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Anatomy of the Thigh Gap¹

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Abstract

This article explores the ongoing obsession with the thigh gap ideal in certain pockets of Western societies. A thigh gap is the space some women have between their inner thighs when they stand with their feet together. The thigh gap ideal is flaunted on “thinspo” websites, which compile diet and exercise tips and display pictures of fashion models and “real women” in their efforts to inspire women to become thinner.

I aim to identify what is wrong with the thigh gap obsession and to suggest a way to overcome it. I begin by describing the genesis of the obsession. I then argue that the relation women in the grip of this preoccupation have to their bodies is an instance of what I call bodily alienation. Next, I consider responses to the thigh gap phenomenon. I claim that a viable response, besides broadening standards of beauty, lies in pursuing bodily activities for their own sake. I call the view I articulate “sensualism.” I conclude by discussing the merits of an individual response of the type I advocate, in light of the structural character of women’s oppression through standards of beauty.

Keywords: embodiment, bodily aesthetics, bodily alienation

Keep calm and remember the thigh gap.
One day I will have a thigh gap.
Feet together thighs apart.
Do it for the thigh gap.
Mind the thigh gap.
#thighgap

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For the uninitiated, a thigh gap is the space some women have between their inner thighs when they stand with their feet together. The thigh gap is a “thing” for a not insignificant portion of Western women.² It is flaunted on “thinspo” websites, which compile diet and exercise tips, and display pictures of fashion models and “real women” in their efforts to inspire women to become thinner. Hence the label “thinspo,” which is short for “thinspiration.” At the same time, there is a backlash against the thigh gap. Some voice concerns over the dangers of dieting to achieve a thigh gap: only some women of a healthy weight naturally have one.³ Others poke fun at the thigh gap craze: witness the emergence of “mermaid thighs” as a new aesthetic ideal.⁴

My goal in this paper is to identify what is problematic about the thigh gap phenomenon and other structurally similar phenomena, and to suggest a way to address them.⁵ First, I describe the genesis of the thigh gap obsession. Second, I explain what I find problematic about the pursuit of the thigh gap; I explain that the

² An online article entitled “15 Tips on How to Get a Thigh Gap Fast” stresses that “you have to want this. No, strike that—**you have to NEED this. Or your thighs will never gap.** Reach deep inside and CHOOSE THE GAP. Anything less is choosing to lose” (<https://therealyouisskinny.com/how-to-get-a-thigh-gap-fast>; emphases in the original). Likewise, the presence of the thigh gap on online platforms such as Pinterest, where users can create virtual boards with images and inspirational quotes, speaks to the presence of the thigh gap obsession. For instance, see the “How to Get a Thigh Gap” board here: <https://www.pinterest.com/sltro/how-to-get-a-thigh-gap/>.

³ Examples of articles that highlight the dangers in dieting or exercising to achieve a thigh gap include Kimberly Spector Wolf’s (2016) “Filling in the Facts about Thigh Gaps” and Winnie Ma’s (2015) “The Truth about the Dangerous Thigh Gap.”

⁴ A Google search of “mermaid thighs” yields a wealth of articles and images taking aim at the thigh gap. As an example of a piece reacting to the thigh gap, consider Marissa G. Muller’s 2016 article for *Teen Vogue* entitled “Mermaid Thighs Are the Body-Positive Trend You Want to Know About.”

⁵ I consider “structurally similar phenomena” to be those that concern body parts other than the thighs and are also symbols of slenderness. I believe the “bikini bridge” and “ribcage bragging” to be phenomena that are structurally similar to the thigh gap. For those who are unaware of these less well-known trends, a person with a bikini bridge’s abdomen is so flat that a “bridge” could unite each hip bone (that is, her lower abdomen does not protrude beyond her hipbones), while a person who engages in the recent vogue of “ribcage bragging” is focused on the thinness of her torso.

harm involved in the phenomenon can be cashed out in terms of the concept of *bodily alienation*. Third, I canvass some responses that have been given to phenomena like the thigh gap. Fourth, I argue that, besides broadening standards of beauty, a remedy to the thigh gap lies in pursuing bodily activities for the sake of pleasure. I call the view I articulate in this section “sensualism.” And, fifth, I conclude by discussing the merits of an individual response of the type I advocate, in light of the structural character of women’s oppression through standards of beauty.

Before considering the genesis of the thigh gap, I should address two related worries that the reader might have concerning the scope of my argument. First, am I simply discussing anorexia? And are online forums dedicated to the thigh gap simply thinly veiled “pro-ana” groups? Second, does investment in the thigh gap fall under the scope of body dysmorphic disorder? Let me take these worries in order. First, I should acknowledge that there may be a relation between the thigh gap phenomenon and anorexia: the pursuit of slenderness may precipitate mental illnesses including, but not limited to, anorexia. Yet there is a difference between the cases I would like to focus on in this paper and clear-cut cases of mental illness—namely, whether the preoccupation concerns achieving a certain beauty ideal or mastering one’s hunger. As Sheila Lintott persuasively explains, while beauty “may start many women on the path to developing an eating disorder,” appealing to the category of beauty is insufficient to comprehend what “keeps many on that path” (Lintott 2003, 80). Lintott invokes the category of the sublime, that is, the mastery of one’s fear of a fearful object, to better conceptualize anorexia; she argues that the mastery of hunger inherent in anorexia gives women who might not otherwise have access to the sublime an experience of it. Lintott’s interpretation of anorexia is useful to delimit the scope of my argument. The phenomenon at stake in this paper is one in which the *beauty ideal* of slenderness still figures in the equation. Second, I wish to exclude body dysmorphic disorder from the scope of my argument. I doubt that the recommendation I offer in this paper would be sufficient for someone for whom there is “clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.”⁶ Yet, I would argue that while I restrict the scope of my argument from the most extreme cases of dieting, exercise, or preoccupation with bodily appearance, it might still be under the purview of philosophy to propose a solution that could find its way into a therapeutic context. I say this based on my own experience. As a feminist philosopher, I think that it is important to incorporate one’s experience in theorizing and not to pretend that our

⁶ *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5*. “Obsessive-compulsive and related disorders.” (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association Publishing, 2013).

<https://dsm.psychiatryonline.org/doi/book/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425596>.

theories come down to earth from an impersonal heaven of ideas. Therefore, I would like to indicate that the proposal of sensualism is one I developed in dialogue with a therapist who encouraged me to pay more attention to what I enjoyed in physical activities and less on the payoff these might afford in terms of my appearance. Thus, I do not think that professional treatment and philosophical recommendations are mutually exclusive. Rather, the severity of the case in question should determine the extent to which my proposal is useful and whether it could be pursued within or outside of a therapeutic context.

1. The Genesis of the Thigh Gap

The thigh gap arises at the intersection of at least three currents: 1) a certain form of narcissism women are encouraged to cultivate; 2) the current association of feminine beauty and thinness in large segments of contemporary Western culture;⁷ 3) an online visual culture that magnifies this association. This section will describe these currents and allow us to revisit the groundbreaking work of Sandra Bartky (1990) and Susan Bordo (1993) on women's relation to standards of beauty, which, I hope to prove, remains all too relevant today. At the same time, I will consider a critical response to Bartky and Bordo—namely, research by Cressida Heyes (2007) on weight-loss dieting, which responds to their analyses by stressing the “enabling” character of efforts to pursue ideals of thinness.

To understand the thigh gap phenomenon, let me first appeal to Bartky's idea of “repressive narcissism.” In “Narcissism, Femininity, and Alienation,” Bartky calls our attention to the network of corporations that function to regulate bodily aesthetics, which she dubs the *fashion-beauty complex*. These corporations, whether they manufacture or market products, communicate the message that the female body is a “task, an object in need of transformation” (Bartky 1990, 40). According to Bartky, women's efforts to live up to the ever-changing aesthetic norms of the complex result in alienation: “The fashion-beauty complex produces in woman an estrangement from her bodily being: On the one hand, she *is* it and is scarcely allowed to be anything else; on the other hand, she must exist perpetually at a distance from her physical

⁷ I am deliberately cautious about making general statements about standards of beauty in the United States and in the West, for that matter. Ideals such as the thigh gap appear predominantly attractive to white women. A Google search of the words “thigh gap” mostly uncovers pictures of white women. In fact, to discover “thinspo” images of women of color, more specific searches, such as “Black thinspo” or “Asian thinspo” are required. The racial specificity of the thigh gap obsession finds support in work on the related phenomenon of “pro-ana,” or pro-anorexia, groups. As Richardson and Cherry (2011) and McCurley (2014) underscore, most participants in pro-ana communities are white.

self, fixed at this distance in a permanent posture of disapproval” (Bartky 1990, 40). Fashion magazines and television shows, for example, communicate this sense of disapproval and a future-directed relation to our bodies: we can truly be fulfilled only once our bodies are transformed. Think of the ever-present theme of the makeover. The makeover promises a “new you.” That is, it promises an improved version of the self through diet and exercise, makeup and clothing, and so on. Commenting on the images we receive every day, Bartky says that they “remind us constantly that we fail to measure up” (Bartky 1990, 40). The effort to cultivate the right body, she elaborates, is both *narcissistic* and *repressive*: it is narcissistic because it involves an over-investment in the body’s appearance, and it is repressive because the body is always experienced as in need of disciplining.

The investment that women who visit thinspo websites have in images of extremely thin women is narcissistic and repressive in Bartky’s sense. To achieve the state portrayed in these images, including the thigh gap, requires a fixation on one’s appearance. What is of concern is *not* how the thighs are experienced from within, whether they feel strong or sore when performing activities, or whether they are a source of pleasure. Instead, the *contours* of the thighs are paramount to the woman invested in her thigh gap. She matches her visual representation of her thighs with the images she browses online, almost as if she were comparing an object separate from her body with other similar items. Furthermore, the repressive character of the thigh gap obsession is evidenced in the demanding exercises and diets that are typically required to achieve the look. Indeed, the fact that a thigh gap is so difficult to obtain has motivated many of the articles that are critical of the trend.

The thigh gap phenomenon is, of course, only one manifestation of repressive narcissism. Developing or maintaining one’s thigh gap, at least at first, appears no different from achieving or maintaining silky hair or hairless, smooth skin. All these “maintenance activities” require observing and correcting the body—policing it. That said, the thigh gap seems to be one of those particularly pernicious feminine pursuits insofar as it can be harmful to one’s psychological well-being. In this context, let me comment on the ideal of feminine thinness that underwrites the phenomenon.

There is an abundance of philosophical and sociological work on the connection between femininity and thinness in much of contemporary Western culture. For example, Elizabeth Wissinger (2015) draws our attention to the roles the standardization of clothing sizes and the modeling industry played in the emergence of our present-day ideals of thinness.⁸ She explains that with the standardization of clothing sizes came a standardization of the measurements of fashion models (for

⁸ In particular, I have in mind Wissinger’s (2015) chapter “Cover Girl: Managing the Model Body.”

instance, weight and height requirements). Coupled with the perception that taller and thinner models best showcased clothing, these forms of standardization fueled the normalization of feminine slenderness. Wissinger's work helps us understand one facet of the emergence of the thinness ideal. But to appreciate the psychological mechanisms at stake in thinspo, I think we should return to an earlier analysis of the femininity-thinness connection: Susan Bordo's in *Unbearable Weight* (1993). There Bordo interprets anorexia and everyday preoccupations with thinness as continuous with one another. She attributes gender associations between women and anorexia to at least two factors: first, the "fear and disdain for traditional female roles and social institutions"; second, "a deep fear of 'the Female,' with all its more nightmarish and archetypal association of voracious hungers and sexual insatiability" (Bordo 1993, 155). As an illustration of this conflict, she highlights some anorexic adolescents' disgust before the female body: they express disdain for "womanly" bodies, and some go so far as to avow the desire to remain children forever (Bordo 1993, 155–156). Bordo's analysis highlights the emergence of this conflict in the United States in the twentieth century. Newly emancipated women found themselves torn between two contradictory images: they were increasingly seen as productive and capable of mastery, but lurking in the background was the specter of femininity as consumption. This analysis is relevant to thinspo culture, which is marked by the urgent demand to shape the body: a web search of the words "thigh gap" will reveal slogans such as "Do it for the thigh gap" or "Mind the thigh gap." These slogans reveal the importance of sculpting the body: the thigh gap is an achievement, which demands dieting and exercise. For example, consider the slogan, featured on the side of the photo of a thigh gap: "Rome wasn't built in one day. Don't give up."⁹ Bordo's analysis is relevant to the thigh gap phenomenon, because a preoccupation with a body part like the thighs speaks to a certain fear of female embodiment.

The association between feminine beauty and thinness in large portions of contemporary Western societies is nothing new. That is why I think we need to dig deeper to understand the emergence of the thigh gap phenomenon. This phenomenon is, in my view, a product of an online culture that intensifies the temptation to narcissism. An online search of "thigh gap" will yield a wealth of images of the prized gap, most of them taken by women involved in thinspo culture. What is striking about these images is that in most of them the woman's head is mostly obscured. This is a result of the angle in which the photos, mostly selfies, are taken: the images focus on thigh gap, while the face recedes into the background. In some instances, this effect stems from the fact that the camera is placed in front of

⁹ This photo can be found on the blog *Whiskey and High Heels* (<https://whiskeyandhighheels.wordpress.com/tag/thinspo/>).

the woman's face. These quasi-headless images heighten the self-objectification inherent in thinspo culture. With the disappearance of the face in these images, the viewer of these images loses sight of a singularly expressive body part. There is no smile to discern, no expression in the eyes; the images reduce the woman pictured to one body part. This reductive tendency is echoed in the slogans used to motivate those interested in achieving a thigh gap: "Do it for the thigh gap" and "Mind the thigh gap," for instance, elevate the thigh gap to the status of an alien thing, a totem.

Besides the narcissism that is part and parcel of thinspo culture, it is worth mentioning that this culture also intensifies the *fragmentation* of the body that earlier feminists have identified in messages concerning feminine beauty. Bartky, in particular, sheds light on this fragmentation in her essay "Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power." There she shows how Foucault's idea that the body's movements become segmented and disciplined applies to feminine embodiment. To illustrate this idea, Bartky mentions Foucault's reference to a military manual that carefully decomposes the breakdown of the gestures required of soldiers at drill. This segmentation of the body is manifest in women's relation to standards of beauty: Bartky notes that in our culture, "a woman must stand with stomach pulled in, shoulders thrown slightly back, and chest out" (Bartky 1990, 68). In addition to the postural norms, other beauty norms contribute to the body's fragmentation: as a woman, I need to apply moisturizer to my face, put styling product in my hair, and shave my legs. Thus, each body part is subject to its own regimen. Similarly, the idea that we can "troubleshoot" the appearance of certain body parts (such as the stomach or "saddlebags") segments the body. This fragmentation takes on even greater proportions in thinspo culture by breaking up the image of the body to feature only the thigh gap. Not only does the composition of the images fragment the body, but the hashtags used on social media featuring the thigh gap shape our responses to the images; they direct our attention to the thigh gap itself, thus excluding other elements of the image from our aesthetic appreciation. Altogether, online thinspo culture heightens a narcissistic fixation on thinness through images and associated hashtags or slogans.

In connection with the online visual culture surrounding the thigh gap, it is important to note that technological advances increase our own options for enhancing images of the body. Magazines, of course, have used sophisticated tools to create a thigh gap on a person who does not have one (think of the celebrities whose thighs have been airbrushed to feature the famed gap). Furthermore, it is now far easier for professional video editors to edit moving images, thereby broadening the encroachment of enhanced images. Worse yet, those equipped with smartphones also make use of an array of apps, such as Snapchat, YouCam, FaceTune, and Camera+, with which to enhance their images and upload them to

social media. In fact, the ability to enhance one's own images might blur the line between a signature distinction in online thinspo culture—namely, the difference between “thinspo” *simpliciter*, which can include images of celebrities, and “real thinspo,” which refers to the images of “real” women who upload photos of themselves. In fact, users of such apps have reported that they forget what their faces and bodies look like through long-term use of them.¹⁰ Overall, these technological advances skew our perception of what real bodies look like, thus widening the gap—no pun intended!—between our actual bodily shapes and sizes and our perception of them.

Thus far, I have identified feminine narcissism, the cult of thinness, and a certain online visual culture as three factors in the genesis of the thigh gap phenomenon. Yet I would be remiss if I did not comment on the online *communities* that also fuel the obsession. Take, for example, the website *Skinny Gossip*, which features discussions of models' and celebrities' physiques and requires signing up in order to post to its forums.¹¹ Similarly, Pinterest allows thinspo adepts to form communities by liking and sharing each other's images and motivational messages. In this regard, thinspo communities resemble “pro-ana,” or pro-anorexia, groups. As Richardson and Cherry (2011) and McCurley (2014) highlight in research on pro-ana online groups, providing community support and monitoring group membership are key features of these communities. Despite the communal aspect of thinspo and pro-ana websites, the communities differ, in my view, in that the presence of publicly accessible pages such as Pinterest boards suggests that thinspo is more visible to the mainstream than pro-ana forums. Moreover, as I have indicated at the beginning of this paper, I think there is a distinction to be made between the psychology of anorexia and that inherent in undertaking a dietary or physical regimen for the sake of slenderness.

One of the lessons to take from my analysis is that the thigh gap phenomenon has antecedents in a certain Western valorization of feminine slenderness, but our online culture takes this valorization to new “heights” (or shall we say new “lows”?). Yet I think there might be more to the temptation to pursue the thigh gap ideal. Are we women merely brainwashed into subjecting our bodies to beauty norms? Or can more be said of our desire to conform to these norms? What incentivizes us to pursue the thigh gap ideal, for instance?

¹⁰ For self-reports concerning the effects of image-enhancing apps and studies of such effects, the reader might consult Ruth Faj's (2017) article, “Is Snapchat Making Us Forget What We Look Like?” Faj's article also cites the psychologist Giuseppe Silva's assessment that virtual images alter our understanding of our bodies.

¹¹ The *Skinny Gossip* blog can be accessed at <https://www.skinnygossip.com/community/>.

To answer these questions, I suggest that we turn to Cressida Heyes’s work on weight-loss dieting. In *Self-Transformations: Foucault, Ethics, and Normalized Bodies*, Heyes contends that “weight-loss dieting” is not simply “an activity that constructs the docile body,” as Bartky and Bordo would have it, but “a *process* of working on the self” (Heyes 2007, 64). This process taps into our desire for self-care. In Heyes’s assessment: “Neither Bordo, nor Bartky, however, fully theorizes the micro-practices of power that make up the day-to-day experience of weight-loss dieting. This erasure leads them to stress the *repressive* moments in the discursive construction of the slender body, contra the *enabling* functions of the dieting process” (Heyes 2007, 77). Drawing on Foucault, Heyes shows how the “minutiae of [the practice of weight-loss dieting], its everyday tropes and demands, its compulsions and liberations” help constitute the self (Heyes 2007, 64). She devotes much attention to the style of weight-loss leaflets, which she views as the modern-day versions of the *hupomnemata* studied by Foucault. For him, these notebooks, written in antiquity, were “key aids to caring for the self” (Heyes 2007, 81). Writers of *hupomnemata* compiled quotations, reflections, and reminders to aid themselves in developing specific attitudes and behaviors that would empower them to understand and manage life events as best as possible, rather than to be overwhelmed by them. Heyes argues that weight-loss leaflets, of the type distributed by such companies as Weight Watchers, function like *hupomnemata* in that they underscore how “the care of the self-implicit in successful dieting will improve one’s self-knowledge, and that knowing oneself is central to weight loss” (Heyes 2007, 81). For example, Heyes cites a weight-loss leaflet, “A Self-Discovery Puzzle,” which states that “these past few weeks you’ve learned many new things about *yourself*. . . . Weight loss is a continual process of learning about your body, your relationship to food, and the environment you live in” (quoted in Heyes 2007, 81).

Heyes’s account of weight-loss dieting is relevant to understanding certain aspects of thinspo culture. The tips for dieting and exercise that are compiled on thinspo websites and pages could be conceived as the online version of the pamphlets that Heyes sees as our modern-day *hupomnemata*. Like the paper pamphlets of Weight Watchers, these sites and pages collect inspirational material and practical tips for attaining a certain physical ideal. For example, Pinterest boards contain thinspo material such as “The Drop 10 Workout,” which lists 10 exercises to repeat daily to “drop 10 pounds in just two weeks,”¹² or, especially tellingly, “Five Questions [to ask yourself] Before Eating,”¹³ which reminds us of the self-knowledge required to sculpt the body.

¹² See <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/49891508345723564>.

¹³ See <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/337770040793779547/>.

In sum, for Heyes, the practices inherent in weight-loss dieting constitute a form of care for the self in a socioeconomic situation where there are few other opportunities for women to accomplish this. This claim, in turn, implies that resistance to the culture of weight-loss dieting might not merely consist in a flat-out refusal of the norms that motivate this dieting, as some feminists would have it, but in finding other ways of caring for the self (Heyes 2007, 87–88). I would like to take Heyes’s conclusion concerning care of the self on board as we explore ways to resist the thigh gap phenomenon. The solution I advance, sensualism, could be considered a way of caring for the self and, as such, as an alternative to the care of the self that weight-loss culture offers. But before examining resistance to the thigh gap, we need to get clear on why the thigh gap trend is problematic.

2. What Exactly Is Problematic about the Thigh Gap Trend?

Thus far, I have intimated that the thigh gap is a problematic phenomenon. Next, I spell out why I hold the body sculpting aimed at achieving the thigh gap aesthetic to be worrisome. First, one could object to the thigh gap phenomenon because of its genealogical origins in patriarchy. As Bordo explains in her treatment of anorexia, the ideal of thinness is motivated by anxieties about women’s role in society and “archetypal associations” between femininity and insatiable appetites. The thigh gap ideal fits within these traditional anxieties and associations, as the rhetoric of some thinspo websites highlights. Second, following Bartky, one could object to the thigh gap obsession because it is a creation of the fashion-beauty complex and an ideal not crafted by women. Third, one could object to the thigh gap on the grounds that it is a supererogatory standard of beauty that conflicts with duties to preserve one’s health. For example, Archer and Ware (2018) contend that there are aesthetic demands in the realm of everyday aesthetics (which includes bodily beauty) which are not reducible to moral demands, and that many of the bodily aesthetic demands to which women strive to conform are supererogatory. Applying the concept of aesthetic supererogation to the thigh gap phenomenon would explain why it is not a standard to which we need conform, since the thigh gap demands attempts at weight loss which might conflict with our duties to preserve our health.

My view is that the thigh gap is objectionable for all three reasons. I wish, however, to bring out a fourth reason for which the thigh gap is problematic. In line with the third suggestion, I believe that the pursuit of the thigh gap is a form of *self-harm*. But, unlike the third argument against it, this pursuit is problematic not merely because it may be *physically* harmful, but because it is *psychologically* harmful. Specifically, the harm I would like to identify is the harm inherent in being *alienated* from one’s body. I focus on bodily alienation, both because I wish to

expand on Bartky's ideas and because my solution to this pursuit, sensualism, borrows from Marxian ideas concerning nonalienated labor.

On my interpretation, bodily alienation stems from experiencing one's body overwhelmingly from the outside—that is, as an object. The distinction I introduce here between our experience of our bodies as objects and our experience of our bodies as subjects is inspired by Husserl's distinction between the human body as a material thing (*Körper*) and the human body as it is lived in everyday experience (*Leib*), which is developed in *Ideas II* (§§35–42). For Husserl, the body is conceived as a material thing under the *natural scientific attitude*. This is the attitude my doctor adopts when she examines my body. The human body as we respond to it in everyday dealings, though, is apprehended in the *personalistic attitude*.

In the context of this discussion, I wish to focus on our capacity to shift perspectives on our bodies, and to experience them more, or less, as objects. On the one hand, when we experience our bodies as objects, we tend to appreciate our bodies as things and compare them to other things; most often we compare our bodies to other human bodies. This is the type of appreciation of the body that is evidenced in the thigh gap phenomenon. On the other hand, when we experience our bodies as subjects, the body tends to disappear from the center of our awareness. Consider Merleau-Ponty's example in the *Phenomenology of Perception* of a blind person who learns how to use a cane to guide her movements (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 175–176). She focuses on the cane to understand how to manipulate it and how it can guide her. With time, though, the cane becomes integrated in her body schema, which, according to Merleau-Ponty, is a structure that guides our movements and allows us to anticipate interactions with external objects.¹⁴ There is also the dancer who learns a new set of choreographed dance moves. He puts effort into learning them first by slowly focusing on and executing each move. But with time they become seamlessly integrated in his body schema and feel like second nature. It is important to note that for an object or skill to become incorporated in the body schema, it eventually needs to recede from the subject's attention.¹⁵ In other words, if the cane does not recede from reflective awareness, then it cannot serve to point to other objects. So too, the dancer will not perform his dance with the same grace and mastery if his awareness remains focused on the details of how

¹⁴ To be clear, Merleau-Ponty's body schema is not a representation of the body; rather, it is meant to "structure our awareness of objects" by carving out a space of possible modes of interacting with the environment (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 106).

¹⁵ Kristin Zeiler (2013) also develops this point about the phenomenology of skillful activity.

to execute each move.¹⁶ My point in invoking the ideas of recession and incorporation into the body schema is to highlight the fact that the reverse is happening in the case of the thigh gap: a certain body part comes to the forefront of awareness. For example, if I am a thigh gap adept, as I put on my jeans, rather than executing the required movements without any explicit awareness of my legs, I may pause and become reflectively aware of them. To borrow the concept of “excorporation,” or reversal of incorporation, from Erik Malmqvist and Kristin Zeiler (Malmqvist and Zeiler 2010; Zeiler 2013), I would argue that the thigh gap can be conceived as an excorporated body part—that is, one “expulsed” from our usual unthematic bodily awareness—and that this excorporation, when repeated or sustained, implies bodily alienation.

As I have just noted, I am concerned with the thigh gap because of the excessive focus on the body as an object that comes with it. But, beyond the alienation inherent in living one’s body from the outside, there is another layer to the thigh gap phenomenon to which I alluded earlier: to the extent that a woman working to achieve a thigh gap fixates on one part of her body at the expense of others, her body becomes segmented. As Merleau-Ponty argues, the body is experienced from within as a *unity*, which is why he likens it to a “work of art” in the *Phenomenology* (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 175). He calls our attention to the fact that, as the body is lived, bodily parts relate to one another in virtue of the task that the subject is intending to accomplish (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 172ff). The body’s motor intentionality organizes the movements of each part with respect to the other. For instance, when I aim to catch a ball, my arm extends upwards and my fingers fan out, not because one movement causes another movement mechanistically, but because the catching of the ball calls forth these movements synergistically. By contrast, if we return to the example of a thigh gap adept putting on her jeans, we witness a fragmentation of the body that disrupts a unified experience of the body that is part and parcel of much of our everyday, unreflective bodily experience.

3. Responding to the Thigh Gap Obsession

How can we undo the alienation inherent in the thigh gap phenomenon? In this section, I will consider some responses to our investment in bodily aesthetics. I do not think that we should reject bodily beauty altogether as a pursuit, but I want

¹⁶ There are limits to the claim that the recession of the body from awareness is a condition for not experiencing one’s body as an object. For example, in her essay on pregnancy in *On Female Body Experience*, Iris Marion Young (2005) explains that during pregnancy the body can be something that we feel and are constantly aware of but that this does not necessarily prevent us from acting or from experiencing a nonobjectified subjectivity.

to suggest that solutions that bypass the focus on bodily beauty are also worth considering.

But, first, is there a case for maintaining that bodily beauty is worth pursuing? In her recent work on fashion models, Cecilie Basberg Neumann (2017) looks into the creativity that models embody in their work. She begins by presenting the beauty/narcissism double bind that characterizes many women's experiences with the pursuit of bodily beauty. According to this double bind, we women are encouraged to invest in our appearance, while being at the same time shamed about such an investment (Neumann 2017, 381). The double bind thus becomes translated into one of "desire" versus "shame" (Neumann 2017, 383). In her argument against resisting this double bind, Neumann looks to modeling, a profession that many earlier feminists have dismissed as alienating. She examines the creativity inherent in modeling activity to underscore the value of creating beauty in our lives. Thus, she argues that we should not discredit the pursuit of bodily beauty altogether (Neumann 2017, 393). Such a dismissal would fail to "acknowledg[e] that beauty matters as a major source of creativity" in human existence (Neumann 2017, 393). Appealing to the work of Elaine Scarry on beauty, Neumann contends that the "urge for beauty" is "an important part of what makes life meaningful" (Neumann 2017, 393).¹⁷

Like Neumann, I believe that bodily beauty is worthy of our appreciation. Nonetheless, reasserting that beauty matters to a meaningful human life does not yet tell us what to do with *stringent* standards of beauty, those that motivate the idea of a *repressive* narcissism. So, what should we do to resist such standards? Should we try, as Bartky herself suggests at the end of "Narcissism, Femininity, and Alienation," to embrace a "nonrepressive narcissism" (Bartky 1990, 42–44)? There Bartky encourages women to develop a feminist "practice" in which "our ideas of the beautiful will have to be expanded and so altered that we will perceive ourselves and one another very differently than we do now" (Bartky 1990, 43). Such a practice would encourage us to develop "our capacity to apprehend the beautiful" and would release it from "the narrow limits within which it is now confined" (Bartky 1990, 44). This would be a form of narcissism, but a nonrepressive one, since it is motivated by the expansion of ideals of beauty.

The idea that we should expand our ideals of beauty has been voiced more recently by A. W. Eaton and by Sherri Irvin. Eaton (2016) encourages us to resist fat oppression by developing broader "tastes" in bodies and including fat bodies within such tastes. Invoking Aristotle's ideas on taste and habituation, she devises a

¹⁷ On a related note, Ann J. Cahill (2003) underscores the value of feminine beautification by arguing that it can be a source of bonding for women and, as such, a "feminist pleasure."

strategy according to which we would habituate ourselves to develop a “taste in,” or aesthetic appreciation of, fat bodies. This strategy would require that we “produce and widely promote vivid, imaginatively engaging, and artistically interesting representations that *celebrate* fat bodies and encourage us to see them as likeable and attractive” (Eaton 2016, 53). I find that Eaton’s work offers a concrete and compelling strategy for loosening the grip that ideals of thinness have on many of us. In a similar vein, Irvin (2017) calls on us to resist body oppression through “aesthetic exploration,”—that is, an “aesthetic practice” in which we seek out “aesthetic affordances” across a wide range of embodiments (Irvin 2017, 9–13). As a model of aesthetic exploration, Irvin describes the experience one might have of one’s hand as one studies it “with open attention to its form and behavior” (Irvin 2017, 10). Likewise, the aesthetic exploration of bodies would consist in cultivating an open appreciation of different bodies. Irvin’s project is motivated by the recognition that “judgments of bodily and facial attractiveness get tied up with judgments about other aspects of the embodied person, resulting in a wide range of differential treatment that—with some exceptions—favors people whose bodies are judged to be attractive over those whose bodies are judged unattractive” (Irvin 2017, 3). If “judgments of attractiveness are a significant driver of harm” (Irvin 2017, 5), then, in the name of social justice, it behooves us to try to adopt strategies to mitigate this harm. Hence her appeal to the idea of “aesthetic exploration,” which would move us to appreciate a wider variety of bodies.

Some voices in the current body-positivity movement also urge us to reconsider what human beauty looks like. Put simply, the aim of this movement is to “reclaim” the body from a culture that only values certain bodies as “worthy and beautiful.”¹⁸ The movement encourages those whose bodies do not fit dominant norms to embrace their bodies. The issue, then, is how to define the reasons for embracing one’s body. For some body-positive activists, body positivity involves recognizing that “all bodies are beautiful.” A message like this resembles the ideas espoused by Bartky, Eaton, and Irvin, since it promotes an appreciation of the body as an aesthetic object—regardless of dominant ideals. “All bodies are beautiful” can be thought of as a nonrepressive, yet narcissistic, message, and also dovetails with Eaton’s and Irvin’s arguments for expanding our aesthetic appreciation of bodies.

I bring up the body-positivity movement not only because some of its messages intersect with arguments found in feminist philosophy but also because the movement has taken note of the thigh gap craze. Responses to it take such

¹⁸ As the bloggers for the *Ellipses Project* write, the body-positivity movement contests a culture that “recognizes only white, able-bodied, heterosexual, and thin bodies as worthy and beautiful.”

shape as the social media campaign #MermaidThighs or humorous jabs, such as T-shirts, bags, and mugs featuring the slogan “Not having a thigh gap saved my phone from falling in the toilet.”¹⁹ Such responses aim to shift the aesthetic norm, though perhaps not always successfully, from thinness to curvaceousness. Women who do not meet the thinspo ideal are encouraged to feel beautiful, now that their bodies are accepted.

Yet, it is important to mention that certain body-positive activists have questioned the emphasis on bodily beauty within the movement. Take Kaila Prins’s contributions on the website *Everyday Feminism*. As Prins (2015a) explains in “3 Reasons Why Body-Positive Ad Campaigns Are Less Empowering Than You Think,” the barrage of advertisements featuring “real beauty,” such as those in Dove’s campaigns, reinforces the sense that beauty is paramount for women. The advertisements imply that we should broaden the norms for feminine beauty, since we women must first and foremost feel beautiful. According to her, such campaigns do not challenge the longstanding imperative to be beautiful that has dominated women’s lives. The question of how we should relate to our bodies remains. In “3 Ways the Body-Positivity Movement Could Be More Body-Positive,” Prins (2015b) not only discourages us from defining ourselves in terms of beauty, but also advises us to focus on our lives as a whole. For instance, we should focus less on our bodies and more on pursuits like volunteer work or intellectual achievements. But this proposal fails to give due to the importance of the body in our everyday lives. That is what motivates me to propose a way of being towards our bodies that avoids the repressive narcissism Bartky depicts and that would complement our efforts to redefine physical beauty. The following section presents my own solution, which I call “sensualism.”

4. Sensualism

In line with my analysis of the thigh gap phenomenon as a form of alienation, I would like to invoke Marx’s account of unalienated labor in an effort to spell out my solution. In “Excerpts from James Mill’s *Elements of Political Economy*,” Marx indicates that unalienated labor would be “the free expression and hence the enjoyment of life” (Marx 1992, 278). It is admittedly difficult to spell out what the “free expression” of the body or bodily activity might consist in. Therefore, I would like to focus on the second part of Marx’s formula—namely, that unalienated labor would be the *enjoyment* of life. So too, I wish to argue that an unalienated relation to one’s body would consist in the capacity to *enjoy* one’s body.

¹⁹ The items mentioned can be found at <https://boldomatic.com/shop/products/HMGtRw>.

My response to the thigh gap phenomenon and structurally similar pursuits is to encourage those under the grip of them to cultivate physical activities for the sake of bodily pleasure. My version of body positivity, the sensualism I advocate, does not require that we focus less on our bodies, but that we reconsider what it means to focus on the body.

What activities could promote an unalienated relation to one's body? My view is that any bodily activity that can be pursued for the sake of enjoyment, and not for the sake of producing a certain appearance, could count: breathing exercises, yoga, sports, sex, and so on.^{20, 21} In the case of the thigh gap, cultivating an unalienated relation to one's body can be achieved by shifting one's focus from regimens designed to perfect the shape of one's thighs to activities that are pursued for the sake of pleasure. In short, one can develop a positive relation to one's body, not simply by expanding one's ideals of bodily beauty, but by developing an *inner* appreciation of the body through physical practices.

Not only does sensualism offer a solution to the alienation inherent in living according to certain feminine norms of beauty, but it is especially well suited to the thigh gap phenomenon, for the following reason. With many of the sensual activities I have mentioned comes the possibility of having a unified, rather than fragmented, experience of the body. This is especially true of the experience one may have while performing sports. For example, the movements of my arm feel like an extension of those of my torso and legs as I leap to catch a basketball.

My proposal of sensualism opens the possibility of a more pleasurable relation to one's body in the following sense: instead of being an object that needs to be sculpted, the body becomes a potential site of pleasure. This is not to say that

²⁰ I should note here that I adopt the label "sensualism"—not "eroticism"—because I think that there is a wide array of activities, including erotic ones but not confined to them, through which one can resist the temptation to self-objectification. Note, too, that I include only intentional activities in my list of activities that can be a source of pleasure. While there may be bodily processes (for example, breathing) that accompany bodily activities that are pleasurable, these do not figure under the description of the aim of the activity intended by the subject. The description under which I aim to jog is what matters to my thesis concerning sensualism. I can aim to jog to achieve a thigh gap or for the sheer *fun* of jogging. This is the distinction I wish to highlight.

²¹ My argument is not exclusively focused on activities that might promote physical fitness; for instance, I include meditative practices, such as breathing exercises. For excellent discussions of fitness and feminist practice, I direct the reader to the blog *Fit Is a Feminist Issue* (<https://fitisafeministissue.com>).

shedding norms like the thigh gap will guarantee states of bodily pleasure; we are all vulnerable to physical suffering. Rather, shedding such norms means letting go of the need to dominate the body, which, in turn, could lay the ground for a less unpleasant experience of one's body.²²

The proposal that sensualism could counter the thigh gap phenomenon allows us to return to Heyes's response to Bartky and Bordo. Sensual practices could contribute to the care of the self that Heyes sees as a motivating factor in women's participation in weight-loss dieting. Rather than caring for the self through dieting, we could fill this void through sensual practices. And I would add that seemingly demanding or punishing activities, such as running a marathon, might even contribute to this care of the self. Phenomena such as "runner's high" attest to the pleasure that a strenuous activity might afford. Likewise, experiences of "flow"—that is, of intense immersion and enjoyment—may accompany extremely demanding activities.²³ Care of the self through sensualism may come through many types of activities and not merely those that appear *prima facie* pleasurable.

At this juncture, the reader might object that certain ways of pursuing ideals of slenderness involve an inner focus on the body. Recall the model Kate Moss's notorious declaration: "Nothing tastes as good as skinny feels." Or think of the description some anorexics offer of the pleasure of feeling water in one's empty stomach. To respond to this objection, I believe that it is useful to return to the scope of this paper's argument: I am concerned with cases where the motivating factor in a dietary or physical regimen is the achievement of a certain physique. My sensualism proposal aims to *counterbalance* an *external* fixation on the body by promoting an inner appreciation of the body. Therefore, it is germane to cases where the form of harm is the excessive focus on the body's appearance—not in the cases where someone seeks to experience the sublime through fasting, to appeal to Lintott's argument. To be clear, sensualism is meant to be not a cure-all but rather a

²² I do not mean to imply that control cannot play a role in an unalienated relation to one's body. For example, control is part of some physical activities—maintaining balance in gymnastics or pacing oneself in an endurance event. Rather, I wish to distinguish between trying to maintain a certain type of domination (the type involved in striving for a demanding aesthetic ideal) and controlling the body (as we do when we master a physical exercise). The difference between control and the domination at issue in the thigh gap phenomenon rests on the aim with which an activity is undertaken. Controlling the body may be aimed at accomplishing a skillful activity, while working toward a thigh gap is aimed at achieving a certain bodily shape.

²³ For a discussion of "flow" in sports, see Swann et al. (2012).

strategy in addressing the gray area between a healthy relationship to one's body and a clinically problematic one.

Another related objection that may be raised concerning my proposal is this: Is there any reason to believe that sensualism will replace the pursuit of the thigh gap rather than just happily coexist with it? For example, don't many of us run for the sake of "runner's high" *and* for the sake of weight loss? To answer this question, I would first clarify that if the *primary* end is the pleasure of fasting, then this falls out of the scope of my argument. Second, however, if the pleasure of exercising is part of the picture, then I think that this is a promising personal change, one that ought not be discounted. My goal has been to propose a solution to offset our tendency to live our bodies from the outside. If someone pursues a physical activity for the pleasure it brings her even though she may also have a secondary interest in shaping her appearance, then this is already a victory to be celebrated. Likewise, if someone were to pursue one form of exercise for the sake of a certain physical feature while she pursues another form of exercise for the sheer fun of it, then this too would represent an advance on relating solely to one's body as an object of beauty to be perfected. Thus, I grant that sensualism and the pursuit of the thigh gap might coexist. Yet, I would counter that the very possibility that sensualism may figure in a person's relationship to her body would mark a lesser degree of alienation. I would add that a person need not fully commit to rejecting the thigh gap before embracing sensualism. I am optimistic that when someone incorporates sensualism in her life, there will be a shift in her understanding of why she undertakes different physical activities and that this shift might propel further positive ones.

Before I turn to the challenges that might be faced in embracing sensualism, I should say a few words about another positive aspect to turning one's focus away from sculpting one's physical appearance. Besides the physical enjoyment I have emphasized, such a shift may also bring a personal sense of empowerment, because feelings of pride and resourcefulness often come from cultivating a new way of being and introducing a positive change in one's life. This has certainly been my experience.

5. Individual Practices and Structural Oppression

Let me close by responding to a worry that the reader might have concerning the emancipatory potential of individual practices, such as the sensual activities I envision, given the structural character of the oppression that beauty standards like the thigh gap perpetuate.

To understand this structural character, it is useful to pause for a moment on what the structuralist Pierre Bourdieu calls "symbolic violence." Symbolic violence differs from "overt violence" in that this form of violence presupposes of those subjected to it a "complicity which is neither a passive submission to an external constraint nor a free adherence to values" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 168). In

my eyes, thinspo is a form of symbolic violence. Women subscribe to thinspo ideals neither because women are physically coerced nor because they freely choose those ideals. They are caught in an intermediate position, in that they adhere to the ideals because they are socialized to do so and because the penalties for not conforming to them are high. (Think of the stigma women in the West face when they do not conform to standards for female body hair.) The thigh gap and other related phenomena constitute ideals that many women believe they freely embrace but are in fact seduced into adopting in our culture.

Women appear locked in a cycle in which they are incentivized to cultivate a certain appearance; at the same time, cultivating this appearance maintains it as a norm. The problem this paper has sought to address is how to break out of this vicious cycle, and I have argued that sensualism offers a way out of the demands of beauty work. But can an individual response remedy a structural issue?

The incentive to pursue sensual activities, I have suggested, lies in having a more pleasurable relation to one's body. But does this incentive trump those promised by social recognition? And if not, can this situation be changed? My view is that the possibility for personal change can be increased by one's being part of a smaller community, a community of resistance. To defend this point, I draw on Fahs and Delgado's (2011) "The Specter of Excess: Race, Class, and Gender in Women's Body Hair Narratives," which analyzes an experiment in which participants, college-aged women from a course on women and health, were asked not to shave and to record their feelings about their bodies. Fahs and Delgado found that "although the original intent of the experiment was to challenge social norms and subvert compulsory shaving demands, the assignment ultimately created a new social norm within the classroom" (2011, 23). In fact, the students who had originally decided to opt out of the experiment eventually decided to join the other women who were not shaving, since they felt left out. In other words, not shaving became the social norm within this community. Not only that, but the experiment encouraged some of the women to continue not shaving after it was over (23). And regardless of whether they returned to shaving or not, the women's post-experiment responses to the surveys "indicate that even temporary and purposeful breaks from social norms can powerfully socialize women into an altered understanding of how much they 'choose' to do things such as shave, wear makeup, or conform to standard presentations of femininity" (Fahs and Delgado 2011, 21). The experiment served to *raise awareness* of the norms that the women subscribed to for the most part without thinking.

The thrust of the essays collected in *Embodied Resistance* is that countercultures, small communities that resist social norms, can support those who challenge them. And though the example of body hair concerns the broadening of standards of beauty, there is still a lesson to be learned from it that is applicable to

sensualism—namely, that the incentive to challenge social norms is bolstered when we come together. Or, to put this point negatively, the promise of a sensual relation to their bodies might, alone, be insufficient to motivate some women to give up the prizes they win from conforming to standards of beauty. Although my philosophy of sensualism concerns one’s inner relation to one’s body and might, therefore, appear to be merely individual, there is no reason to believe that we cannot make the *value* of sensualism a communal matter. This philosophy may take hold when we form communities that encourage a sensual relation to our bodies. Our task should not be to elevate any particular physique as an ideal but to enshrine sensualism as a social norm. In this regard, it is a viable response to a structural problem if we think of it as a collective practice. Sensualism could be a rallying point for women and, as such, a *feminist practice*.

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