

# The Meaning of Bodies

*Marilynn Johnson on bodies, shame and adornment*

The original role of clothing, we are told, was to shroud the shameful, to hide the indecent, to make proper for public consumption this embarrassing thing we all move about the world in: a body. In the Bible story of Genesis, Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit and realise they are naked. This causes them to feel shame and they quickly invent clothes, sewing fig leaves together to make aprons. Bodily adornment emerges here as humankind's first invention, a result of our first lesson and curse.

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Clothing was a moral imperative for Adam and Eve. Once they became aware of their nakedness they concomitantly became ashamed. This was a given – there was no chance of them posting selfies flexing from paradise. They had to cover up. To become “civilised” was, in part, to recognise that one should feel ashamed in one's body.

Philosophers and theologians have long considered the relationship between the

mind and the body. This is important because if the self is constituted in any way by the body this poses a problem for the soul living on in the afterlife once the body has perished. In the 17<sup>th</sup> Century Rene Descartes considered himself as a thinking thing, as consciousness. As pointed out by Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia in her letters with Descartes at the time, he forgot to connect the self as consciousness back up with the body. We are not, as Descartes might have hoped, simple consciousness. We are consciousness inextricably linked to the material body.

More recently philosophers have been engaging with the materiality of our lives. The best theories of consciousness now consider the ways that our lives are embodied and extended into the material objects around us. And contemporary philosophers have now turned attention not just to bodies but the way they are adorned as well. Here I will do just that. In this piece I will present three philosophical ideas that are relevant to the study of meaning in bodies and bodily adornment and the related historical context. The history I consider includes school dress codes, the shooting of Trayvon Martin, the Stonewall riots, and marches called Slutwalks. The first philosophical concept I will present is Chike Jeffers's distinction between the prudential and the ethical ought of dressing. Second, I present Wesley Cray's argument about why



certain people have an ethical obligation to engage in a practice called “genderfucking”. And thirdly, I will argue that some recent events can be understood as instances of what philosophers call “metalinguistic negotiation”. The history here provides the data to be accounted for, and thus we will start with that. Ultimately what I say here can help us understand what moral obligations we may have with how we dress and with how we respond to the dress of others.

To begin, it is important to note that we see reflected in the history of dress facts about control and power. Historically people with certain bodies have been seen as needing to be under more control than others. There has been particular emphasis on the structures determining how bodies of women, people of colour, and people who challenge gender norms must be adorned.

We can become so accustomed to our own way of life that we may forget that the norms of today weren’t always this way.

There are certain things that were worn in the past that would be deemed unacceptable in contemporary society. We know the first Olympics in Ancient Greece were run naked, and during the Amarna period in Ancient Egypt women wore dresses that were made of very thin, transparent cloth, of the type that would get you arrested in most places in America. Corsets, which in our time have a sexual connotation, were by the 1830s thought to be a necessary requirement for any proper lady. Indeed, a “proper” lady in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century might carry the weight of thirty pounds of clothing.

Concealing the body, covering our shame, extends from those first grape leaves in the origin story, right up until what we wear today. Today as throughout recent history, women have been among those alternately praised and shamed for what they are wearing. Like many women, I have had personal experience with this. One case that stands out in my memory is being called

to the Assistant Principal's office in High School for wearing a tank top with lace on the neckline. In the office I was asked if it was lingerie. It was not. This was the first and only time in High School I was sent to the Assistant Principal's office—and it was so my body could be policed. Tank tops with lace on the neckline did not seem inappropriate to me then and do not seem so now. And as I pointed out to in the Assistant Principal's office, my school did not have a rule against them. I was informed they were planning to make one. Young girls are raised with explicit and implicit messages that although they are inextricably women, they cannot be a *certain* kind of woman: don't be a slut.

Of course, women aren't the only ones who have their bodily adornment policed. In the time of Charles Darwin and other explorers, the adornment of those encountered around the world was taken to be indicative of their poor character—a sign of their inferiority, and something to be rectified. A striking case of this is a man from Tierra del Fuego, who was called "Jemmy" by the British sailors on the H. M. S. Beagle. Dressing Jemmy in English garb was seen as "civilising" a "savage". This was taken not as a matter of mere decoration but of morality. It is this sort of mentality that lives on today, in laws and policies about nudity, school and workplace dress codes, and also underpins other, more subtle attempts to control what we wear.

The hoodie is one piece of adornment that has received particular attention in recent years. In 2012, 17-year-old Trayvon Martin was shot by George Zimmerman while walking home from a convenience store. Prior to shooting him, Zimmerman

had called the police and reported that Martin looked "real suspicious". This teenage boy had been wearing a hoodie with skittles in the pocket.

In a bit of outlandish commentary, Fox news pundit Geraldo Rivera suggested that the hoodie was as much to blame for Martin's death as his actual assailant, claiming,

I believe George Zimmerman, the overzealous neighborhood watch captain, should be investigated to the fullest extent of the law and, if he is criminally liable, he should be prosecuted. But I am urging the parents of black and Latino youngsters, particularly, to not let their children go out wearing hoodies! I think the hoodie is as much responsible for Trayvon Martin's death as George Zimmerman was.

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Rivera later apologised for this position, after facing backlash from a number of people, including his own son.

The ways certain bodies are deemed to look "angry" or "real suspicious" is tied to

power and policing—ranging from literal policing done by the state to more subtle forms. Bodies are policed because of the categories they are placed in, and then, when certain garments become associated with these categories, the garments themselves are policed, thought to be “bad”, “dirty”, “wrong”, or even to blame for the wearer being shot or raped. It is striking to note that the realm of the moral or immoral can extend even to something as seemingly benign as a piece of bodily adornment such as a hoodie or a tank top.

Philosopher Chike Jeffers has considered the meaning of Trayvon Martin’s hoodie. His discussion presents the first philosophical concept I will consider here. In a chapter of a 2013 edited collection entitled *Pursuing Trayvon Martin* Jeffers asks whether or not there was something to Gerardo Rivera’s statement that Black and Latino parents should stop their children from wearing hoodies. He breaks this question into parts, the prudential and the ethical. The prudential aspect has to do with what “might be prudent in avoiding unnecessary harm”. Thus we see the “oughts” of dressing bifurcated into two categories: the ethical ought, and the prudential ought. Jeffers explains that if we consider just the prudential ought things become easy: if wearing some garment makes you more likely to be subjected to potentially fatal violence, simply don’t wear that garment. He writes that “no further deliberation would be necessary”. But should we always err on the side of the prudential ought?

And what might the ethical ought of adornment look like? What Jeffers concludes in his article is that “we should accept the wearing of hoodies as part of black youth

culture and even applaud those who express themselves this way while exploding stereotypes through their pursuit of excellence”. He also argues that we should seek to undo the broader social structures in which hoodies reflect economic marginalisation.

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Specific attempts to change the perception of hoodies have been made, as seen in an act of protest by U.S. congressman and former Black Panther Bobby Rush. In the House of Representatives in 2012, the same year Trayvon Martin was killed, Congressman Rush took off his suit jacket to reveal a hoodie underneath. He was cut off and immediately escorted out of the House for violating the dress code. In his speech on the House floor, given over the pounding sound of the gavel, Rush said “Just because someone wears a hoodie does not make them a hoodlum”, making his call for change clear.

The race of the wearer, is, of course, just one of the many factors that can shape what adornment is deemed acceptable. In many locales in America there are laws and dress codes that cut across gender lines. And this is not limited to places like schools. In New

York City in the 1960s the law specifically mandated the number of “masculine” items men must wear and the number of “feminine” items women must wear. It is just these laws that—in addition to other reasons involving the mafia and NYPD corruption—led to the famous Stonewall Riots in the summer of 1969. On the night of the Stonewall Riots members of the NYPD went into the Stonewall Bar on Christopher Street in New York City and started to arbitrarily “enforce” the law about what men could wear and what women could wear. Their brutal “enforcement” included forcibly bringing bar patrons into the bathroom to “check” their sex—forcing them to reveal their genitals to the officers. The other bar patrons revolted and this led to rioting, which continued for a number of days. These riots helped spark the gay rights movement and this history is the reason that

pride parades around the world happen in June and July, in commemoration.

In 1974, 5 years after the Stonewall riots, a piece was printed in a magazine called *Gay Sunshine* which described the practice of “genderfucking”. In a recent symposium published in *The Journal of Aesthetic and Art Criticism*, philosopher Wesley Cray characterises these practices as when a person publicly and intentionally engages in gender nonconforming bodily adornment practices. Cray has us consider a person who genderfucks with the explicit aim of making their culture safer for other gender nonconforming people. This is the second philosophical argument I consider here. Genderfucking is framed as an opportunity to protect others who are in similar social groups but who enjoy less privilege in other ways. Cray suggests that there is a moral obligation for certain nonbinary people to en-

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gage in this practice, writing “I have in mind mostly those who are white, not disabled, financially secure, and fortunate enough to find support from friends, family, and community”. Returning back to the “prudential ought” versus the “ethical ought” that arises out of Jeffers, we see here Cray making a compelling argument about what those who are in a position to sacrifice something ethically ought to wear. These people putting themselves at risk of not only verbal abuse but potentially physical violence makes the world a safer place for those who couldn’t take such a risk.

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Of course, as Cray notes, this puts the burden again on members of the oppressed groups rather than on those who cause them harm. Isn’t it really the George Zimmermans of the world who need to change? The answer to this is “yes”. But as individuals we are limited in the sort of change we can enact.

Jeffers makes explicit in his discussion of Martin’s hoodie the parallels to the “prudential question” encountered by women who wear certain clothing and face sexual violence. A woman dressed in revealing or very feminine clothing may well be engaged in an active and conscious act of protest around what women should be safe to wear. Let’s not forget that much of what women wear today is a result of women in the past pushing this boundary. Not so long ago skirts were thought to be the only

proper legwear for women.

These acts of liberation continue today with a modern case I understand to be an instance of what philosophers call “metalinguistic negotiation” with dress—the third and final philosophical term I present here. Metalinguistic negotiation is a means of taking a normative stand about how terms and concepts *should* be used. Like with gender-fucking, there is a conscious and intentional aim to push boundaries and flout norms. With metalinguistic negotiation in bodily adornment, the idea is that through certain acts of flouting norms of dressing one can implicate that the meaning attributed to a certain way of being or dressing ought to be changed. But this is easier said than done.

Events called “SlutWalks” have taken place across America and around the globe since 2011. The SlutWalk events were first sparked by the remarks of a Canadian police official, who, in responding to a number of rapes at Canada’s York University, said that “women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimised”. SlutWalks began as a direct response to the idea that a woman is to blame for her rape because of what she was wearing. The attendees at these events would usually wear revealing clothing, lingerie, or to various degrees be nude. The organisers know that the dress of the protesters and the event’s name would shock—just as it perhaps shocked when there were the first steps taken to reclaim the word “queer”, a connection that was made explicit.

The attitude taken by the protesters in SlutWalks is “you may think my wearing this makes me a slut, but I will reclaim my body and these garments for myself, and thereby show you that you need to recon-

sider your conceptual framing of myself and my body”. As characterised in the New York Times, “SlutWalkers want to drain the s-word of its misogynistic venom and correct the idea it conveys: that a woman who takes a variety of sexual partners or who presents herself in an alluring way is somehow morally bankrupt and asking to be hit on, assaulted, or raped”. The organisers and protesters know that this way of dressing flouts norms of what is acceptable—just as the name of the event does—and it is in these acts of flouting norms that the act of protest occurs.

Journalist and commentator Jessica Valenti wrote at the time, “Thousands of women—and men—are demonstrating to fight the idea that what women wear, what they drink or how they behave can make them a target for rape”. The idea of this event took off, and in 2011 Valenti reported that “SlutWalks...have gone viral” and declared that they were “the most successful feminist action of the past 20 years”. These events gained a lot of publicity, perhaps some due to the message, but also because they involve women dressed in revealing clothing, and thus also drew the intended target for change: those who view the marches with a lascivious gaze, just to gawk at the bodies.

Despite Valenti’s praise, criticisms of the marches were rife, with approximately a quarter of articles published about the movement being commentary that denounced the events. One criticism is that “the package is confusing and leaves young feminists open to the very kinds of attacks they are battling”. This same observer and critic wrote,

I found myself again wishing that the young women doing the difficult work

of reappropriation were more nuanced in how they made their grabs at authority, that they were better at anticipating and deflecting the resulting pile-on. But I also wondered if, perhaps, this worry makes me the Toronto cop who thought women should protect themselves by not dressing like sluts.

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We see that in one article SlutWalk is objected to for being both confusing and also not nuanced enough. Nuanced messages are harder to get across. And as we see here, even the critic acknowledges the possibility that perhaps she is just uncomfortable with the bucking of norms that is necessary for change. However, such criticism misses the point. The confusion that results from the flouting of norms is a part of how the process of changing meanings works: it is what makes it clear that metalinguistic negotiation is happening—that the protester is using the term or garment in a new way.

Perhaps it is easier to ignore all of this and think of ourselves like Descartes did—in terms of minds, souls, or brains in a vat,

the “ghost in the machine”. For many people, thinking about their bodies causes them to feel shame. It can be uncomfortable to think about bodies, to acknowledge that we have bodies, and to consider the ways that our bodies and how we adorn them are perceived by others.

Philosophers, in particular, as those living the “life of the mind”, might think that we have transcended our physical bodies. I discussed here the piece by Cray published in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, which was a part of a symposium on the book *Adornment* published by philosopher Stephen Davies in 2020. I too participated in this symposium, and I wrote a piece highlighting the special bodily nature of adornment. I focused on the fact that adornment does not have meaning in a vacuum but rather on a specific body. A black hoodie means something on one body and something else on another body. The same goes for a skirt. Being topless at the beach is acceptable for those with certain bodies and not for others. People with some types of bodies are forced to face this reality more than others.

In his reply to my piece, Davies pushed back a bit, writing “I might prefer to be judged as an aesthetician by the books that adorn my lounge than by my all-too-tasteless attire”. This, it seems to me, is the fantasy of the philosopher. There’s a desire here to be just a mind, not a body with adornment. Those of us who have our dress policed from childhood maintain no such illusions about being judged first by anything other than our appearance—and what our adornment is taken to mean on our particular bodies. Some can get away with wearing what is deemed to be “tasteless” attire. Others cannot—some get

blamed for their rape or murder because of what they were wearing.

We must acknowledge these realities about bodies and adornment. Yes, the George Zimmermans of the world need to change. And, if you are someone whose body has never been deemed a threat, who doesn’t have to think about clothes for the sake of safety, you must recognise that this is a result of the social structures in our culture—and not the reality of daily life for many people. We can act prudentially, adorning our bodies in ways that makes us less susceptible to being on the receiving end of violence. And, when we are in a position of power we can dress with the ethical ought in mind. We should admire all those who dress in a way that makes the world safer, even—and maybe especially—when it shocks and offends. Change often comes with discomfort. It is not easy, but history shows us that change is possible.

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