotional pains, whereas in the Body Positive Movement, by presenting a pedagogy of the right attitude toward one’s body, it effectively “position[s] the central lack as body positivity itself...the body must undergo the ritualized public discourse and subsequent catharsis that body positive websites facilitate” (Sastre 2014, 938). Such emphasis on personal change and agency inevitably falls into the bigger frame of neoliberalism’s “rhetoric of choice-driven, bodily-oriented self-improvement” (Sastre 2014, 932). Only this time, the “choice” and “improvement” is not to adhere to the hegemonic body, but to adhere to the hegemonic attitude toward one’s body.

From this example we can clearly see how Body Positivity, a seeming challenge to mainstream social aesthetics, is nonetheless problematic. The true issue still lies in the authority and objectivity we grant on the notion of “beauty”, despite a proposal to change its content.

## CONCLUSION

From my argument, it is made clear three things: firstly, perceiving beauty as a set of objective standards is erroneous, because these standards are constructed by a racist, sexist, patriarchal society (such as WHR in science, appreciation of small eyes on Asian faces); secondly, the standards of beauty have changed so much throughout human history and across cultures that we should instead of pursuing it, question the authority and objectivity we grant to claims and judgments of beauty; thirdly, people are not in equal situations to adhere to beauty standards in their own societies, given for example, different socio-economic status. From such arguments, we can conclude that the idea of beauty as objective is deeply questionable. As a way to think beyond the frame, I also raise the case of the Body Positive movement, to illustrate that many efforts to abolish aesthetic standards have fallen into the trap of neoliberalism in contemporary societies. It is left unknown what should be embraced: a society in which the traditional ugly is considered beautiful, or a society in which ugliness and beauty does not exist or matter?

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