This talk discusses oppression based on judgments of bodily unattractiveness and argues for an aesthetic approach to resisting this form of oppression. Philosophical theories have often suggested that appropriate aesthetic judgments should converge on sets of objects consensually found to be beautiful or ugly. The convergence of aesthetic judgments about human bodies, however, is a significant source of social injustice, because people judged to be unattractive pay substantial social and economic penalties in domains such as education, employment and criminal justice. The injustice is compounded due to the interaction between standards of attractiveness and gender, race, disability, and queer and trans identities.

I argue that, in response to this form of injustice, we should actively work to reduce our participation in standard aesthetic practices that involve attractiveness judgments. However, this does not mean we should refuse engagement with the embodiment of others; even if it were possible to do so, ignoring someone’s embodiment is often a way of dehumanizing them. Instead, I advocate a form of aesthetic practice, aesthetic exploration, that involves seeking out the unique aesthetic affordances of all bodies and aiming to have positive aesthetic experiences of them, regardless of whether they are attractive in the standard sense. I argue that there are good ethical reasons to cultivate aesthetic exploration, and that it is psychologically plausible that doing so would help to alleviate the social injustice attending judgments of attractiveness.

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