

# Aesthetic Blight, Aesthetic Agency, and Justice

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## ABSTRACT

*Aesthetic blight* is persistently aversive aesthetic experience to which someone has been made systematically vulnerable by virtue of their identity, embodiment, or disempowered social position. Aesthetic blight undermines well-being and signals societal disregard, so justice requires working to eliminate it. An obvious solution is to clear up whatever stimuli are causing the aversive experience. But this strategy has its limits: it is not sensitive to variability in responses to stimuli, often produces an aesthetically bland environment, and generates further injustice when human bodies and cultural products are among the stimuli perceived as aversive. A closer look reveals that aesthetic blight is not just a matter of aversive stimuli. It involves restrictions on *aesthetic agency*, conceived as taking two forms: agency to act on the world in response to our aesthetic evaluations (e.g., removing an aversive stimulus) and agency to act on our system of aesthetic evaluations to transform our responses—where the latter involves conceiving aversiveness not as a fixed quality of things, but as a potentially malleable quality of experience. By restoring people's agency both to create valuable aesthetic environments and to transform their aversive responses in some circumstances, we can alleviate aesthetic blight without producing further injustice.

Aversive aesthetic experiences can be harmful, significantly diminishing our quality of life. Some people are systematically vulnerable to aesthetic harm by virtue of an aspect of their identity, embodiment, or social position. I use the term *aesthetic blight* to refer to situations of persistent aesthetic harm due to such systematic vulnerability. Aesthetic blight is a staple of carceral spaces, where an absence of aesthetic pleasures combines with exposure to strongly aversive stimuli such as loud noises and unpleasant smells. It afflicts dispossessed communities, which may experience a proliferation of garbage, broken and boarded-up windows, cracked and weedy sidewalks, and noxious smells from nearby factories or dumps (Ockerman 2021). People may experience aesthetic blight because the environment is systematically unaccommodating to them, as when fat people lack comfortable seating, wheelchair users are consigned to the margins with poor sound quality and obstructed view, and neurodivergent people must remain in overstimulating environments to attend school, work, or meet their regular needs. Because aesthetic harm undermines well-being and aesthetic blight is the ongoing experience of such harm due to systematic vulnerability, there are reasons of justice to alleviate it.

A natural first impulse, in looking for solutions to aesthetic blight, is to focus on the aversive stimuli that give rise to it. Let us repair, clean up, and repaint the blighted neighborhood; let us design carceral spaces with acoustic tiles, softer surfaces, and better food. Some measures in this direction are certainly warranted. But I argue that our first attention should be given to solutions that target the *aesthetic agency* of the person(s) experiencing aesthetic blight. I speak of two forms of aesthetic agency: the capacity to take actions grounded in aesthetic evaluations (such as adding salt to improve flavor)

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and the capacity to change our system of aesthetic evaluation itself (such as cultivating enjoyment of food with less salt). I argue that addressing aesthetic blight by bolstering aesthetic agency is preferable both for aesthetic reasons and for reasons of justice: it is appropriately responsive to variability in individuals' aesthetic responses, avoids objectionable forms of aesthetic homogenization, and avoids the injustice that can attend some strategies of altering or removing stimuli found aversive.

This project is informed by an expansive view of the aesthetic advanced by [Arnold Berleant \(2010\)](#), [Berleant and Allen Carlson \(2007\)](#), [Sherri Irvin \(2008a; 2008b\)](#), [Thomas Leddy \(1995; 2012\)](#), [Katya Mandoki \(2007\)](#), and [Yuriko Saito \(2007; 2017a; 2017b; 2022\)](#) among others. In this view, the aesthetic is part of the texture of everyday life, inflecting everyday activities and environments. Aesthetic attributes can apply to somatic experiences ([Irvin 2008a; 2008b](#)) and to social structures and relationships ([Berleant 2010](#)). The valence of aesthetic experiences may be positive, negative, or neutral; the term "aesthetic" is not reserved for experiences or qualities that are pleasant or to those exceptional in some way.

The aesthetic character of ordinary experience can be part of what makes life worth living or can be a source of great suffering. As Saito puts it, "aesthetic matters in everyday life are never trivial; instead, they are surprisingly powerful in determining the quality of life and the state of the world, for better or worse" ([2017a](#), 128). Aesthetic blight undermines well-being and deserves serious attention as a matter of justice.

## I. AESTHETIC AVERSIVENESS

Aesthetic blight is the ongoing experience of aesthetic harm. Aesthetic harm, in turn, is a matter of aversive aesthetic experiences. We must thus get a handle on these concepts and their relations. Let us begin with aversiveness.

When do we say that something is aesthetically aversive? Hume suggests that "certain qualities in objects ... are fitted by nature to produce ... particular feelings" in us: we are naturally built to enjoy certain stimuli and find others abhorrent ([1757/1985](#), 235). In some domains there seems to be a striking regularity of preferences, even across cultures: we flee in disgust from sights or smells indicative of vermin or infectious agents, and some sounds horrify us by indicating acute human suffering.

But a profoundly negative aesthetic response need not be grounded in natural tendencies: aesthetic preferences are culturally shaped, and a stimulus that I find aesthetically neutral or even pleasing might be aversive for someone with different culturally grounded aesthetic responses. Notoriously, cross-generational exposure to music with different sonic qualities, especially played at high volume, produces friction, as one generation may be deeply attached to sounds that another generation experiences as cloying, cheesy, or unpleasantly chaotic. Ants or grasshoppers are considered a commonplace food or delicacy in some cultural contexts but are considered disgusting in others.

There is no obvious reason why aversiveness should be attributed only to stimuli that provoke a shared negative response in a group of people. A lesson of everyday aesthetics is that everyday aesthetic experience is, in an important sense, not bound by norms of correctness: even if I have misunderstood the nature of an object I encounter, or even if I have an unusual profile of tastes and preferences, my experience itself has a specific aesthetic character. If I find the taste or mouthfeel of oranges disgusting, my aesthetic experience of eating a piece of orange does in fact have a specific, negatively valenced character, though most others would have an aesthetic experience with different qualities. A person with misophonia may have profoundly negative aesthetic responses to the sound of another person chewing or even breathing, though most of us are not thus affected.

We thus cannot deflate or deny aesthetic aversiveness by pointing to a misalignment of an experience with its object. The aversive quality of my experience of eating the orange is real, regardless of whether it is grounded in any actual negative aesthetic feature of the orange. For this same reason, we should recognize that aversiveness is a quality of *experiences*, not of the stimuli implicated in those experiences. This insight will come in handy later.

The aversiveness of an experience need not be a product of sensation alone. It often involves some conceptualization or assignment of meaning. Whether we understand a smell as issuing from a ripe cheese or a ripe sock may play an important constitutive role in the valence of our experience. Let us also note that the aesthetic aversiveness of some experiences may owe to what is most naturally

described as an absence of stimuli. Barrenness or lack of comfort may be experienced as aversive. Widespread loss of smell during the COVID-19 pandemic shone a light on the underappreciated role that olfactory stimuli play in the richness of everyday aesthetic experience: in their absence, people report experiencing “a profound emptiness in a place that used to process sensation” and feeling “dis-oriented and disconnected, strangely set adrift” (Friedman 2021; Gibson 2021). Experiences of absence or lack can be aversive.

## II. AESTHETIC HARM

When the intensity or duration of an aversive aesthetic experience rises to the level of a significant impact on well-being, this is *aesthetic harm*. Aesthetic harm, like other harms, lies on spectrums of both severity and duration: being rattled by a blast of loud and unpleasant sound, like experiencing sharp pain, is intense harm that may quickly fade, while mild tinnitus may be an ongoing, low-intensity harm.

This picture is complicated by what I will call *manufactured* aesthetic harm.<sup>1</sup> The intensity and duration of aesthetic harm, and the very fact of aversiveness itself, are not brute facts: they are often a function of mechanisms that channel an aversive response in new directions and assign meaning in ways that exacerbate and intensify it. Oppressive social systems manufacture aesthetic harms to dismiss people and cultures as inferior by virtue of the alleged crudeness of their cultural products or the ugliness of their bodies, which are then understood as aesthetically harmful for others to encounter. Disability theorist Tobin Siebers describes this as “aesthetic disqualification ... a symbolic process [that] removes individuals from the ranks of quality human beings, putting them at risk of unequal treatment, bodily harm, and death” (2010, 23).

Notoriously, people have been targeted for aesthetic disqualification based on disability, race, fatness, and gender identity. As Siebers suggests, aesthetic harm can be manufactured by channeling responses that need not themselves be grounded in cultural malevolence. Our responses to human bodies are emotionally charged, and we may, Siebers notes, naturally experience strong emotional responses to bodies and minds with uncommon or unexpected features and functioning (2010, 1, 10). These emotions are then subject to social channeling that may intensify them, assign meanings in ways that cement a negative valence, and direct them to new objects. Siebers argues that powerful emotions in response to disability are sometimes channeled to support racial disqualification by tying race to forms of mental or physical incapacity (2010, 27). Sabrina Strings (2019) argues that antiblack racial aversion, itself already manufactured, was then channeled into anti-fatness: the latter arose out of racial anxiety and animus and continues to serve as a mechanism to control racialized bodies, even while its extension to white bodies helps to conceal its racial origins and functions.

Not all aesthetic disqualification directly targets the body. The art of disempowered peoples is classified as “primitive”; their neighborhoods and modes of self-styling are denigrated as “trashy.” These are all aesthetic mechanisms of dehumanization, designed to make some people seem unworthy of a designation of full personhood.

A result of aesthetic disqualification is that when people encounter the bodies and cultural products of those targeted for disqualification, they may experience that encounter as acutely aesthetically aversive and thus, by my definition, aesthetically harmful. For instance, fat people and people with facial differences regularly encounter suggestions that they are harming people simply by appearing visibly in public spaces. It is tempting to respond to such manufactured aesthetic harm by claiming that it is not in fact aesthetic harm at all: for it is grounded in misapprehension of the object that is prompting the response. But I will not go this route. The fact that aesthetic harm, and sometimes the very aversiveness that underlies it, is manufactured does not make it imaginary or nonexistent. The key, instead, is to recognize that the stimulus (e.g., the facial difference or the fat body) is not the source of the harm. Aversiveness, as we noted earlier, is a quality of experiences, not of things. And where we find a form of embodiment aversive because of a social system that has instilled this tendency in us, it is the social system, not the body, that has harmed us.

Why should we maintain that manufactured aesthetic harm is nonetheless real? First, manufactured aesthetic harm is experienced by everyone, including those targeted for aesthetic disqualification.

Social hierarchies aim and sometimes succeed at making disempowered people experience their own embodiment as loathsome. Cheryl Frazier argues that body positivity, which aims at the aesthetic enjoyment of one's own body, may not be feasible for some fat people whose embodiment has been harshly stigmatized, since "it requires unlearning a lifetime of internalized shame and hate (often while still embedded in a society that continues to encourage those negative responses)" (2022, 147). Damage to one's ability to take pleasure in their own embodiment and the embodiment of members of their family and community is real and significant aesthetic harm.<sup>2</sup>

Manufactured aesthetic harm can be experienced acutely even by those who reject the social hierarchy in which it is grounded. George Yancy, drawing on DuRocher (2011), describes two cases of white women during the US Civil Rights Era, with apparently strong and genuine commitments to antiracism, determined to break bread with black people but finding themselves in the grips of a racialized disgust so powerful that one experienced "severe stomach distress" and the other "literally ... could not keep her food down" (Yancy 2016, 246). Acknowledging the reality of such aesthetic harm, despite its manufactured origin, is part of recognizing the extent of the damage wrought by oppressive social systems. Acknowledging the aesthetic harm experienced by these white women does not imply prioritizing it over the aesthetic and non-aesthetic harms suffered by black people targeted for aesthetic disqualification; nor does it require ignoring the fact that the women's outwardly expressed aversive responses surely did further harm for which they are accountable. To emphasize: the key, in these cases, is to recognize that the manufactured aesthetic harm, while real, is inflicted by the oppressive social system itself, not by the bodies to which that social system invites us to attribute it.

One might hope that we could cleanly separate manufactured aesthetic harm from forms of aesthetic harm not produced through social manipulation. But social channeling of aversive responses is ubiquitous. As Ryan Doran (2022, 104) describes, aversive responses are highly subject to social pedagogy: we learn what is disgusting in our culture by observing the facial expressions and behaviors of others, and our bodily responses are heightened when we know that others are observing us. Social channeling of aversive responses explains cultural differences in what is found disgusting. I may disagree with a person from Odisha about the aesthetic value of chutney made from red ants. Is there an underlying, precultural fact of the matter about whether red ants are a tasty or a disgusting foodstuff?<sup>3</sup> And even if so, does this fact necessarily invalidate any particular individual or culturally shaped aversive response to the eating of ants?

All this to say: I will not pursue a distinction between aesthetic harm that is a product of social manipulation and aesthetic harm that is not. While some aesthetic harm is manufactured in the service of an oppressive social hierarchy, other aesthetic harm is manufactured in the service of a variety of contested social values and meaning-making endeavors. Shaping our aesthetic responses in a variety of ways is a deep function of culture (Irvin 2025). There is no clear dividing line between pernicious manufactured harm and other forms of social aesthetic pedagogy.

Moreover, as noted earlier, an aesthetic experience that is intensely aversive *really is* an aesthetic harm, regardless of its origins, just as a hallucination may cause real suffering. A harm may be real even if something has gone wrong in its causal underpinnings. But the fact that much aesthetic harm is manufactured will give us important resources to work with in considering strategies to alleviate it.<sup>4</sup>

### III. AESTHETIC AGENCY

As we have begun to see, aesthetic harm, and the aversiveness that underpins it, is not simply a fact of the matter. A variety of social and cultural influences can contribute to whether one's experience is aversive and whether that aversiveness rises to the level of harm. Moreover, we typically have options for managing our exposure to aesthetic harm. This brings to the forefront the concept of *aesthetic agency*, which will play a key role in our understanding of aesthetic blight and the strategies for managing it.

When I am having an aversive aesthetic experience, I may change the sensory aspects of my experience by relocating, putting in noise-canceling earbuds, or taking some other action to change the situation: spraying some WD-40 on that squeaky hinge, or asking the kids to stop slamming the door. I also have another kind of option: transforming my aesthetic response. The prospect of

shifting the valence of our aesthetic responses is well established. We can cultivate appreciation for things we once found difficult: negative experiences of the bitterness of coffee or the astringency of whiskey can be converted into savoring of the very qualities we once disliked; the unpleasant dissonance of certain sounds may become a source of delight when they are incorporated into a musical structure. Even experiences that start with a strongly negative visceral charge may be transformed: Carolyn Korsmeyer notes “the peculiar attraction of the disgusting” and observes that it “achieves a direct and immediate arousal” that, in the right circumstances, “turns out to be an aesthetic advantage” (2011, 39).

These examples suggest a key role for aesthetic agency in addressing aesthetic harm. I use the term to encompass agency exercised through two kinds of actions. The first are actions grounded in aesthetic evaluations, such as lubricating a squeaky hinge or adding plants to brighten up a room.<sup>5</sup> The second are actions directed at our system of aesthetic evaluation, potentially shifting which evaluations we make in what circumstances. As Keren Gorodeisky (2021) notes, while our aesthetic attitudes and response tendencies may not be subject to immediate voluntary control, we can be held responsible for them. Moreover, we can take actions, even if indirect, to reshape our aesthetic response tendencies and the evaluations that issue from them (Dyck 2019). We might take such actions for aesthetic reasons, such as to cultivate more rewarding aesthetic experiences: I might aim to become a more sensitive appreciator of perfume, better able to detect and assess the relevant qualities, because I have an inkling of aesthetic rewards to be found in that practice. Or we might instead attempt to reshape our system of aesthetic evaluations for non-aesthetic reasons, such as to reduce our participation in forms of injustice (Eaton 2016). If we find ourselves with ableist, antifat, or antiblack aesthetic preferences, we may aim to shift our system of aesthetic evaluations for moral reasons, or for a combination of moral and aesthetic reasons—since, in addition to being morally abhorrent, an inability to appreciate disabled, fat, or black forms of embodiment deprives us of rewarding aesthetic experiences (possibly including rewarding experiences of our own embodiment).

Even where we have no interest in cultivating a positive appreciation for some stimulus, we can often shift our response toward more neutral territory. Some of this work is cognitive: we can use a shift in perspective to bring ourselves down from the heightened emotional, indeed physiological, response that partly constitutes the aversiveness of an experience. If we are distressed by the sound of a baby crying on an airplane, we can shift toward empathizing with the parents’ experience. When we are jarred by loud music at a gathering, we can be glad that the participants are having fun. And wherever we are exposed to aesthetic choices or products we find unfortunate or unpleasant, we can celebrate the fact that there is a great variety of people, things, and experiences contributing to the richness of the world we live in.

The availability of these strategies highlights, once again, the fact that aversiveness is not a quality of objects or environments; it is a quality of the *experience* someone is having on a given occasion. Some stimuli may reliably produce aversive experiences in an individual or a group of individuals, but the perceiver’s cognitive, perceptual, and affective tendencies also play a role in the aversiveness: and this relationship is not fixed. Engaging aesthetic agency to cultivate appreciation or at least calm our negative reactions can reduce our exposure to aesthetic harm while contributing to the richness of our experience.

#### IV. AESTHETIC BLIGHT AND AESTHETIC AGENCY

As we noted earlier, *aesthetic blight* is persistent experience of aesthetic harm to which one is made vulnerable by an aspect of one’s identity, embodiment, or disempowered social position. Why do these conditions put one at risk of aesthetic harm? First, some groups of people are subject to societal neglect or willful disregard of their flourishing, aesthetic and otherwise. As a result, society is not set up to support their aesthetic well-being and may actively oppose it. Neurodivergent people often encounter environments where their sensory needs haven’t been taken into account; incarcerated people may be intentionally subjected to harsh conditions on the theory that they deserve such treatment; communities of color are systematically exposed to unpleasant and toxic conditions due to racist disregard or intentional flouting of their needs.

Second, aesthetic blight is connected to assaults on aesthetic agency. Disempowered people often have diminished access to resources and are excluded from decision-making about things that contribute to the quality of aesthetic experience. Moreover, the circumstances of disempowerment often undermine the capacity to transform one's responses by directing attention, cultivating an appreciation for challenging stimuli, and shifting cognitive perspective or assignment of meaning. The incarcerated person's attempt at transformation, for instance, is often undermined by conditions that affect their mental health and ability to concentrate, such as sleep deprivation, inadequate nutrition, and exposure to violence.

Aesthetic blight arises when aesthetic harm is sufficiently severe and pervasive, *and* one is stuck with it, unable to alleviate it through reasonable strategies. Aesthetic blight thus involves two conditions:

- (1) One is subjected to continually or repeatedly aversive aesthetic experience.
- (2) One's ability to respond to this situation through a reasonable exercise of agency is restricted.

An incarcerated person in the US encounters profound aesthetic deprivation: hard surfaces, rough textures, restricted access to art and music, and flavorless or disgusting food.<sup>6</sup> Condition (1) is met. But this doesn't fully characterize the experience of aesthetic blight. Incarceration also undermines physical and cognitive agency, preventing the incarcerated person from exercising reasonable agency to improve their aesthetic circumstances.

Condition (2) makes reference to a *reasonable* exercise of agency. Reasonableness has two dimensions. The first relates to the sheer feasibility of the exercise of agency. Impoverished and disempowered people may be flatly unable to exercise aesthetic agency due to a lack of material resources needed for aesthetic choices; limited access to time and energy due to overwork, inadequate nutrition, and caregiving responsibilities without support; and cognitive overload due to stress and decision fatigue from constant impossible choices about how to stretch resources (Mani et al. 2013). But reasonableness also involves a normative assessment of the conditions in which agency is exercised. An incarcerated person may have the capacity to exercise certain kinds of aesthetic agency, but may risk severe punishment in doing so, making an expectation that they will exercise such agency unreasonable.<sup>7</sup> A person who is persistently subjected to aversive experiences due to a disempowered social position they occupy might be *able* to exercise agency to manage aesthetic harm, but their being put in the position that requires this exercise of agency is unreasonable. In such a case, condition (2) is met. Moreover, the exercise of aesthetic agency demands time, energy, and environmental and material resources that are far from equitably distributed; exercising aesthetic agency may thus be more onerous for members of disempowered communities. This, too, should enter into our assessment of reasonableness.

Conditions (1) and (2) are not entirely independent. Where stimuli are sufficiently aversive, this may undermine agency by restricting one's cognitive and emotional resources. In addition, the restricted agency may increase the aesthetic aversiveness of an experience: knowing that I can get away if needed may deescalate the aversiveness of a situation I'm in, whereas knowing I'm stuck may amplify it.

Blight is a matter of degree. Both incarcerated people and guards may experience aesthetic blight in the same environment if the guards are from a disempowered class with limited employment options. Insofar as the guards have greater control over their movements, the ability to leave the prison at the end of their shift, and so forth, they are less subject to aesthetic blight than the prisoners—they have a greater ability to exercise agency in managing their aversive experience—but this does not mean they are immune.

Where restriction of agency is not imposed by an external agent, aesthetic blight may emerge independently of injustice. A person with a hoarding disorder or major depression may have restricted agency in addressing aversive stimuli in their environment; they may experience aesthetic blight that is not caused by injustice. A person with a disability related to mobility or communication may be unable to exercise certain kinds of agency to alleviate their experience of aversive stimuli, and this may result in their experiencing aesthetic blight.<sup>8</sup> Even where aesthetic blight does not result from prior injustice, alleviating it is a matter of justice: we should seek systematic solutions to alleviate conditions that undermine flourishing.<sup>9</sup>

## V. AESTHETIC IMPROVEMENT AND AESTHETIC AGENCY

Aesthetic blight is sometimes managed by removing stimuli that are perceived as aversive. Some such strategies seem straightforward: if an empty lot has been used as a dumping zone, cleaning up the trash improves the sensory landscape. If a fat person is continually subjected to inadequate seating, providing larger chairs reduces discomfort and eliminates the signal that one's embodiment is unwelcome by design. If a prison has been serving food that is unseasoned and vermin-infested, rectifying this will improve aesthetic well-being.

But strategies of this kind, when overgeneralized, readily go wrong in two interconnected ways. First, their applications are sometimes overly aggressive or restrictive, resulting in an environment in which the aesthetic values of some are imposed on all and opportunities for aesthetic expression are limited. Often such environments will be bland, lacking in aesthetic richness and variety. Neighborhood “clean-up” efforts are often connected to gentrification—which, as Quill Kukla notes, generates a pronounced aesthetic homogeneity.

[T]op-down gentrification tends to lead to a familiar constellation of chain stores, loft condos, pedestrian plazas, and the like, whereas bottom-up gentrification leads to “quirky,” “hip” independent business and specialty stores .... However, there is a kind of homogeneity that the latter neighborhoods end up with as well .... [R]egardless of where in the world they cluster, they tend to share a limited aesthetic repertoire that transcends regional and even national borders .... There's no way of guessing, from inside a third-wave espresso bar while drinking an oat milk dirty matcha latte, whether one is in the US, Germany, or China (Kukla 2021, 96–7).

Urban blight remediation efforts, too, tend toward blandness, with a reduction of visual complexity and removal of indicators of cultural history. The City of Detroit, for instance, celebrates blight remediation efforts that raze vegetation and remove distinctive painted signage, producing a tidy flatness.<sup>10</sup>

Second, some strategies designed to alter the sensory landscape manifestly produce injustice. “Ugly laws,” which prohibited the mere appearance in public of people classified as unsightly due to disfigurement or visibly impoverished condition, were enforced in the US up to the 1970s, a phenomenon echoed in modern-day suppression of content showing visibly queer, disabled, and fat bodies on social media platforms like TikTok (Schweik 2009; Botella 2019).<sup>11</sup> To this day, harassment and violence targeting people deemed unsightly by virtue of gender presentation, weight, or disability are commonplace; and people often call the police to forcibly regulate forms of expression and embodiment that they find too loud, too erratic, too smelly (Whittaker 2022). Whereas we have attained some societal awareness about the injustice of aesthetic disqualification directly grounded in race and disability, Cheryl Frazier (2023) notes that antifatness remains a source of uncritical abuse based on aesthetic considerations, and that fat people are treated as though they are harming others through the unpleasantness of their very existence in public space. This, in turn, suppresses the visual representation of fat people, giving the impression that fatness has suddenly emerged rather than being a longstanding manifestation of human embodiment (Frazier and Fried 2025).

Addressing aesthetic blight by changing the sensory landscape may sometimes be appropriate, but this kind of strategy fails to capitalize on one of our observations about aesthetic aversiveness: it is a feature of *experiences*, not of environments, bodies, or other stimuli. This raises the prospect of strategies that support people in exercising agency to change the nature of their experience, which need not always involve changing the stimuli they encounter. As we will see, such strategies reduce the risk of enforced aesthetic homogeneity while also being more compatible with just and caring engagement with other members of our communities.

## VI. TRANSFORMING AESTHETIC RESPONSES TO EMBODIMENT

Aesthetically aversive experiences of some human bodies are a significant aspect of our social landscape, in part because they are manufactured as part of social hierarchies. Defining these bodies as blighted and placing restrictions on their movement to reduce the public's exposure to them was a longstanding and clearly unjust strategy for addressing stimuli found aversive by some.

Supporting people's agency to retrain their aesthetic responses is important, because those with stigmatized embodiment are harmed by experiencing others' aversive reactions. When others grimace, look away, or withdraw, this is dehumanizing to those whose embodiment is targeted (Garland-Thomson 2009). In addition, collective aversion to certain bodies has downstream discriminatory effects on the distribution of economic and social goods that are pervasive and documented in a large empirical literature (Irvin 2017). Transformation of aversive responses to one's own body is also worthwhile; the capacity to take pleasure in our embodiment, or at least to experience it neutrally, is an important aspect of well-being.

Legal scholar Jasmine Harris (2019) argues that aversive responses to embodiment must be directly confronted as a matter of justice. When we integrate children with disabilities into mainstream classrooms, other children's aesthetic responses to their embodiment—for instance, disgust at drooling—may result in a disabled child's being subject to excruciating isolation that compromises their learning, development, and well-being. Supporting other children in engaging their aesthetic agency to overcome initial discomfort and value the disabled child as a full, embodied person is crucial to successful educational integration.

There are good reasons to think we can shift aversive responses to embodiment. As I argue elsewhere, “living human bodies, all of them, ... have very rich affordances by virtue of their colors, textures, ever-shifting forms, complex structures, capacities for movement, and so forth. The human body—every human body—is an incredibly replete aesthetic object” (Irvin 2017, 14–5). I advocate a strategy of aesthetic exploration, releasing our expectations about what human bodies are supposed to be like and seeking out the positive affordances of bodies as they are. Other scholars recommend actively exposing ourselves to representations that help to shift our aesthetic response tendencies. A.W. Eaton (2016) recommends using valorizing representations to help us cultivate an aesthetic appreciation of fat bodies. Siebers suggests, along related lines, that “[a]rt is the active site designed to explore and expand the spectrum of humanity that we will accept among us” (2010, 10).

There may also be a role for scientific or functional knowledge in shifting our response tendencies: if we recognize a distinctive appearance or movement as a normal and expected aspect of this body's functioning, rather than seeing it as a dysfunction or anomaly, this may help to quiet aversive responses and even promote positive aesthetic responses to a uniquely adaptive characteristic.<sup>12</sup> Such knowledge can be achieved through pedagogy or through direct experience. Dance incorporating disability heightens viewers' awareness of the functional capabilities and unique aesthetic affordances of bodies that are sometimes categorized as functionally lacking. As Sarah Whatley (2007) argues, though, not all strategies of viewing yield an appreciative response to the distinctive aesthetic affordances of the disabled body in dance. On some “viewing strategies [...] a ‘presumption of difference’, whether conscious or not, plays into and reinforces dualistic thinking and attention on embodied binary oppositions: valid/invalid, classical/grotesque, deviant/ideal and so on” (2007, 17). While some performances may captivate us in a way that helps break down these binaries, we may need to actively adopt strategies of appreciation that do not focus on disability as spectacle or freakery (cf. Garland-Thomson 1996). Engaging our agency allows us to cultivate forms of viewing that promote positive aesthetic experiences and a greater appreciation of disabled embodiment.

Where our aversive aesthetic responses contribute to oppressive social hierarchies, transforming them may be morally obligatory. However, individuals cannot simply will their way into a shifted response, and there may be individual differences in how much of a shift is feasible. Societal support for the adoption of new aesthetic strategies, and structural support like the availability of positive aesthetic representations, may be needed where a negative response is deeply entrenched.

## VII. LIMITS ON THE TRANSFORMATION OF AESTHETIC RESPONSES

With this account in hand, one might wonder if the problem of aesthetic blight has a simple solution. Can't people just deploy their aesthetic agency to transform their responses, thereby alleviating their distress? The answer is that this strategy solves the problem in some instances but not others.

As we have seen, aesthetic blight involves a restriction on aesthetic agency that makes it difficult to apply strategies either to reduce one's exposure to aversive stimuli or to transform one's responses.

Avoiding one source of grating noise, or transforming our response to one vacant lot in visible disarray, may be reasonable. But if we are constantly surrounded by stimuli that tend to produce aversive experiences in a variety of modalities, seeking refuge from the aversiveness becomes more onerous.

Moreover, when an environment is pervasively aversive, this may affect not only our sensory and aesthetic experience but also our ability to operate within it. Such an environment may physically obstruct us, with cracked sidewalks that trip us, streets prone to flooding, and other elements that fail to effectively perform their functions. A disaster tourist focused on visual fascination might be able to enjoy a decaying neighborhood temporarily. But if one is stuck there, the fact that the environment continually stymies one's ability to go about one's business becomes aesthetically aversive in itself: it is an example of functional ugliness (Parsons and Carlson 2008). And as we have noted, persistent exposure to aversive stimuli may directly undermine, and be accompanied by other forces that tend to undermine, aesthetic agency.

A proposal to deflate a concern about aesthetic blight by appealing to the capacity of a targeted group to transform their responses, then, would locate the responsibility to alleviate injustice in the wrong place. Transformation of responses is an effortful practice that requires opportunities for the exercise of aesthetic agency: it demands time, cognitive engagement, and perhaps also supportive cultural resources such as artworks and other representations. Requiring that disempowered people transform their responses places an additional burden on people who are already experiencing sociopolitical oppression.

To be clear, I am not arguing that members of dispossessed communities experiencing unjust aesthetic blight *should not* attempt to transform their responses. Without a doubt, there are prudential reasons for those experiencing blight to cultivate the capacity for positive aesthetic experiences, and members of dispossessed communities often show great creativity in responding to aesthetically aversive conditions. (See, e.g., Holt's [2024] discussion of aesthetic creativity in incarcerated communities.) As Saito notes, cultivating positive aesthetic experiences "can help [communities] retain a sense of humanity, dignity, and resilience" when they lack the power to alter key aspects of their material circumstances (2017a, 19). But the burden of alleviating blight and its attendant injustice should not fall on them. They may or may not be able to or wish to pursue various strategies to make their aesthetic experience more tolerable; but even if they do deploy such strategies with some success, this does not imply that there is no injustice that needs to be attended to.

Moreover, there may be good reasons for those experiencing blight to *avoid* the cultivation of certain kinds of positive responses. Aesthetic experiences often involve the attribution of meaning, and the aversiveness of a stimulus may sometimes be a function of how we understand it. Dispossessed communities know that the decay of their surroundings, and their disproportionate exposure to stimuli widely found unpleasant, signify societal neglect of their needs and human dignity. This attribution of meaning to the sensuous aspects of one's environment can help to make it aversive. One may have good reasons to resist cultivating neutral (not to mention positive) responses: the negative valence of our aesthetic response may be part of our ongoing recognition of injustice that should be resisted. Saito argues that while aesthetic appreciation of imperfection should be cultivated in many circumstances, we should maintain our negative responses to imperfections when they "indicate social ills and injustice," because "the negative aesthetics associated with them is the best means of signaling that something is amiss and change or improvement is in order." Indeed, she suggests, the fact that "[o]ur sensibility assaulted by these negative aesthetic experiences affects us immediately and viscerally" has special potential to motivate resistance to injustice (2017b). Both members of and outsiders to a dispossessed community, then, may have reasons not to transform their aversive responses.

Given these insights, what would structural solutions to aesthetic blight look like? What is needed here is support for aesthetic agency to transform the sensory landscape in a way that suits the needs of the community, allowing them to take the lead in deciding what needs to change, rather than having an aesthetic vision imposed from outside. Support for community self-determination includes both alleviating conditions that undermine individuals' capacity for aesthetic agency and participation, such as poor nutrition, poor mental, and physical health, and overwork, and ensuring the availability of material resources to realize the community's aesthetic values and vision. A community's aesthetic vision will likely include the removal or repair of material elements widely experienced as aversive. But

there are important disagreements about how these elements are understood and valued: a “project car” in the yard or driveway, like a chaotic pollinator garden, may be seen as unsightly by some while its appearance and functional affordances are aesthetically valued by others. Communities should be empowered to decide what constitutes an aesthetically valuable environment for them, and to develop strategies for navigating intramural disagreement about these matters. Cultivation of capacities for aesthetic open-mindedness and tolerance may help to promote flourishing in the face of aesthetic diversity and disagreement (cf. [Song 2018](#)).

Imposition of the generic market-driven aesthetic described by Kukla, as is common in gentrification and blight remediation projects, is not the right strategy here. Aesthetic preferences for one’s community and neighborhood are deeply cultural and place-based, and community members should be genuinely engaged in the process of determining the aesthetic future of a place where aesthetic aversiveness has co-mingled with a sense of home. This is especially critical given that neglected and nonfunctional features of the environment signal the community’s disempowered status; making things right is a matter not just of generic aesthetic improvement but of restoring people’s capacity to be and be treated as full participants in their society, where aesthetic agency is part of full participation. Unfortunately, this sort of community-engaged strategy is uncommon and often has limited impact. (See, e.g., [He and Qian 2023](#).) Frequently, blight remediation and top-down gentrification give lip service to community needs but are in fact a pretext for displacing current community members in favor of a more lucrative population ([Lee 2017](#); [Taylor 2014](#)).

Sometimes people are thrust into a forced community, as with incarceration. In such cases, combatting aesthetic blight may involve a combination of strategies: amelioration of pervasive stimuli that are widely found aversive (and that tend to undermine both agency and well-being), support for meaningful participation in community decision-making, and opportunities for individual aesthetic decision-making. The availability of condiments for food and the freedom and resources to adorn one’s living space, for instance, allow people to exercise their agency in customizing their aesthetic experience.<sup>13</sup>

The importance of engaging communities’ aesthetic agency should not overshadow the fact that alleviating certain conditions widely experienced as aversive remains a good first step. Some prison food is disgusting by any reasonable standard; cracked and buckled sidewalks are functionally ugly; a chair that is too small to fit one’s body is painful. Alleviating these conditions without requiring effortful self-advocacy by the community reduces aesthetic blight and signals respect.

## VIII. OUTSIDERS AND AESTHETIC BLIGHT

Members of a dispossessed community subjected to aesthetic blight, as we have seen, should be supported in exercising aesthetic agency to transform their sensory landscape, not merely their responses. How should outsiders to such a community respond to blight?

Several photographers have created photographic projects that aestheticize the ruins of Detroit, revealing the visual fascination and even delight that are available in environments that exhibit devastating dysfunction and decay. This aesthetic fetishization of urban environments shaped by poverty, social disenfranchisement, and municipal neglect seems subject to Susan Sontag’s criticism that aestheticization may invest one in the maintenance of an unjust status quo ([1977](#), 12). To the extent that these responses displace recognition of the dispossessed condition of those living in and with ruined environments, the cultivation of positive aesthetic responses may be harmful.

However, this need not push us to Saito’s conclusion that outsiders should simply maintain their aversive aesthetic responses to blighted environments. [María José Alcaraz León \(2022\)](#) argues that appreciating the positive aesthetic qualities an environment has acquired through unjust elements in its history, such as human-induced damage, may stimulate our curiosity about, interest in, and concern for the environment. Moreover, focus on the negative aesthetics of a human environment risks dehumanizing the people living within it. People are seen as less than fully human when they are thought to lack traits like agency and aesthetic sensibility that are understood as essential to full personhood ([Haslam and Loughnan 2014](#)). We tend unreflectively to hold people responsible for the qualities of their environment, and focus on the environment’s aversive qualities may lead us to

attribute to its residents a lack of the motivation or aesthetic sensibility needed to improve their environment. This can compromise outsiders' perception of a community's humanity even if deeper reflection reveals that the environmental characteristics found aversive are due to injustice. Dorceta Taylor argues that racism contributes to judgments that a neighborhood is blighted; and this designation, in turn, provides a rationale for dismantling the community and coercively transferring property to be redeveloped for the use of a more affluent—and whiter—population (2014, chap. 9; cf. Lee 2017). Dehumanization contributes to a failure to recognize the aesthetic richness of a community and its physical environment; and this in turn motivates a grossly unjust and dehumanizing response.

Transformation of the valence of aesthetic responses is not enough: it is important to cultivate positive aesthetic responses in a way that is intentionally humanizing. How is the community using available resources, even if limited, to cultivate pockets of aesthetic appeal? How are community members deploying creativity to navigate the functional obstacles within the environment? Such responses shift our focus to the humanity of the community while still allowing us to recognize that the limited resources and obstacles they face stem from injustice. By broadening our focus to include not just the sensory affordances of the material environment but also the activities of the people within it, we may have aesthetic experiences that are satisfying and also promote just attitudes and actions, such as advocating for community members to be supported in the exercise of aesthetic agency.

Something similar is true of cultivating positive aesthetic responses to others' embodiment: this can be done in ways that are more or less humanizing. Some aesthetic responses that we experience as positively valenced may involve fetishization or fascination with grotesquerie. Cultivating positive aesthetic responses that focus not just on bodies but on persons as embodied can move beyond a fixation on otherness (Lintott and Irvin 2016). Transformation of aesthetic responses is a valuable tool, but not just any transformation will do.

## IX. CONCLUSION: AESTHETIC AGENCY AND JUSTICE

Aesthetic blight arises when some people are made systematically vulnerable to aesthetic harm. This is unjust and warrants structural solutions. Strategies for alleviating aesthetic blight should be evaluated by the standards of justice. Removing or withdrawing from a stimulus we experience as aversive may contribute to dehumanization and thus cause harm. Even the transformation of our negative aesthetic responses to more positive ones must be done with care: some ways of transforming our responses are compatible with or even promote recognition of the full humanity of individuals or communities, while others may fetishize, objectify, or dehumanize.

Our discussion has positioned us to recognize a key constraint on support for aesthetic agency and self-determination. Some individuals and communities are antifat, anti queer, ableist, racist; and aesthetic preferences often play a key role in constituting these oppressive dispositions. Should someone claim that their exercise of aesthetic agency or community self-determination requires the exclusion of "blighted" bodies that they find irremediably aversive, we can reject this declaration. Because of their rich sensory and functional affordances, human bodies are promising candidates for the transformation of aesthetic responses in a more positive direction. If a group of people has been so strongly trained in aversive response that they are unable to overcome it, this is in fact a way that their agency has been undermined. This is both a direct harm to them (though it does not approach the harm caused to those targeted by dehumanizing responses) and a corruption of them, insofar as it enlists them as participants in injustice. Acknowledging this does not absolve them of wrongs: where our cognition and agency are still operative, even if compromised, we are obliged to engage critical consciousness, recognize the harm we cause, and work strenuously to stop inflicting this harm, even if it is difficult.

Bolstering people's capacity to appreciate the aesthetic affordances of a world filled with a diverse abundance of stimuli, including many forms of embodiment and of aesthetic expression, then, is part of enhancing aesthetic agency. Being able to appreciate—or at the very least tolerate—a wide array of stimuli helps us to live with others and navigate aesthetic differences: it allows us to celebrate the aesthetic diversity of our communities even as our preferences for our own bodily styling or domestic environment differ from our neighbors' preferences for theirs (Song 2018).

Aesthetic blight is a real form of harm. It is often due to injustice: membership in a dispossessed community may result in disproportionate exposure to aversive stimuli or restriction of agency. Even where aesthetic blight is not caused by injustice, justice may require specific efforts to alleviate it. Bolstering the capacity for aesthetic agency can empower us to alleviate experiences of blight and allow us to take greater pleasure in the rich aesthetic affordances of our world, taking into account the full humanity of those with whom we share it.<sup>14</sup>

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## END NOTES

- 1 My usage here has some resonance with Dominic McIver Lopes's use of the expression "manufactured conflict" to describe a situation in which aesthetic cultures are unnecessarily pitted against one another (Lopes 2024, 64ff).
- 2 In Lopes's terms, this is an instance of aesthetic injustice, where people are "harm[ed] in [their] capacity to perceive beauty in the world": specifically, beauty in certain forms of embodiment (Lopes 2024, 14).
- 3 Red ants can be sustainably farmed and are high in protein, fiber, and minerals. These facts are distinct from facts about their tastiness, but might figure in an assignment of meaning that shapes the aesthetic character of our experience.
- 4 I'm grateful to Yujia Song and an anonymous referee for prompting me to clarify my thinking on aesthetic harm and normativity.
- 5 This proposal is based on Lopes's (2018) suggestion that aesthetic acts are those that depend on aesthetic evaluations. For Lopes, an aesthetic evaluation is specific to an aesthetic practice, and aesthetic practices are domains in which expertise is operative. Drawing on the insights of everyday aesthetics, I consider valenced assessments of the felt texture of experience to be aesthetic evaluations even where there is no clearly defined practice involving expertise.
- 6 As Tony Vick (2024) notes, "I've been served trays of prison food containing everything from rat turds to used Band-Aids."
- 7 Stephanie Holt (2024, 121) discusses a case of an incarcerated person subjected to a month of solitary confinement for making aesthetic alterations to prison-issued uniforms.
- 8 I don't mean to suggest that restriction of agency in conditions of disability or mental illness is never caused by injustice: societal failures to support people's mobility and access to resources and mental health treatment are forms of injustice that contribute to aesthetic blight.
- 9 Martha Nussbaum (2000; 2011) suggests, similarly, that justice requires supporting people's capabilities for aesthetic agency. Aesthetic considerations are relevant to her categories of "senses, imagination, and thought," "play," and "control over one's environment."
- 10 See the "before" and "after" images of a commercial property (14365 Mack) and residential block (2925 Garland) here: <https://detroitmi.gov/news/city-detroit-tackles-blight-removal-blight-remediation-priority-executing-mayor-duggans-blight> (accessed Dec 30, 2024). There may sometimes be compelling non-aesthetic reasons to remove excess vegetation and board windows up securely; but it is also true that public safety is used as a pretext for making changes that are designed to enhance a specific form of commercial aesthetic appeal. See, e.g., the designation of traditional housing in the Enninglu district of Guangzhou as "dangerous and dilapidated" in advance of a beautification campaign tied to the city's hosting of the Asian Games in 2010 (He and Qian 2023).
- 11 I am grateful to Cheryl Frazier for pointing out this connection.

- 12 This is different from the approach to functional beauty advocated by [Parsons and Carlson \(2008\)](#), which treats individuals that are dysfunctional relative to their category as ugly. The suggestion here is, instead, to appreciate the unique functioning of each individual rather than comparing it to a category-based ideal (cf. [Irvin 2022](#)).
- 13 To be clear, this proposal is meant only to address aesthetic blight, not to deny or minimize other forms of harm and injustice that attend incarceration and may motivate an abolitionist position (cf. [Holt 2024](#)).
- 14 For discussion and feedback on earlier versions, I'm grateful to Cheryl Frazier, Jeremy Fried, Lisa Giombini, Stephanie Holt, Babak Khoshroo, Camilla Palazzolo, Sandra Shapshay, Yujia Song, Bailey Szustak, and participants in the 2022 Annual Meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics. Two anonymous referees also provided very helpful feedback.