On the Trail; the Aesthetics of Hiking‡

I am a hiker. My travel itinerary and vacation schedules are often organized around hiking plans, I lead group hikes as an adult Scout volunteer, and I feel truly deprived when life's obligations keep me off the trail for too long. I do feel fortunate that my age and marital status has saved me from any need for dating apps because the very honest inclusion of hiking as a personal interest might have made me the unfortunate target of profile jokes and derision. I have witnessed that in digital profile parlance, a love of hiking is considered a suspect trope presumably claimed to appear more interesting, more spiritual, more outdoorsy and motivated than Netflix steamers and bar hoppers. But is it possible that this sometimes maligned, elevated assessment of hiking's assumed importance isn't only a poser stance? Can hiking actually offer these amazing benefits? I believe it can, so even after successfully avoiding apps-initiated, hiking-skeptical japes, I haven chosen to double down and not simply claim hiking as a personal interest, but to full-throatedly declare that I believe in hiking as an existential aesthetic experience.

This sounds like a bold claim and has me thinking about the burden of proof needed to verify that any aesthetic practice is existentially important. In truth, I believe the burden of proof is quite low and existential importance is not a particularly substantial claim. Our lives are an interdependent, interwoven collection of events, thoughts, perceptions, ideas, emotions, activities and subsistence; all of which are important aspects of our existence. Take for example the pedestrian activity of watching television. For many, television is simply a pleasant diversion. But as part of our lives and a way time is spent, it is woven into and helps form the full measure of a person's life–it is of existential import. And even for the casual viewer, there are probably times when television has been thought-provoking or emotionally intense or antagonistic. Existential importance is not a claim that needs to be proven, the importance is fully built-in just through existing, but for a claim of existential importance to be worthy of careful study and deliberation it needs to include multiple, varied, intense and important, identity-forming features.

A televisionista, to coin a term, would be someone who seeks out and cultivates those more intensive television experiences and finds life-affirming value in that activity. I suppose it would also be possible that someone could center pleasant diversion as a major organizing principle in their life, but the impassioned version seems more likely and more sustainable. To prove that my experience of hiking is an existential experience worth examination, I will be enumerating the multitude of ways in which hiking shapes and colors my life, including indelible memories,

satisfying accomplishment, embodied experience, the experience of outdoor environments, and spiritual practice. This enumeration will not make existential aesthetic claims in universal terms, this essay is very much a personal one. To that end, I will be exploring not only how hiking shapes my life and thinking as an overall activity, but also how specific individual hikes have brought about important outcomes.

I don't feel it is always necessary to lay out a fine-grained, philosophical definition of a term that already has a generally agreed upon meaning, but in this case I do think we need to spend some time investigating the specifics of what qualifies as "a hike" because the nature and structure of a hike is a part of what makes hiking existentially important. I will take it as a given that a hike involves traveling a distance outdoors on foot. I don't think a requisite minimal distance is needed to qualify as a hike. A relatively short walk can still be a hike, especially when you consider the inexperienced, the unhealthy, and children. But even if the actual distance walked needn't be monumental, it is still important to be going somewhere. Walking laps around an outdoor track, no matter the cumulative miles, is not a hike. Not all walks are hikes and for our purposes it is necessary to differentiate between a hike and other walks. Walking a long distance to get to work because you can't afford a car (or can't afford to fix your broken car) is not a hike. Migrants fleeing war, poverty or the effects of climate change can travel great distances on foot, over mountains, through forests, jungles and deserts, but are not hiking. Forced relocations, soldiers marching, the seasonal movements of nomadic shepherds, none of these are hikes.

If movement to meet material needs doesn't constitute a hike, what defining features do? My understanding of hiking grew considerably upon realizing a hike fits Bernard Suit's definition of games, a definition brought to my attention in *Games, Agency as Art* by C. Thi Nguyen. The "portable version" of Suit's definition of games is "Playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles." (Nguyen, 5) Nguyen goes on to point out that Suit's portable definition has "quietly package the notion voluntary goals inside the notion of voluntary obstacles." (Nguyen, 34) An obstacle "isn't an obstacle unless it interferes with a goal." (Nguyen, 34) A hike very neatly fits this definition as an activity, with a voluntary, and completely arbitrary, goal and unnecessary obstacles. Many times, the transportation that gets a hiker to a trailhead could just as easily get them to the destination (or at least much closer to it,) but the "rules" of hiking require that one walks there. And if one catches a bus, hitches a ride, or rents a bicycle, they have suspended the hike until they return to walking. Thinking of hiking as a game not only helps in providing a rough categorical definition, a recreational walk outdoors with a

planned route and destination, it also helps me frame some ways in which hiking achieves the values of accomplishment and self-satisfaction.

The goals of gameplay may be arbitrary, but the establishing of goals is an important precursor to a satisfying feeling of accomplishment. In terms of gameplay, the desire to meet this goal is necessary for engagement. We must “come to care, in some way, about winning.” (Nguyen, 36) Case in point, I once awoke at my home in the suburbs north of Chicago in the middle of the night to drive to Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore, in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, with the somewhat ridiculous goal of hiking the farthest I ever had in a single day. The plan was to meet up with a group of backpacking Scouts who had been on the trail for over a week, joining them for the last few nights of their trek. The centerpiece of Pictured Rocks is an east-west section of the North Country National Scenic Trail that skirts along the cliffs and shoreline of Lake Superior. A series of inroads creates a network of parking lot trailheads along this east-west axis with easy access to notable rock formations, beaches and campsites. The group I was joining was near the east end of the park, but instead of parking at the trailhead less than a mile from their campsite, I parked at a visitors’ center on the west end of the park and backpacked thirty miles to join them. The choice was arbitrary and a little bit absurd. I had some doubts as to whether or not I would be successful and the route I had mapped out in the hiking app AllTrails was named “Foolish Plan.” And even if I did succeed, I was unsure how well I would be able to continue walking on with the rest of the group the next day. I could have played the hiking game in easy mode, but I voluntarily chose a greater level of difficulty. I am happy to report that I did complete the thirty miles in a day, arriving at camp shortly after sunset. And, after sleeping more soundly than I have on any other camp out, I was able to happily hike along with the group for the next two days. I was (and am) quite pleased with my success and yet in practical terms it was a success that accomplished nothing of pragmatic value.

It should also be noted that this feeling of satisfaction is not limited to successes. Because the goals are arbitrary, failure isn’t necessarily ruinous. Although some games can result in catastrophic injury or death and games that include gambling can bring about financial ruin, most of the time failure in games is inconsequential. The same is true in hiking. Tragedies can occur, but death and injury feel like outliers and oftentimes sit outside the scope of gameplay. Most catastrophes that would transform a hike into an emergency are contingencies that could happen in many other situations and are not intrinsic to hiking. Most failures within the hiking game are far more inconsequential. One of my favorite hikes was the most difficult backpacking I have done so far and, in terms of the original goal, a failure. It was a two night trek in

Algonquin Provincial Park in Ontario, Canada. There were several inches of snow on the ground and although the temperatures were below freezing, they had dropped only recently and the path beneath the snow was still a mushy, muddy mess, making each step belabored and slow. My backpack was overweight because I had chosen to pack in all my water, instead of risking the collection of water from partially frozen lakes, and because I did not have specialty gear for winter backpacking, the extra layers I needed for winter sleeping were very bulky. I arrived at the trailhead later than intended and the sun set while I was still on the trail. A bright moon helped mitigate this last disadvantage, but all these factors slowed me down and instead of arriving at the backwoods campsite I reserved seven miles from the trailhead, I stopped at the first site I came upon, a mere three miles in. The next morning I loaded my backpack and set off upon the trail to assess if I could salvage my original plan. As I took my lunch break, it was obvious I would not be able to complete the original loop I had mapped out and back-tracked to the site I had camped in the night before. Luckily, there wasn't overwhelming demand for winter backcountry sites and I was able to find empty spots despite having reservations elsewhere. As I hiked to my car the final morning, at a much faster pace now because the ground was frozen solid and I was no longer carrying multiple days worth of water, I considered my failure. Instead of completing the planned fourteen mile loop, I had hiked under nine miles and I had struggled and strained for most of it, unable to set a good pace. But in the end this failure was inconsequential and unable to squelch the beauty of the snow-covered trees, glacially-shaped landscape and dried copper-toned beech leaves still clinging to the trees around me, or to disrupt the calming peace of being outside in the hushed woods. In Nguyen's terms this was a form of "striving play," a type of play for the sake of playing the game. I mapped a route and set a goal that I cared about, but only so long as the goal facilitated gameplay. I needed to "acquire an interest in winning for the course of the game," (Nguyen, 36) but once the game ended, my desire for success was disposable. This failure of a hike is one of my very best and a favorite memory of mine.

Both of the aforementioned hikes also speak to a vital aspect of many meaningful hikes, an intense experience of embodiment. One way this is manifest is in finding a good hiking pace. When teaching Scouts the Hiking merit badge, I define a good, managable pace as 3 miles per hour. This is an easy metric for the Scouts to understand and equally easy to assess whether or not one is achieving this pace on the trail. But in truth, a good pace is not a static, measurable speed, it is something that is felt in the body. A good pace is one that is brisk, but can be sustained for a long period, and where each step leads naturally into the next step. When hiking

at a good pace, the trail ahead can be scanned to avoid upcoming tripping hazards and pitfalls, safely traversing the terrain without spending an entire hike staring at your own feet.[1] On the Algonquin trek, I didn't find a good pace until that final stretch back to the car, on solid ground with a lighter backpack. The initial feelings of failure came not only from the shortened distance and rerouting, but from my slow, belabored struggle—my failure to reach a flow-state, a flow-state that was not only achieved, but absolutely necessary for finishing the Pictured Rocks trek successfully. But even in cases of well-paced hikes, many of my favorites include a feeling of profound exhaustion.

I arrived at South Mountain Park and Preserve on the outskirts of Phoenix when the gates opened at 5am. I had flown in overnight and after stopping to buy food and water I headed straight to the park. The setting was a blend of wilderness-like pockets and close proximity to the suburbs. Much of the time was spent in the park's interior, where the path and trail markers were the only visible human-influence, but the city of Phoenix could be sighted from several vistas and some sections of the trail used park roads or paralleled nearby roadways. I completed a seventeen mile loop and with the exception of 5am runners who were getting in a morning workout, going up and down the first hill from the parking lot in the cooler predawn hours, I only saw three other people out on the trails, until I got back to the picnic shelters near where I had parked. There were many long, steep rises along my path, the midday sun beat down strongly and I had just jetted in from the flatlands of Illinois to the mountainous elevations of Arizona. I distinctly remember the feeling of being completely and entirely spent, collapsing into the driver's seat like a rag doll when I finally arrived at my rental car. Aiming for exhaustion isn't an explicit goal of hiking, but there is something self satisfying in feeling truly bone tired, in physically feeling the history of a trail traversed written throughout the whole body.

My rough categorical definition of a hike requires that hiking occur outside, but I do not believe a specific type or quality of outdoor space is necessary. This is a point I want to return to later, but I am going to begin by talking about experiencing places with an eye towards largely overlooking the human-made elements. These are not spaces that are as free of human influence as the "untrammeled" [2] backcountry of designated wilderness areas, but large tracks in somewhat wilder places, such as national parks.

Oftentimes, advocates for nature aesthetics want to move away from human-centered ideas stating that nature needs to be approached, as Yuriko Saito put it, "on its own terms." [3] As such, picture postcard views can be seen as overly human-centered and a mischaracterization of

landscape's value. Equating a successful hike with collecting a series of good views can be seen as a lamentable attitude. I am sympathetic with the mandate to approach nature on its own terms and will always encourage the appreciative embrace of the homely and the overlooked, the mundane and the obscured, not to mention the unremarkable sections of path between one Instagrammable moment and the next. I am sympathetic, but fear a wholesale dismissal of breath-taking vistas and views misses part of the story of nature appreciation. In an age of digital mass production; picture postcards, Hudson River School paintings, Ansel Adams photographs and Instagram posts influence where and how we look when on the trail. Many, perhaps even a majority, are more likely to stop and view the waterfall or the overlook and less likely to notice what is quiet, drab or underfoot. An Instagram post of needle-like Chinese mountains or of a remarkable Southwestern U.S. hot springs that we may never visit in our lifetime, introduce a natural world that is more fantastic and varied and vibrant than we ever might have imagined on our walks through the local forest preserve. These images also prime us on how to see and frame the natural wonders we do encounter. One time, in the Columbia River Valley, I started a hike up the Klickitat-Fisher Hill Trail, a trail that borders the Klickitat River, a Columbia River tributary that descends rapidly into the valley below. To my surprise and delight, the path ascends alongside a Yakama fish camp and I witnessed Native people dip fishing, as they have for countless generations, in waters rushing and spilling over the rocks of the deep and narrow canyon. During my hike up the hill, my phone died and as I came back down I was crossing a high bridge over the Klickitat River as the sun was beginning to set in stunning fashion. Without a phone to snap a picture, I stopped, gazed outward, and carefully noted the features before me, hoping to set it to memory. The steepest, narrowest section of the river had ended and the speeding waters slowed as they buffeted against a huge, blocky black stone below me, forming a large spiraling eddy before more calmly continuing the downward trek. Sturdy, wizened oak trees of a small stature and without leaves lined the steep banks, punctuated by an occasional dark green pine tree. Although this was outside my view, the downstream end of the fishing grounds was immediately behind me and I was very cognizant of folks ending their day, climbing the network of ropes they had laid out to pull themselves up from the steep, slick rocks. Before me a bright glowing circle of the sun appeared flat and disc-like as it set behind the far off hills on the opposite bank of the Columbia River, bathing all that sat before me in a red-tinged golden light. Having the phone removed enhanced the experience, but even without the phone camera as an artificial framing device, I commonly view and frame phenomenal natural wonders from the vantage point of an outside observer. The fact that notable views are often best described as picture-perfect is not without merit.

Vistas and views are all well and good, but approaching nature on its own terms, as a frameless environment, is where hiking excels. Once I spent a full day hiking on Mount Rainier. I arrived as the gates to the National Park opened, parked in the first primary visitors' lot and started, almost immediately, walking upward. I continued up for much of the day, turning around only when I thought it was necessary for a timely return to my car within the dwindling hours of daylight remaining. I arrived back at my car about a half hour after it got dark. For the most part it was a grey and misty day, punctuated with a few small patches of blue sky midday and heavy snow flurries at the highest elevation. I never had a view of the Mt. Rainier peak and the overlooks were deeply shrouded in a heavy mist. I had been forewarned by friends who live in Washington state about the likely weather conditions and the predictable lack of magnificent vistas. They saw this as a potential reason to drop Mt. Rainier from the itinerary. Although stunning views are enjoyable, Mt. Rainier remained on my agenda because I know breath- taking views aren't the only reason, or even a primary reason, to hike. Coming from the flat lands of middle America, simply being somewhere that I could hike up and up and up and still have further heights ahead of me was a delightfully novel experience, both mentally and bodily. The woods were punctuated with changing soundscapes, most notably as one approached, visited and then departed from the numerous waterfalls along the route. Temperature, smells and landscape shifted as I traversed from the damp misty forest at the starting parking lot to the snow covered paths of the higher elevations. I was delightfully surprised by truly unexpected encounters, like insects actively going about their insect lives upon the snow fields, when I has assumed, incorrectly, that all insects went dormant in the cold. In other words, I was experiencing nature not as something I was observing out there, but as something I was walking within. Holmes Rolston III describes it thusly, "Aesthetic appreciation of nature, at the level of forest and landscapes, requires embodied participation, immersion, and struggle. We initially may think of forests as scenery to be looked upon. That is a mistake. A forest is entered, not viewed." (Rolston 1998, 162) My movement through this space, my embodied experience of and placement within the forest of Mt. Rainier National Park offered no vistas to gaze upon, but I did experience the temporal and enveloping properties of a full, frameless landscape.

Although it is difficult to define, I want to at least mention the idea of not just walking within nature, but of the deep feeling of being a part of nature that hiking can foster. One of the best descriptions I have come across for this feeling has been expressed as one of kinship. In her book on Anishinaabe botanical teachings, *Plants Have So Much to Give Us, All We Have to Do Is Ask,* Mary Siisip Geniusz entitles the first section, on the identification and use of plants of

particular cultural significance, “Indinawemaaganag: All My Relatives” because, as her daughter, Wendy Makoons Geniusz, states in the preface, “Anishinaabe protocols require us to introduce plants just as we would introduce another human being.” “Plants are thought of as beings with their own histories, stories, beliefs, and way of life.” (Geniusz, xiii) In speaking on the human need to be outdoors, Deanna Beacham, an educator who formerly worked for the Virginia Council on Indians and National Park Service Chesapeake Bay, states it must be “emphasized that ‘nature’ is not something apart from humans, but includes humans...Natives know all beings are our relatives, all the time.” Beacham is clear that her time spent outdoors is important because it is time spent with relatives she would not see unless she pays them a visit. This idea of kinship extends to plants, animals, people, rocks, rivers and more. Although well expressed in the repositories of Native knowledge and culture, the feeling of being a part of nature isn’t exclusive to Indigenous ideas of kinship. For others, I believe this feeling is what is meant when people speak of “communing with nature.”

Although the parking lots and fish camp of the last two hikes I described kept human-influenced parts of the landscape within our scope, both hikes centered their primary experience around non-human nature. I mentioned previously, and I think it is important to reiterate, that I do not believe a certain quality or type of outdoor environment is necessary for a walk to qualify as a hike. I have enjoyed many city hikes, as well suburban ones and pastoral hikes among the agricultural fields and dairy pastures of rural America. I believe the same principles of picture-perfect vistas, environmental experience, and kinship can be found in these human-built spaces. Examples would include the south Michigan Avenue facade wall in Chicago as a human-built vista and experiencing a city environmentally by traversing among its industrial corridors, alleyways, streets, train tracks, power lines, intersections, etc. And even in human-built environments, non-human nature still surrounds us as cultivated plants, trees that predate city incorporation, urban wildlife, weeds and weather—available to remind us we are part of a greater world-wide life sustaining system.

So far my example hikes have all been solo treks. Even the Pictured Rocks hike was about the miles before I met up with the group. As an adult Scout leader who teaches the Hiking merit badge, I hike with groups quite often. These group hikes are fun, enjoyable and memorable, but they rarely rank among the most meaningful hikes. They may fall a bit short of an existentially important aesthetic worth close consideration. In many ways, group hikes are to me as television was for the average viewer in an earlier example, a pleasant diversion. I also need to confess[4] that although I fully stand by my assertion that urban, pastoral and suburban hikes fully

fulfill the definition of a hike, these hikes, like the group hikes, are often less meaningful to me than hikes in natural settings with less human influence.

What solo hiking in natural settings nurtures for me that group and urban hiking can sometimes work against is the experience of the sacred. There is a holy feeling I have experienced on hikes, a feeling of something greater, of something *more than*. I have chosen to interpret this feeling of sacredness as a direct, personal experience of the divine, but my conception of the divine is so minimally defined, so non-specific, that an open-minded non-believer could easily replace this religious experience with ideas of mindfulness, tranquility and respect for nature with very little loss of fidelity. Rolston refers to this spiritual sense that can exist even without a God-Creator or capital-D Divine as ecological spirituality. Ecological spirituality “finds the natural history on Earth evoking a sense of the numinous. Perhaps there is no supernatural; but, then again, the natural is super, superb. One can doubt whether there is any God, Ground of all Being...but one can hardly doubt that there is nature, fundamental ground in which we live and move and have our being.” (Rolston 1997, 59)

Ronald Hepburn see the aesthetic use of the term sacred as one that should be reserved to “include the realizing and celebrating of highest values - notably consciousness, personhood, beauty in nature, life-enhancing and energy-releasing power - all in contexts that keenly activate our normally dormant sense of wonder and mystery in the awareness of those values and their bearers.” (Hepburn, 162) For me, the stillness that can accompany hiking, particularly when I am away from human-centered spaces, among the flourishing of non-human life and environments, is especially well suited for awakening these dormant senses. A sentiment also expressed by Rolston in his examination of the aesthetics of forests. “But when value is discovered there, the forest as archetype, as spontaneously self-organizing, as generator of life, not merely as resource, but as Source of being, the forest starts to become a sacrament of something beyond, something ultimate in, with and under these cathedral groves.” (Rolston, 165)

It is certain there are other means and mechanisms in hiking that are important and life-affirming, but now that I have completed my own enumeration of ways in which a hike can be meaningful, I would like to revisit a claim I made while establishing a rough categorical definition of a hike. Earlier I listed a number of long walks undertaken for material needs that I did not consider hikes, primarily because they did not meet the gameplay requirements of a recreational walk. A walk, even one undertaken for practical concerns, can become a hike if

walking becomes a source of meaning in ways similar to those described above. If a long walk is the only means of conveyance I have for getting to work, walking becomes a commute. But if while commuting I pay attention to my movement through the landscape, feel kinship with the life and features around me, admire the views and/or experience the sacred, I am also taking a hike. In *My First Summer in the Sierra*, John Muir ascends into the mountains when hired as a shepherd. Much of what he describes are side trips away from shepherding duties, but it would be safe to assume that Muir did not turn off his existential important experiences of the Sierras while he was walking with the sheep.

Having examined many ways in which a hike can be meaningful, you might wonder if I have come to the conclusion that hiking should be touted to others as an existentially important aesthetic opportunity or if it is too personal a quirk for it to matter to others? First it must be acknowledged that hiking is no more universal in its existential aesthetic importance than fashion, jazz, sports fandom, animation, etc. To advocate for hiking is not to grant it special status, it is simply extolling the benefits of one particular activity among many candidates. Secondly, not everyone has equal access to or the physical ability required for hiking. Although there is no wilderness requirement for hiking, and therefore no need to drive to far-flung trailheads, this lower barrier for entry does not mean there are no barriers. Folks can choose to start a hike from their own front door, but some outdoor spaces are actively hostile and many places can be unsafe for pedestrians. The equipment needed for hiking is minimal, even if gearheads might tend to go overboard at their local outfitters, but a hike is difficult to enjoy if one can't afford adequate food, sturdy shoes and decent rain gear. Access simply isn't universal. Finally, while influencers like Instagram's @fatblackandgettinit are working to bring about change, hiking has often been seen as the domain of fit-looking, white people, leaving others, including fat and Black folks, out. Caveats aside, the reason I take young folks out on the trail is in the hope of initiating a lifelong love of hiking. Hiking certainly won't be of life- shaping importance for everyone, but I am willing and eager to proselytize to find a few for whom it is. Perhaps hiking will still be the butt of jokes in the dating profiles (no matter the future platforms) of multiple generations to come, but my hope is that the multitude of hiking benefits I have enumerated, as well as additional benefits that will be attributed to the varied personal experiences of other hikers, will keep folks—even those who initially thought hiking wasn't for them—out on the trails.

‡ This paper is, in part, a personal essay about the places I have gone hiking and all the locations I describe are on Indigenous land. Nations of the Columbia River Valley include the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Reservation: the Cayuse, Walla Walla and Umatilla; the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs: the Wasco, Tenino, and Paiute; the Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation (some of whose lands also include Mount Rainier National Park): the Klikitat, Palus, Walla Walla, Wenatchee, Wishram, and Yakama. Phoenix, Arizona includes the lands of the O'odham Jewed, Akimel O'odham. Hohokam, and Piipiash. Algonquin Provincial Park lies on the lands on the Anishinabe, whose lands also include the site of the Existential Aesthetics Conference in Marquette, Michigan and the nearby Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore. These lands are also the territories of the Oceti Ŝakowiŋ.

Land acknowledgements are often backward facing, a perfunctory exercise to bookmark horrendous past harms. Today, I acknowledge these nations to both recognize past and ongoing harms and to express faith that adopting an honest and robust Land Back ethos can bring about a more just future for everyone who lives on this land. In a paper like mine, that is so closely and intimately tied to the land, it is important to think seriously about Native sovereignty. Thinking about the excursions I describe, recognizing true sovereignty might alter some greatly, leave some unchanged, and might even make some no longer possible, but being open to all the possibilities of a shared Indigenous future holds hopeful promise of healing and just relations.

1 I thank Juan Carlos Gonzalez for a question at the Existential Aesthetics Conference, July 27–27, 2024, Northern Michigan University, Marquette, Michigan that led to this passage on pace

2 The description of wilderness areas as "untrammeled" comes from The Wilderness Act of 1964 and I thank Levi Tenen for bringing it to my attention in "Justice and the Wilderness Aesthetic."

3 Yuriko Saito, "Appreciating Nature on its Own Terms," *Environmental Ethics*, 20, 1998

4 Thanks to Sandra Shapshay whose generous feedback at the Existential Aesthetics Conference helped me notice and admit this

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