

Conflict and Cosmopolitanism: A Critical Notice of Dominic McIver Lopes's *Aesthetic Injustice* (Oxford University Press, 2024)

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Abstract

Dominic McIver Lopes's *Aesthetic Injustice* (2024) makes an ambitious and important contribution to discussions of the relationship between aesthetics and justice. After briefly summarizing the distinction between aesthetic injustice and weaponized aesthetics which motivates much of the book, we turn our attention to three issues. First, we put critical pressure on Lopes's claim of originality by showing that many earlier scholars and artists had already explored the unjust restriction of aesthetic capacities. Second, we argue that Lopes's cosmopolitanism is a universalizing framework that risks erasing asymmetries between victims and perpetrators and leaves the theory ill-equipped to address oppressive aesthetic cultures. Third, we apply critical scrutiny to Lopes's assumption that aesthetic cultures are "conflict-free zones," drawing on everyday and artistic practices to argue that conflict is a pervasive and sometimes desirable feature of aesthetic life. This, we argue, casts doubt on cosmopolitanism as the foundation for a theory of aesthetic injustice. We conclude by questioning the desirability of a cosmopolitan theory based on the preservation of the value diversity and social autonomy of aesthetic cultures. Please note that in sections III and IV, we discuss gendered and racialized violence.

I. INTRODUCTION

Dominic McIver Lopes's *Aesthetic Injustice* (2024) is an ambitious and important contribution to discussions of the relationship between aesthetics and justice. Extending his work in *Beyond Art* (2014) and *Being for Beauty* (2018), which analyzed the nature and value of aesthetic practices, *Aesthetic Injustice* shifts focus to the social arrangements that shape how such practices can flourish or fail. The book's ambition lies in showing that an overlooked domain of social injustice—the

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aesthetic—demands attention, and that examining it is necessary to complete our account of social injustices.

To clarify this proposal, Lopes distinguishes *aesthetic injustice* from what he calls *weaponized aesthetics*. The latter refers to cases where aesthetic mechanisms are used to cause non-aesthetic harms, such as when racist beauty ideals are deployed to legitimize racist exclusions. By contrast, aesthetic injustice harms people by specifically targeting their aesthetic capacities and agency, which Lopes construes broadly to include far more than just making and appreciating art. He illustrates this distinction through three examples:

1. Pecola Breedlove (from Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye*) is harmed in her capacity as an aesthetic agent when she becomes unable to perceive beauty after a white clerk treats her with disgust.
2. The Haida are harmed in their capacity for cultural aesthetic autonomy by Canadian government initiatives meant to honor them, since these threaten to freeze their aesthetic culture in a static state rather than acknowledging it as a living, dynamic culture.
3. Nat, who is blind, is harmed in his capacity for aesthetic agency by the fact that blind people, unlike sighted people, are not routinely afforded opportunities to participate in pictorial arts, when in fact they do have the capacity to process pictorial information and express themselves pictorially.

These examples motivate the cosmopolitan framework that anchors the book. Aesthetic injustice, Lopes tells us, occurs when people are harmed “in their capacities as aesthetic agents” (2024, 4)—when their ability to evaluate, create, or engage aesthetically is impaired—in ways that undermine two justice-relevant interests. The first is an interest in the value diversity of aesthetic cultures; that is, the good of many schemes of aesthetic value existing side by side. The second justice-relevant interest is in the social autonomy of aesthetic cultures; that is, the good of each culture's profile being shaped chiefly by the acts of its own members. In other words, Lopes's definition of aesthetic injustice is inseparable from his cosmopolitan commitments: a harm to aesthetic agency counts as unjust precisely insofar as it undermines the value diversity or social autonomy of aesthetic cultures. On this view, aesthetic injustice is bound up with large-scale social arrangements: it is not a matter of individual misfortune, but a structural defect in how societies organize their aesthetic life.

The book unfolds accordingly. Part I develops the overarching conceptual framework and defends the cosmopolitan theory. Part II examines the feedback loop between weaponized aesthetics and aesthetic injustice through case studies of cultural appropriation, bodily beauty, and disability. Part III considers what kinds of institutional and policy measures could protect aesthetic diversity and autonomy without lapsing into paternalism or illiberal constraint. The result is a unified account that integrates conceptual analysis, case study, and normative reflection, and in which harms to aesthetic agency are presented as neither trivial nor derivative but as a distinctive form of injustice that any adequate theory of justice must acknowledge.

Aesthetic Injustice offers two central achievements. First, it provides a systematic account of connections between aesthetic and social injustice. Second, Lopes's value pluralism and cosmopolitanism offer an antidote to philosophical aesthetics' almost exclusively Anglo-European focus. The book is characteristically dense, tightly argued, ecumenical, and steeped in a rich array of examples from everyday life and from diverse cultural contexts across the world, reflecting one of its central motivations: the fact of aesthetic diversity. We agree that his systematic account marks an important step in recognizing the centrality of aesthetic life to social justice. At the same time, the very ambition and originality of Lopes's project invite further scrutiny. We argue that a theory of aesthetic injustice grounded in cosmopolitanism has limitations and that certain aspects of his proposal merit further problematization.

Our comments are organized in three parts. First, we examine Lopes's claim of originality and show that many earlier scholars and artists had already explored the unjust restriction of aesthetic capacities. Second, we turn to his cosmopolitan theory, arguing that its universalizing framework

risks erasing asymmetries between victims and perpetrators and leaves the theory ill-equipped to address oppressive aesthetic cultures. Third, we put pressure on his assumption that aesthetic cultures are “conflict-free zones,” drawing on everyday and artistic practices to argue that conflict is a pervasive feature of aesthetic life and that this casts doubt on cosmopolitanism as the foundation for a theory of aesthetic injustice. We conclude by questioning the desirability of a cosmopolitan theory based on the preservation of value diversity and social autonomy. Please note that in sections III and IV, we discuss gendered and racialized violence.

II. HAS AESTHETIC INJUSTICE BEEN NEGLECTED?

Lopes presents his account as original on the grounds that aesthetic injustice has been largely neglected in favor of weaponized aesthetics. He distinguishes the latter—cases where aesthetic forms are used to inflict non-aesthetic harms—from aesthetic injustice, which targets people in their specifically aesthetic capacities. Yet this claim of originality demands scrutiny: the unjust restriction of aesthetic capacities has been a recurring theme across decades of scholarship and artistic practice, often developed most forcefully by members of oppressed groups.

While Lopes is among the first to use the term “aesthetic injustice”—along with Gustavo H. Dalaqua (2020) and Rachel Fraser (2024)—it must be noted that the *idea* of aesthetic injustice stands within a long tradition. For instance, the field of feminist aesthetics began decades ago (Ecker 1986; Brand and Korsmeyer 1995). Decolonial aesthetics got its start in the 1980s with the work of Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) and María Lugones (1987). Anita Silvers (2000) began developing disability aesthetics over 25 years ago, and Tobin Siebers’ (2010) book *Disability Aesthetics* came out 15 years ago. Adrian Piper (1996, 1999) and Paul C. Taylor (2016) have addressed racism and aesthetics, and special issues of aesthetics journals have been dedicated to race and aesthetics (Roelofs 2009; Peterson and Eaton 2019). In the 1920s Alain Locke (1925, 1928) and W.E.B. Du Bois (1926) debated how art could play the important social role of creating respect and self-respect for African Americans.

Have these earlier discussions focused only on weaponized aesthetics and not on aesthetic injustice, as Lopes suggests? We note that many thinkers have explored how aesthetic agency is restricted in contexts of oppression. Art historian Linda Nochlin (1971) analyzed how women were for centuries harmed “in their capacities as aesthetic agents,” to use Lopes’s terminology, by being denied access to the training necessary to participate in figurative artmaking. Film scholar Laura Mulvey (1975) argued that under patriarchy, women are constrained to be only the object and not the subject of the gaze, with far less power to determine narrative structure and meaning-making in the aesthetic realm. Black lesbian feminist poet Audre Lorde (1985) argued for the power of poetry to resist oppression that saps women’s creative potential. Disability scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2009) noted that when viewers turn away from disabled people, they undermine the latter’s agency in commonplace forms of self-presentation and self-definition.

Artists, too, have addressed unjust restriction of aesthetic agency. Artist-activist collective the Guerrilla Girls (1998), formed in the mid-1980s, argued that women’s artistic disempowerment was ongoing, not a thing of the past. In his performance and installation artwork *Artifact Piece* (1985–1987), James Luna (Luiseño) lay in a vitrine, surrounded by everyday artifacts from his life, to highlight the treatment of Indigenous people as historical objects of knowledge rather than as living persons engaged in creative agency. Black artist and curator Howardena Pindell published a report demonstrating the exclusion of artists of color from New York galleries, also using the material in her 1988 artwork *Art Crow/Jim Crow* (Pindell 1988; Buick 2022, 1–3). Pindell argued, “As a result of the closed nepotistic interlocking network, artists of color face an industry-wide ‘restraint of trade,’ limiting their ability to show and sell their work” (1988, 160). She adds, “Some white artists use us as subject matter but we are not permitted to interpret ourselves on the same platform” (1988, 161).

Scholars of racial and colonial oppression, likewise, have noted that undermining people’s aesthetic capacities to engage in art creation, self-expression, value formation, and self-fashioning is central to projects of dehumanization. Edward Said (1978) argued that orientalist colonialism

involves depriving people and nations of their capacity for aesthetic self-definition. [María Lugones \(1987\)](#) described the distorted aesthetic perception that is instilled within racial and gender hierarchies, encouraging women of color to align their values with the oppressor's. Gloria Anzaldúa, recalling being physically struck with a ruler for speaking Spanish at school recess, decries "linguistic terrorism" in which the capacity for self-expression is undermined when one's language, accent, or style of speech is denigrated (1987, 80). "El Anglo con cara de inocente," she says, "nos arrancó la lengua" (1987, 76). Saidiya Hartman recounts the role of forced aesthetic spectacle in chattel slavery, with enslaved people violently coerced to sing, dance, and otherwise perform contentment or jollity to maintain the falsehood of their suitability for bondage and enhance their torturers' profits (1997, 36ff). Paul C. Taylor discusses accounts by W.E.B. Du Bois, [Ralph Ellison \(1952\)](#), and [Frantz Fanon \(1952\)](#) suggesting that "black people ... have to struggle against losing sight of themselves, against losing the capacity to envision and construct themselves," since hostile racialization aims to assault their aesthetic capacities by forcing them to see themselves "through the eyes of others" (2016, 40).

Finally, Brazilian philosopher Gustavo H. Dalaqua coined the term "aesthetic injustice," which he defines as "harm done to someone specifically with regards to her aesthetic capacities," in an article by that title (2020, 1). Dalaqua points to the work of Augusto Boal, a Brazilian practitioner and theorist of theater, especially his book *The Aesthetic of the Oppressed* (2006).

These examples are far from exhaustive. That unjust restriction of aesthetic agency features prominently in discussions of oppression is no surprise: bell hooks suggests that undermining of aesthetic capacities is central to oppressive projects, such that "if one could make a people lose touch with their capacity to create, lose sight of their will and their power to make art, then the work of subjugation, of colonization, is complete" (1995, xv). Hooks also observes that progressive discussions of these phenomena sometimes fail to cite the very scholars, often women of color, who have laid the relevant groundwork (1995, xiii–xv).

What might explain the fact that Lopes does not acknowledge these as discussions of aesthetic injustice? Lopes seems to offer an interpretation of aesthetic injustice as a circumscribed field, one that both takes shape within aesthetics and derives from it. Examples of aesthetic injustice that are deeply interwoven with systems of oppression, then, seem to be positioned outside his field of inquiry. Indeed, *Aesthetic Injustice* does not discuss the concept of oppression; the word 'oppression' does not even appear in the book.¹ But in light of the many studies that have explored the relationship between aesthetic agency and oppression, we are skeptical about the possibility of isolating an aesthetic injustice that is not interwoven with political and social motivations.

III. IS COSMOPOLITANISM THE RIGHT FRAMEWORK?

The fact that people are harmed in their capacities as aesthetic agents is not sufficient to constitute aesthetic injustice according to Lopes: for "not all harms are unjust" (2024, 6). Injustice, he says, is a matter of large-scale social arrangements. If we agree that Lopes's three central examples are examples of injustice, there should be a theory of large-scale social arrangements that accounts for what makes these incidents unjust. The examples are, that is, observations in need of a theory. Both the concept of weaponized aesthetics and Lopes's cosmopolitan theory of aesthetic injustice play roles in the explanation of the injustice.

Let us return to the example of Pecola. The harm she suffers consists in the undermining of her aesthetic agency: targeted by racist disgust, she becomes less able to appreciate the aesthetic affordances of the world, and specifically of Black bodies, including her own. Why is this unjust? Lopes's answer unfolds in two parts. First, "aesthetic injustice ... is real because it stems from and compounds aesthetics weaponized through appropriation and ideological ideals of bodily beauty" (125). That is, there is a positive feedback loop between the undermining of aesthetic capacities and the use of aesthetic mechanisms to produce social injustice in the non-aesthetic realm. The erosion of Pecola's capacity to appreciate Black forms of embodiment may weaken her ability to resist the dehumanization to which she is subject when her body is aesthetically stigmatized under white supremacy; and this dehumanization, in turn, reinforces and augments the assault on

Pecola's aesthetic capacities. This assault is a form of injustice in that it is part of the apparatus that maintains large-scale social arrangements that we independently recognize as unjust.

What distinguishes aesthetic harms that occupy this positive feedback loop with weaponized aesthetics from those that do not? The second part of Lopes's answer is that aesthetic harms are unjust when they violate one of two aesthetically relevant interests that we all share. The first is "an interest in the value diversity of aesthetic cultures ... [W]e all have an interest in there being a diverse range of aesthetic cultures" (6). An aesthetic culture involves a group of people who interact, in a specific domain, around a shared aesthetic profile. For instance, people engaging with "new world wine making" (6) privilege certain kinds of aesthetic qualities in wines, and this makes for a shared aesthetic profile that coordinates activities of winemaking, consumption, appreciation, and so forth. Second, "we have an interest in the social autonomy of aesthetic cultures," which is "an interest in each aesthetic culture having its destiny in the hands of its own members" (6).

Why should we accept the cosmopolitan theory's claims about these two shared interests? The dialectic runs as follows.² When we attend to the three central examples, we can see that something unjust is happening: people are having their aesthetic agency undermined by virtue of their membership in an aesthetic culture.³ Moreover, these injustices "stem from and compound" the injustices associated with weaponized aesthetics. And the aesthetic harms that stand in this reciprocal causal relationship with weaponized aesthetics have something in common: namely, they all violate one or both of the two cosmopolitan interests. At this point, Lopes states, "A case has now been made that the theory earns its keep because it pinpoints interests that we have. We have the interests because the existence of aesthetic injustice is needed to make full sense of weaponized aesthetics" (156).

Does the harm to Pecola involve a violation of one of the two cosmopolitan interests? Lopes suggests that white supremacist behavior like the clerk's undermines the value diversity of aesthetic cultures: it "deprives us of an opportunity to multiply cultures of bodily beauty that can shelter and invite ... respect for multiple valid, incommensurable, logically compatible, and sometimes mutually incomprehensible ideals of bodily beauty" (119).

Let us make a few observations about this picture. First, the invitation to "multiply cultures of bodily beauty" suggests that we need to add additional aesthetic cultures, but not that we should modify or disqualify any existing aesthetic cultures. The aesthetic value profile of the white supremacist aesthetic culture that the clerk inhabits could remain intact. The clerk's wrong, by Lopes's lights, is not in adhering to that aesthetic value profile, but in acting on that profile in a way that suggests that other profiles are not also legitimate: that is, failing to afford them appropriate respect. Indeed, the value diversity of aesthetic cultures would be reduced if we simply disrupted or eliminated white supremacist aesthetic cultures.

Second, if we locate the injustice in the violation of an interest in the value diversity of aesthetic cultures, the clerk has been harmed in just the same way that Pecola has been. And, indeed, this seems to be Lopes's position: for "Pecola represents us all, no matter what the colour of our skins, in as much as we have all internalized the same ideal of bodily beauty. We see bodily beauty too narrowly, and that is a harm to our capacities as aesthetic agents" (118). Indeed, the harm to the clerk, on this view, has probably been more severe than the harm to Pecola: for Pecola likely has access to family or community resources for resisting white supremacist beauty standards and celebrating Black beauty that the clerk lacks. So, while the example was initially presented as involving a harm to a Black woman, Lopes's theoretical analysis points toward an equal, or perhaps even more severe, harm to the white supremacist man who has treated her with acute disrespect. We are troubled by this shift in focus: the aesthetic harm to Pecola is in fact far more severe, since it is her ability to appreciate the beauty of her own body, and the bodies of others in her community, that is assaulted by aesthetically expressed racial hatred.⁴ But it's not clear that the cosmopolitan theory offers resources to acknowledge this specific harm.

Part of the problem is cosmopolitanism's universalizing bent.⁵ Cosmopolitanism emphasizes the interconnectedness of all human beings, regardless of their affiliations or identities. According

to the cosmopolitan, we are all “citizens of the world” and belong to a single moral community undergirded by universal moral values. However, some have argued that cosmopolitanism’s universalism appears to conflict with, and so not grant a role to, our attachments to particular communities, cultures, and places. For this reason, Lopes follows those, like [Anthony Appiah \(2005, 2007, ch. 6\)](#), who embrace a “rooted” cosmopolitanism that aims to balance local and universal-global identities by grounding claims about how to handle cultural difference “at least partly in local cultural reasons” ([Lopes 2024, 26](#)).

And yet, Lopes’s claim that “Pecola represents us all” sounds like something straight out of the white feminism playbook: first, it shifts focus away from unjust harm to a Black woman to unjust harm to “us all,” and second and related, it appears to convert a form of injustice uniquely faced by Black women into a common injustice that affects everyone. [bell hooks \(1986\)](#), [Kimberlé Crenshaw \(1989\)](#), and other intersectional feminists have mightily resisted the notion of injustices and oppression that are common to all women—much less to “us all”—regardless of intersecting identities. “The idea of ‘common oppression’ was a false and corrupt platform disguising and mystifying the true nature of women’s varied and complex social reality,” writes [hooks \(1986, 127\)](#). This criticism cuts equally well against cosmopolitanism. It is doubtful that “we all” are harmed by white supremacist ideals of bodily beauty, much less harmed equally.

Lopes’s proposed remedy is “to propagate images of bodies from diverse cultures of bodily beauty. Instead of finding everyone a place in an overarching aesthetic culture, the strategy is to promote and portray many cultures, such that everyone can find one in which to thrive. Images that convey the variety of bodily beauty cultures can train us to see bodies as complying with local ideals that might carry great weight for insiders but that are obviously not obligatory for everyone” ([2024, 124](#)). Notice how this plays out in practice. We may have an aesthetic culture that prizes strict adherence to cisgender norms of masculinity and femininity, such that bodies that do not comply with these norms are seen as ugly or disgusting. We may have an aesthetic culture that treats young, thin, non-disabled bodies as beautiful and perfect, while seeing old, fat, and disabled bodies as ugly or disgusting. As long as, say, disabled people are able to construct a distinct aesthetic culture with a different aesthetic profile that prizes their forms of embodiment, there is no need for adjustment of the aesthetic value profile of any other aesthetic culture—and, indeed, requiring such adjustment might be seen as undermining the social autonomy of that aesthetic culture. The only thing that white supremacist, ableist, or cisheteropatriarchal aesthetic cultures need to do, on the cosmopolitan picture, is acknowledge that some people may belong to different aesthetic cultures with different, but still legitimate, aesthetic value profiles. A white supremacist aesthetic culture, then, should acknowledge that the aesthetic valuing of Black forms of embodiment carries “great weight for insiders” to Black aesthetic cultures but is “obviously not obligatory” for the white supremacist aesthetic culture to adopt.

The cosmopolitan ideal of mutual respect for multiple aesthetic ideals may work fine in many contexts. I can respect the aesthetic value profiles of musical traditions and cuisines from other aesthetic cultures, even if my own tastes and preferences do not align with those aesthetic value profiles. But human bodies are not cultural products, and to be embodied in a certain way is not thereby to belong to a certain aesthetic culture. Moreover, the body is profoundly connected to the self, and many of its attributes are not chosen or reasonably alterable. Lopes’s picture seems to allow that the clerk, and the aesthetic culture to which he belongs, are free to aesthetically prize white forms of embodiment and aesthetically abhor Black ones, as long as they do not prevent Pecola from seeking out an aesthetic culture with a different aesthetic value profile. Pecola has no claim on the white members of her actual community to affirmatively value her embodiment. Her only claim is for them to recognize that their aesthetic abhorrence is relative to their own aesthetic culture rather than universal; this recognition might move them to tone down their displays of revulsion. In our view, this stops well short of an adequate solution to the problem of white supremacist beauty standards.

One might protest that Lopes’s proposed solution of “propagat[ing] images of bodies from diverse cultures of bodily beauty” will not in fact leave the white supremacist aesthetic value

profile intact: for as people are exposed to new cultures of bodily beauty, their capacities for aesthetic appreciation will expand, and they will come to directly experience the aesthetic value of a wider array of bodies. But Lopes's brief presentation of the solution leaves us with unanswered questions.

What might actually result from multiplying cultures of bodily beauty? Is it possible for white supremacist aesthetics to lose its supremacist nature, while remaining essentially the aesthetic culture that it is? Or is the supremacist attitude, and the accompanying disgust and distaste toward non-white embodiment, baked in to the aesthetic profile of white beauty culture? Even if supremacy can be separated from the white beauty profile, is the promotion of diversity and autonomy of marginalized cultures enough to effect this change? How does the history of racism, as well as present conditions of structural inequality, affect how these dynamics play out? What is needed for historically marginalized aesthetic cultures to get on even footing with those that currently dominate?

Perhaps Lopes's strategy is indeed the way to enact aesthetic justice. But without engaging these questions thoroughly, we question whether cosmopolitanism is the panacea he suggests. If promoting cosmopolitan values is not enough to disturb a supremacist aesthetic culture, then Lopes faces a serious problem—the cosmopolitan theory does not have the resources to recommend a shift in the aesthetic value profile of a particular aesthetic culture, or of the community within which it is embedded, even when that profile encodes patterns of valuing and behavior that are demonstrably harmful.

IV. IS THE AESTHETIC “NATURALLY CONFLICT-FREE”?

Lopes insists that aesthetic cultures are “naturally conflict-free zones” (2024, 65). He has in mind not conflict over resources but, rather, what he calls “incompatibility” conflicts, where the aesthetic value profile of one aesthetic culture undermines or otherwise clashes with the aesthetic value profile of another aesthetic culture. While this “conflict-free” aspect appears to apply both internally to a given aesthetic culture and to conflicts between different aesthetic cultures, Lopes is most interested in the latter. This is due to Lopes's commitment to cosmopolitanism which holds that while aesthetic cultures may be so different from one another as to be incommensurable, aesthetic cultures are nevertheless compatible with one another, at least in the “natural” case. It follows for Lopes that incompatibility conflict between aesthetic cultures is a “degenerate condition” (65).

While we refrain from speculation about the “nature” of aesthetic cultures, we do have substantial doubts about framing incompatibility conflicts as corrupt deviations from the norm. First, aesthetic cultures are rife with incompatibility conflicts. Second, incompatibility conflicts can be aesthetically favorable and generative. Third, we should expect incompatibility conflicts given that aesthetic values are often inextricably connected to ethical and political value. Fourth, some of these aesthetic-ethical-political conflicts are so troubling as to demand resistance, particularly in cases of oppression. We explain these reasons below, but first we explore in more detail Lopes's claim that aesthetic cultures are “naturally conflict-free.”

Lopes tells us that “minimally conceived,” an aesthetic culture is “a group-level regularity of aesthetic activities—appreciating, making, performing, editing, and the like—that is explained by members of the group sharing formative social conditions” (30). His list of aesthetic cultures is expansive and emblematic of everyday aesthetics, even if he only minimally cites proponents of this important subfield.⁶ The list includes “Kochi rickshaw decoration, ASL poetry, Korean television, Shetland sheep dog breeding, new world wine making, old world wine making, gardening, image memes, some philosophical writing and scientific illustration, gardening, Go but not crazy eights, abstract expressionist painting but also house painting” (5). While we think it admirable that Lopes's minimal conception permits such an expansive and varied list of aesthetic activities, we also worry that the examples themselves skew heavily toward the conflict-free. If you love Korean television and I love Go, we might compete for time and space to pursue our hobbies at our local community center, but this would be a conflict for resources, not an “incompatibility conflict”; the values of Korean television do not oppose, undermine, or otherwise clash with Go (59–60).

Part of the problem is that Lopes appears to underestimate the role of the aesthetic in the cultures of enduring sociopolitical groups, what he calls “organic cultures.” Lopes writes, “Organic cultures might articulate webs of thick concepts that knit together ways of life and constitute the identities for which agents demand recognition. While some aesthetic cultures are parts of organic cultures, aesthetic culture certainly does not supply a thickly comprehensive vision of how to live” (65) We argue that aesthetic culture is much more richly entangled with such comprehensive visions than Lopes acknowledges, resulting in forms of incompatibility conflict that frequently flare up in aesthetic life.

In the European artistic tradition, for example, there are many cases where an aesthetic culture actively devalues another and this devaluing is endemic, rather than extrinsic, to the former’s aesthetic profile. To take one famous example, in the 16th century, art historian Giorgio Vasari introduced the term “Gothic,” which was synonymous with “barbaric,” to describe medieval architecture (Vasari 1568). For Vasari and many of his contemporaries, medieval architecture was not merely different but represented a grotesque deviation from the classical ideals they valued. In fact, for them, classical form was not merely an artistic preference but an embodiment of ethical and civic virtues. The aesthetic values of harmony, proportion, and symmetry mirrored the balanced and rational constitution of a well-ordered society, and of a new relationship with nature and with God. By contrast, the Gothic style, with its vertical thrust and irregularities, was taken to reflect an older worldview in which the individual stood small before the overwhelming divine. Thus, the aesthetic rejection of the Gothic was inseparable from a rejection of the social and religious ideals it was thought to express. In the same way, the nineteenth-century Gothic Revival explicitly linked Gothic architecture to ethical and religious renewal: industrial modernity was identified as the cause of the corruption of both art and social life, and the recovery of medieval forms was part of a prescriptive program for restoring communal integrity and spiritual vitality (Pugin 1836). Here again, an aesthetic profile functioned as a vehicle for a wider set of moral, social, and religious commitments. Another, more recent example of aesthetic incompatibility is the Nazi regime’s 1937 travelling exhibition dedicated to *Entartete Kunst*, or ‘Degenerate Art.’ The exhibition was organized for propaganda purposes, with the goal of denigrating art not approved by the regime, in contrast with the *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung*, which glorified so-called “pure German art.” Among the artists considered “degenerate” were masters such as George Grosz, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Paul Klee, Franz Marc, Emil Nolde, Otto Dix, Pablo Picasso, Piet Mondrian, Marc Chagall and Vasily Kandinsky. Their works were displayed alongside derisive captions such as “Madness becomes method” or “Nature as seen by sick minds” (Barron 1991). The exhibition exemplified an aesthetic culture that actively repudiated and sought to eradicate a competing aesthetic profile on the basis of ideological, moral, and sociopolitical commitments.

Aesthetic conflicts are also ubiquitous in the shared spaces, interpersonal relationships, and practices that structure our everyday experience of the world. We are constantly immersed in environments structured by sounds, smells, visual arrangements, and spatial rhythms reflecting culturally embedded aesthetic preferences and orientations. Genuine conflict frequently arises: incompatibility that, while often framed as “mere” difference in taste, is rooted in deeper, culturally shaped ways of inhabiting and perceiving the world (Irvin 2025). For example, people sometimes call the police to enforce their aesthetic preferences for a quiet or orderly environment (Gonzalez 2022; Whittaker 2022). Even where everyday frictions do not escalate into open conflict, the normalization of the aesthetic preferences and expectations of some groups often devalues and restricts the expressive possibilities of other groups.

Conflict between aesthetic cultures is not only frequent and ubiquitous; Jonathan Gingerich (2025) argues that aesthetic conflicts can be aesthetically favorable and generative, a point he illustrates with compelling examples from the Euro-American avant-garde. A world without aesthetic agonism, Gingerich argues, “is one in which the life-rendering potential of art has been neutralized” because “we could not have the depth of feeling that we should hope to find in aesthetics if it did not, at least sometimes, involve extremely intractable and intense conflict” (2025, 325).

Gingerich notes that his view is “comfortably aligned with an approach that draws a less stark divide between the aesthetic and other domains of value” (2025, 327).

Lopes intentionally avoids connections between aesthetic domains of value and ethico-political ones.⁷ While it may be conceptually fruitful to isolate purely aesthetic forms of injustice from ethico-political concerns, it forces Lopes’s theory to ignore the many diverse kinds of incompatibility conflict that, as we argue, are not only endemic to aesthetic cultures but also central to understanding aesthetic injustice in its most acute real-world manifestations.

Relatedly, Lopes’s theory does not address the ways in which aesthetics is, as Yuriko Saito puts it, a form of everyday worldmaking: “everyday aesthetics determines the quality of society, and ultimately the state of the world, for better or worse” (2017, 4; cf. 2007). As Saito argues, “it is not possible to surgically remove life values from aesthetic values” (Saito 2017, 207). As an example, consider the aesthetics of lawns and yards in the US.⁸ The manicured lawn is a status symbol, requiring time, effort, money, and water to maintain. As Saito notes, the aesthetic standards governing lawn culture are “order, uniformity, neatness, and cleanliness,” which go hand-in-hand with, and are understood as expressing, ethical values: “industriousness, work ethic, orderliness, propriety, neighborliness, and civic-mindedness” (Saito 2017, 143). The twenty-first century has seen a backlash against the grass lawn because its intense upkeep damages the environment. A revised ethico-political understanding of the grass lawn motivates a revised aesthetic according to which a maximalist lawn with no grass but full of native plants and pollinator-friendly “weeds” is not “messy” and “unkempt” but, rather, a site of “fecundity, productivity, and ... abundance” (Saito 2017, 207). These are rarely compatible aesthetic cultures: the person with the immaculate grass lawn often feels that their neighbor’s “unkempt” eco-friendly lawn diminishes the neighborhood’s overall tidiness, while the person with the eco-friendly lawn feels that their neighbor’s pursuit of order and uniformity expresses disregard for the environment.

Where aesthetic incompatibility conflict exists, the conflicting aesthetic cultures may not be symmetrically implicated: one of the two aesthetic cultures may have an aesthetic value profile that is entangled in a harmful way with ethical and political values, for instance when an aesthetic culture is characterized by dominance and oppression—again noting that “oppression” is a concept overlooked in Lopes’s entire treatment of aesthetic injustice. In some cases, an aesthetic culture is itself weaponized in the sense that it targets members of specific identity groups for violence, mistreatment, scorn, hatred, or disgust. As we discuss below, the aesthetic can contribute directly to systems of violence and oppression. Lopes’ theory offers few resources to address such cases, since it cordons off aesthetic injustice not only from the ethico-political, but also from violence.

While Lopes acknowledges that violent coercion is one central mechanism that sustains social injustice, he asserts that “elements of aesthetic culture are not good instruments of violent coercion, so set that mechanism aside” (2024, 8). This claim appears to follow from Lopes’ characterization of aesthetic cultures as “naturally conflict-free.” But as we have argued, there are reasons to reject this characterization, undermining any support it provides for the claim that elements of aesthetic cultures are poor instruments of violent coercion. Moreover, there is considerable evidence to the contrary: many elements of aesthetic cultures (as Lopes defines them) promote or otherwise bolster violent coercion by justifying it, making it socially acceptable, commemorating it, glamorizing it, or otherwise validating it. We explore two examples—and here we would like to reiterate a trigger warning for racialized and sexualized violence.

First, many artistic forms aestheticize rape: for example, Italian Renaissance oil painting (Eaton 2003), some contemporary music (think Robin Thicke’s “Blurred Lines”), dominant forms of mainstream heterosexual pornography (Eaton 2007), and the videos that Gisèle Pelicot’s husband made while so many men raped her. These works aestheticize rape, whether by making a spectacle of it, eroticizing it, celebrating it, humorizing it, prettifying it, romanticizing it, or dramatizing it in a positive way.

A second example is lynching photography. During the Reconstruction era in the US, photography was put to the sadistic and voyeuristic use of capturing the viciously racist spectacle of

lynching. These pictures were widely distributed as postcards and memorabilia. Further, it has been persuasively argued that lynching itself was made into a theatrical spectacle that contributed to the validation and virulent spread of the practice (Allen et al. 2000; Wood 2009; Young 2010; Mitchell 2011). We might also include as part of this “aesthetic culture” fictional film and other narratives that aestheticize lynching, like D.W. Griffith’s hugely influential 1915 film *Birth of a Nation*, which glorifies the Ku Klux Klan as heroes who protect white women from sexually aggressive and unintelligent African-American men.⁹ The film increased KKK support and thereby helped to revive the Klan (which had been almost eradicated by the government) and the film incited lynchings and race riots all over the US (Ang 2023).

The aesthetic cultures we have described have at their very heart the normalization, promotion, and celebration of violence. They make gendered and racialized forms of violent coercion seem acceptable, attractive, appealing, and even exciting. This is the point of a concept like ‘rape culture’: systematic violence is a matter not of isolated acts but of an expressive ecosystem that perpetuates violent coercion by empowering violent actors and silencing potential victims. This is not a minor quibble; it goes to the heart of Lopes’s cosmopolitanism.

V. DO WE ALL SHARE AN INTEREST IN THE VALUE DIVERSITY OF AESTHETIC CULTURES?

Cosmopolitanism is, as Lopes notes, “markedly pro-diversity” (2024, 27): it endorses and celebrates cultural differences of all sorts. Aesthetic cultures are diverse in the sense that each has its own value profile. At the same time, cosmopolitanism also has universalizing aims. It attributes the same interests to everyone, regardless of their histories, identities, and other aspects of their social situations: “we all have an interest in there being a diverse range of aesthetic cultures” (6), especially “aesthetic cultures that are not our own” (50). Moreover, we have an interest in these cultures’ autonomy.

Who is Lopes’s “we”? Is it the same “we” whom, he claims, Pecola represents (remember, “Pecola represents us all”)? And why should we think that “we all” have an interest in aesthetic cultures that are deeply harmful to “us” or to others, especially when “we” or these others are members of oppressed groups?

There are many such aesthetic cultures. In addition to representations that celebrate rape and lynching, we might consider minstrelsy, revenge pornography, child pornography, white supremacist online culture, Jim Crow memorabilia, and fascist aesthetics of several varieties. Aesthetic cultures organized around weaponization are not rare; they are everywhere, woven into the fabric of oppressive systems. Lopes’s theory of aesthetic injustice cannot seem to acknowledge them, much less explain them. From our perspective, none of these is worthy of respect; nor do we share an interest in exploring these cultures or in preserving their autonomy. On the contrary, we have an interest in their permanent disappearance because they deeply oppose the values and goals of aesthetic cultures that the authors of this essay do care about, such as feminist pornography, feminist art, and the Black Arts movement. To return to a milder, but still important example: if I am committed to fecund and abundant green spaces with native plants and food crops, I do not have an interest in the aesthetic culture of the green lawn. Instead, it is in my interest for this aesthetic profile to wither and die.

Taking seriously the depth of aesthetic incompatibility, which is intertwined with ethical incompatibility, should lead us to question the cosmopolitan suggestion that we all share an interest in the value diversity of aesthetic cultures. Where a culture’s aesthetic value profile prescribes disgust for the bodies of members of an oppressed group, or celebrates violence against them, that profile does not supply legitimate reasons and does not deserve respect; nor should we desire the social autonomy of such a culture. Attention to past theorizing about aesthetic injustice in contexts of oppression and consideration of cases of real-world aesthetic incompatibility reveal the need to contemplate the limits of our interest in the value diversity of aesthetic cultures, and likewise the limitations of cosmopolitanism in accounting for aesthetic injustice.¹⁰

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ENDNOTES

- 1 We note the contrasting approach of Rachel Fraser (2024), who acknowledges relevant work on oppression and explicitly explains her reasons for focusing instead on the concept of injustice.
- 2 This dialectic is presented in several passages including this one: "Harm is not sufficient for injustice; the next step is to close the gap between harm and injustice by making the case that the harm subverts interests in the value diversity or social autonomy of aesthetic cultures.

The hypothesis is that we have interests such as these. That hypothesis is true if it is needed to fully understand weaponized aesthetics. The question is whether aesthetic injustice stems from and compounds aesthetics weaponized against disabled people” (Lopes 2024, 134–5).

- 3 Lopes states that “a relatively large-scale social arrangement is aesthetically unjust when and only when, and because, the arrangement is part of an aesthetic culture that harms people *with a different aesthetic culture* in their capacities as aesthetic agents” (2024, 3–4, emphasis added). However, we note that it is not clear that Pecola Breedlove and Nat are harmed by virtue of their membership in specific *aesthetic* cultures; it appears, instead, that they are targeted due to their social identities (race and disability status). While we do not delve into this further here, the cosmopolitan framework may create difficulties in acknowledging aesthetic injustice directed at social identities rather than at aesthetic cultures.
- 4 Jonathan Gingerich makes a related but broader point: “someone suffers an injustice ... because they have been denied a role in shaping the aesthetic world in which they live” (2025, 327).
- 5 See also Gingerich (2025, Section V).
- 6 We note that Yuriko Saito, a key figure in everyday aesthetics who has written extensively on the intertwining of the moral and aesthetic (Saito 2007, 2017, 2025), receives only one citation, and only in passing, throughout the whole book, with no substantive discussion of her thought.
- 7 For instance, “the cosmopolitan theory of aesthetic injustice makes no mention of moral considerations” (Lopes 2024, 10). To be clear, it is not that Lopes does not care about the ethical and political dimensions of injustice, nor that he does not recognize intersections of the aesthetic with the ethical—see, for instance, his treatment of this intersection (Lopes 2005, ch. 5). Rather, a major task of the book is to isolate uniquely and, one might say, *purely* aesthetic forms of injustice, even if these are, as Lopes puts it, *petite bière* (Lopes 2024, 11) when compared to the moral and political dimensions of social injustice.
- 8 The well-maintained green grass lawn that dominates US suburbs today can be traced back to the aesthetic practices of affluent Europeans—from medieval formal gardens to the more naturalistic English gardens of the eighteenth century (Viola, Olivadese, and Minelli 2025). European colonizers brought these ideals to the US, as displayed by Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello (Jenkins 1994). The invention of the lawn mower and the construction of suburbs after the Civil War made lawns accessible to the middle class (Jenkins 1994).
- 9 Whether fictional films ought to be considered part of a different aesthetic culture is an interesting question but beside the point we want to make here.
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