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Reclaiming beauty: non-heteronormative and racialised conversations on fatness and transness

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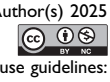
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Abstract

This article explores the relations between fatness, transness, racism and beauty, proposing a theoretical framework to critically examine how beauty is experienced and negotiated amidst intersecting forms of oppression. Drawing on conversations with fatness experts, academics and fat activists in Mexico and ethnographic research with *travesti* sex workers in Brazil, the article interrogates the limits of 'permitted' bodies within hegemonic beauty standards shaped by white supremacy, heteronormativity and patriarchy. It focuses on three key themes: the boundaries of 'permitted' fat and trans identities, the negotiation of bodily intelligibility in relation to beauty norms, and the dynamic, context-specific intensities of oppression and resistance. By integrating concepts such as Matsuda's 'the other question' and Moreno Figueroa's 'distributed intensities', the article illuminates how beauty operates as a gatekeeper to social legitimacy and as a resource for survival, self-definition and collective resistance. Mexican fat activists challenge Eurocentric, thin-centric ideals, advocating for a self-defined, inclusive beauty rooted in their genealogies and experiences. Brazilian *travestis* navigate racial and gender hierarchies through hyper-feminine performances that simultaneously conform to and subvert hegemonic standards, asserting their presence within transphobic and racially stratified contexts. This analysis highlights the multifaceted nature of beauty as an experience that both marginalises and enables. It argues for a broader

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understanding of beauty that transcends dominant frameworks, advocating for actionable paths towards dignity, inclusion and liveability for those whose bodies defy societal norms. By examining the distributed intensities of oppression, the article offers insights into reshaping beauty and embodiment in ways that challenge exclusionary practices while fostering transformative possibilities.

Keywords
beauty, transness, fatness, racism, non-heteronormative, distributed intensities, intersectionality

Introduction

> Honestly, given the choice between being an ordinary woman and a *travesti* – where everyone knows I'm a *travesti*, a doll – I'd rather be a doll, a *travesti*. I don't want to pass as a woman or go unnoticed. Absolutely not. I truly want to succeed; I want to be a glamorous, powerful *travesti*. (Reyna, interviewed May 2008)

> I'm not that fat woman who wears trainers or low-cut dresses. I don't talk about fashion, I'm not inhabiting my body in that way. I am not 'curvy'. I am a brown, Indigenous woman with an explosive laugh, also marked by being a lesbian. (…) Being fat must have a political content that positions us and makes us think that we are scruffy fat lesbians from poor urban neighbourhoods [*gordas fachosas de barrio*], with a different life context. (Yadira del Mar, podcast *Lesbiana con Huipil*, episode 'Gorda y Fachosa', July 2023)

Feminist theory has extensively examined the intersection of beauty and 'race', highlighting how hegemonic Eurocentric ideals rooted in whiteness have marginalised bodies outside the realm of desirability and beauty. However, feminist scholarship has been slower to address how fatness functions as a fundamental control mechanism reinforcing white supremacy (Harrison, 2021; Strings, 2019) and its beauty standards, which, in turn, tighten heteronormative and patriarchal norms. This tightening is exemplified by Yadira del Mar's demand in the extract above for the right to be a 'scruffy fat', revealing how these structures are challenged. Trans people and their experiences, emerging from this constrictive framework, further disrupt preconceived ideas about how bodies and lives should appear, underscoring Reyna's complex statement that they would 'rather be a doll, a *travesti*'.[1]

Bringing fatness, transness, racism and beauty into conversation, we argue, is a provocative and insightful approach. Both fatness and transness can – at times – defy heteronormativity, and also confront racism and open pathways for non-hegemonic beauty that supports liveable lives. As Butler (2004: 39) argues, 'when we ask what makes a life liveable, we are asking about certain normative conditions that must be fulfilled for life to become life'. A liveable life may be one where some fat and trans individuals are socially permitted to exist, provided they conform – by passing – and do not challenge dominant

structures of heteronormativity, patriarchy and white supremacy. However, navigating this terrain can also mean negotiating, provoking and resisting these notions of permissibility, ultimately creating new conditions for living in more expansive ways. We argue that beauty is central to this experience of liveability. It acts as an atmosphere, a sign and a pathway through this terrain. We focus on non-hegemonic beauty, for lack of a better term, to capture a movement towards a plural and inclusive understanding of beauty – one that is simultaneously challenging, a resource and an inclination or lure (Coleman and Moreno Figueroa, 2010), providing solace, pleasure and the foundation for a liveable life.

This article proposes a theoretical approach to analysing fatness, racism and trans/non-binary/cis identities, aiming to critically examine how beauty is experienced and negotiated with varying intensities at the intersection of these forms of oppression. We present two examples – discussions of fatness in Mexico and experiences of transness in Brazil – to address three main issues:

1. The delimitation of the parameters of the 'permitted fat' person and the 'permitted trans/*travesti*' person: This argument explores how these boundaries help define what non-hegemonic beauty could be and how fat and trans sexually non-normative people navigate these limits. By doing so, these subjects reveal possibilities that extend beyond personal liberation to potential collective inclusion and transformation.
2. The negotiation of bodily intelligibility in relation to hegemonic beauty standards: This issue examines how fat and trans/non-binary people engage with hegemonic beauty norms through choices to alter or resist modifying their bodies (e.g. via diet or surgery). It questions whether acts of conformity or resistance challenge or reinforce these norms, highlighting that even when hegemonic ideals are appropriated, they are not passively consumed but are actively redefined from the margins. This opens up space for rethinking beauty and embodiment in ways that disrupt conventional ideas of who is considered acceptable or intelligible.
3. Distributed intensities through empirical moments: We apply Matsuda's (1991) concept of asking 'the other question' and Moreno Figueroa's (2010) notion of 'distributed intensities' to analyse beauty as an experience. This approach incorporates race, gender non-binary perspectives and body size diversity, rooted in specific empirical moments. It captures how intersecting elements – such as oppressions based on gender, race and sexuality – relate dynamically, sometimes surfacing with greater intensity and at other times receding or disappearing. This perspective allows for observing how people experience connections to beauty, femininity or oppression based on body size or race, shaped by the social configurations that enable these moments to emerge and be expressed.

This approach and these arguments reveal that beauty standards are not solely imposed on those at society's margins but are part of a broader framework that interpellates everyone, shaping collective understandings of value, desirability and human worth. Focusing on the distributed intensities of beauty and related oppressions, therefore, is not just about

identifying specific experiences but about uncovering pathways that show how these normative structures, while exacerbating marginalisation, also subtly influence and affect all people within margins of variability or fluctuation. By examining these dynamics, we consider how a more inclusive and expansive view of beauty could foster ways of living and mobilising that envision a good life for all.

To understand what we mean by 'distributed intensities', it is helpful to return to the context in which the term was originally developed. In her work on whiteness, *mestizaje* and racism in Mexico, Moreno Figueroa (2010) uses 'distributed intensities' to describe the ways that racist practices permeate everyday life through historical and social logics that are often invisible yet powerfully felt. The term captures the dynamic nature of oppression: it appears more strongly in some contexts and recedes in others, shaped by social, emotional and structural configurations. It also points to the uneven recognition, internalisation and expression of racism, highlighting how it becomes normalised and ambiguous, even as it sustains racial hierarchies.

In this article, we reconceptualise and extend the notion of distributed intensities to deepen intersectional analysis. Intersectionality theory has long illuminated how social categories such as race, gender and class interact, producing compounded forms of oppression and/or privilege. However, by integrating the concept of distributed intensities, we propose a more dynamic understanding of how these categories function in practice – not as static identities or accumulations of disadvantage, but as relational and fluctuating forces that shift in prominence across different contexts.

To 'distribute' implies a dispersion or spread, suggesting that oppressive systems such as racism, fatphobia and transphobia are not concentrated solely in explicit acts or structures but are embedded across daily life in ways that are relational, context-dependent and often imperceptible until they intensify in specific moments. These distributions are not random; they follow social patterns or configurations rooted in historical power dynamics, shaping who is more likely to experience exclusion or recognition at different times and places.

The term 'intensities' emphasises the variability and affective weight of these interactions. Social phenomena like beauty-related oppression are experienced with varying degrees of intensity – sometimes simmering below the surface, other times erupting into moments of heightened visibility or crisis. These intensities shape not only external treatment by others but also internalised experiences of worth, desirability and self-definition. By attending to intensities, we can better understand how beauty operates as both a regulating force and a potential site of resistance.

In applying this framework to beauty, we show how distributed intensities allow for a more flexible and nuanced mapping of intersecting oppressions. Beauty norms do not exert uniform pressure but instead fluctuate, sometimes demanding hyper-femininity, as in the case of *travestis* navigating cisnormative and racialised beauty standards, and at other times rejecting bodies altogether, as in the exclusion of 'scruffy' fat women from mainstream narratives of desirability. These shifts illustrate that intersectional categories are not fixed but move dynamically, influenced by temporal, spatial and cultural conditions.

By expanding intersectionality theory through the concept of distributed intensities, we propose a methodological approach that accounts for these fluctuations and relationalities. This approach encourages us to ask critical questions: When does oppression surface most acutely? When does it recede or become invisible? Who perceives these shifts, and what social positions shape that perception? In doing so, this framework moves beyond simply identifying intersecting forms of oppression to examine how they are mobilised and reconfigured in specific contexts, revealing new possibilities for resistance and transformation.

To conduct this analysis, we present reflections on two distinct groups in Mexico and Brazil based on conversations, interviews and ethnographic work. The first group comprises Mexican cis-women who identify as Black, Indigenous or mixed-race/*mestizas*, are dark-skinned, sexually diverse and include fat activists, artists and researchers focused on various aspects of fat oppression. The second group consists of mixed-race and Black Brazilian *travesti* sex workers. We explore how these narratives incorporate notions of beauty, how their bodies are expected to be malleable and modifiable and how intersections of gender diversity, racial identity, body size, age and class shape in their empirical intensities complex, often contradictory challenges to Eurocentric, cis-heteronormative and hegemonic beauty ideals.

We have chosen Mexico and Brazil as our empirical field sites, for both practical and de-centring reasons, as here is where we have dedicated an important part of our scholarship but also because they offer very exciting conjunctures for the topics at hand, particularly as current debates on race and gender walk a tightrope between conservatism, Catholicism, machismo and strong social mobilisations and organising around queer, trans and fat rights.

To address the core questions and paradoxes of this article, we apply a methodological lens that pushes intersectionality to consider the distribution of intensities within empirical moments to explore the lived experiences and narratives of fat and *travesti* people. This multifaceted approach involves carefully weaving together and unpacking our understanding of fatness and fat oppression. Our challenge is to continuously ask the critical 'other question' (Matsuda, 1991): When we encounter fatphobia, to what extent are we also facing binary thinking? When we witness heteronormativity, how is racism coming to the fore or being concealed? When someone is labelled ugly or disgusting, what class interests are being advanced?

Using intersectionality to explore specific concerns is not new; many have emphasised how the 'empirical moment' can reveal which forms of oppression and intersection are at play (Moreno Figueroa and Viveros Vigoya, 2022). However, we seek to deepen and shift our understanding of intersectionality by asking: who can see what, when, to what extent and with what intensity? In other words, what social positions and experiences, in specific contexts, enable more nuanced interpretations? This focus is important not only for developing sharper analyses of the world and our interactions within it but also for fostering a liberatory attentiveness – listening to voices that may not be the loudest but embody flexible, responsive politics. Such an intersectional approach, as Misra et al. (2020) argue, frames power as a dynamic interplay involving oppression, relationality, complexity, context, comparison and deconstruction. We begin by

positioning this article within the literature on fatness, transness and the process of dieting and bodily transformation, followed by a discussion of beauty, fatness, gender and race. Our central argument is that examining beauty through the lenses of racism, gender non-binarism and body size exposes systemic hierarchies that regulate visibility, legitimacy and exclusion. By challenging these structures, we illustrate how oppressions emerge empirically with different distributed intensities shaping ideals as well as how they are resisted by marginalised people, advocating for inclusive frameworks rooted in dignity, agency and diverse genealogies of beauty.

Fatness and transness, dieting and transitioning: beyond binaries

Both fat studies and fat activism critique how fatness is framed through binary, cisnormative gender identities, where men are only recently considered but women are still primarily seen as the ones who experience, suffer or resist fat oppression. Not long ago, an intersectional, queer perspective began to emerge to analyse how fatness affects bodies that challenge gender binarism. UK sociologist White (2014) offers one of the most insightful analyses on fatness and trans identities, highlighting that even cisgender fat people may struggle with cultural norms of gender intelligibility and permissibility, where thinness reinforces traditional gender roles (also see Jarrín, this issue). For instance, fat cis and trans men may find embodying 'successful' masculinity difficult due to fat distribution around the hips or chest, which can appear feminine. Conversely, while fat trans women may have curves read as feminine, fatness paradoxically de-feminises them. This dynamic illustrates how fatness intersects with gender, sometimes making bodies unintelligible within prevailing expectations of masculinity and femininity in a given cultural context.

Fat and trans bodies may share a particular relationship with malleability. Hegemonic, weight-centred medical discourses label fatness as a health 'problem', often exaggeratedly, and attribute it to individual (ir)responsibility and lack of motivation (Pausé, 2012). This framing suggests that body size is a malleable condition that can be reshaped through willpower and discipline. Diets, medications, products and exercises are promoted as tools for transformation, with weight loss positioned as the ultimate goal. Evidence showing the ineffectiveness of diet plans, the entrenchment of diet culture and the immense profit of the diet industry (US$72.6 billion in the USA in 2023 alone – Parsons, 2023) is often dismissed as an excuse for lacking discipline. Research consistently demonstrates that diet plans frequently fail in the long term, with most individuals regaining lost weight – and sometimes more – within five years (Wolpert, 2007). Additionally, dieting has been linked to eating disorders: the Center of Excellence for Eating Disorders at the University of North Carolina reports that 35 per cent of 'normal dieters' progress to pathological dieting, and of those, 20–25 per cent develop partial or full-syndrome eating disorders (Center of Excellence for Eating Disorders, Department of Psychiatry, 2024). This points to the substantial psychological risks of dieting, especially for individuals prone to disordered eating. Even in the context of eating disorders, fat people are often overlooked; anorexia, for example, is typically diagnosed and treated in thinner patients, while similar weight suppression patterns in fat

individuals are ignored. As Rastogi and Rome (2020: 166) argue, 'patients with higher weight status are as likely to experience disordered eating as their normal-weight peers'.

Medical discourses and practices have historically been used to justify interventions on the bodies of trans people whose gender identities differ from the sexes assigned to them at birth. Narratives about trans people, particularly those identifying as 'transsexual', have been shaped by a medical model that frames them as 'suffering' from being born in the 'wrong body' (Fassin, 2003). In strict terms, this model implies that medical technologies – such as hormones and surgeries – are necessary to 'adjust' their bodies, enabling them to 'transition' to their 'true' gender (Prosser, 1998). Moreover, this medicalised understanding of trans identities has had broader cultural implications, reinforcing binary understandings of gender and promoting the idea that one's 'real' gender can only be realised through medical transformation. This model leaves little space for non-binary, gender-fluid or *travesti* identities, which may not follow the narrative of medical intervention for gender affirmation. It often prioritises medical access over other forms of affirmation, marginalising those who cannot or do not want these procedures.

Currently, many trans scholars have rethought how care is experienced among trans people, acknowledging the importance of gender-affirming care while recognising its limitations in a binary, medicalised context. Malatino (2020), for instance, stresses that care should not be exclusively tied to medical interventions. While such interventions are significant for some, not all gender-nonconforming people follow a medical transition narrative. This broader, more inclusive approach respects diverse forms of gender affirmation. Furthermore, the focus on the 'wrong body' narrative overshadows the social and political dimensions of trans existence, framing gender identity as an individual medical problem rather than a reflection of societal structures that enforce rigid gender norms (Spade, 2011; Stryker, 2008).

Both dieting and transitioning can be seen as responses to (cis)normative mandates that encourage body modification to create 'good' citizens (Hogle, 2005), 'permitted bodies' that conform to societal standards of weight and sex-gender intelligibility. However, this imperative for body modification among marginalised groups is increasingly challenged as fat-identified and trans-identified people become politicised, especially when they adopt an intersectional approach to their experiences of oppression. The fat acceptance movement, growing globally, with a strong presence in Latin America and a predominant history in the USA, opposes any body intervention, focusing instead on empowering fat individuals to reject fat oppression and diet culture, encouraging acceptance of their bodies 'as they are at any given moment' while challenging the structures that sustain fatphobia[2] (Bacon, 2010; Cooper, 2021; Rothblum and Solovay, 2009; Tribole and Resch, 2020; Wann, 1998). Similarly, trans activists reject the pathologisation they face, arguing that it is society, and the roots of transphobia, that should be questioned – not their bodies (Missé, 2013; Spade, 2011). Many trans people, as noted, demand recognition of their gender identities without body modification (Nieder et al., 2020), despite the high cost of bodily unintelligibility, which often exposes them to violence, transphobia and discrimination, placing their lives in daily precarity between life and death (Balzer and Hutta, 2014).

These discussions around bodies as malleable or modifiable, as Murray (2005) and White (2014) caution, are fraught with conflict, especially when some fat activists choose to lose weight or when fat trans activists navigate cisnormative medical frameworks for surgeries to make their bodies more intelligible and, ultimately, their lives more liveable (Butler, 2004). Even trans people with a de-pathologising stance often opt for surgeries, such as breast removal (for trans men) or Adam's apple reduction (for trans women), not solely for 'passing' but to address their personal needs for self-determination and to mitigate the impact of transphobia. These complexities deepen when considering racial identities and sexual preferences, which influence the demands for performing femininity and masculinity and their beauty standards. Research on Black, Indigenous and Brown women's experiences highlights the struggle of navigating daily life under the fear of racialised ugliness (Craig, 2006; Morales and Parra, this issue; Moreno Figueroa, 2021; Tate, 2009). This can diminish their sense of womanhood and femininity, impacting their ability to 'get on' with life. These dilemmas and contradictions are integral to understanding the narratives of Mexican fat activist women and Brazilian *travesti* sex workers in relation to beauty. We will explore these narratives in dialogue with the main themes discussed, moving towards a collective agenda for understanding and liberation. As Olufemi (2021) proposes in her notion of 'imagining the otherwise', this is a radical call to transcend the restrictive norms governing bodies, gender, race and beauty. Embracing such imaginative possibilities encourages new forms of belonging and self-determination, fostering transformative futures that celebrate, rather than marginalise, bodily diversity. We now turn to a brief discussion on the connections between fatphobia, beauty, race and gender to contextualise our empirical exploration.

Beauty as a mirror of body size/shape, gender and racial inequalities

The Eurocentric roots of fatphobia are deeply tied to a system of racial oppression that privileges the 'beautiful' thinness of (white) bodies. This history also relies on heteronormativity, reinforcing heterosexuality and gender binarism to control body sizes and dictate appropriate feminine and masculine performances. As a result, non-white LGBTQI+ negatively racialised fatness, particularly that of Black women, is constructed as a 'monstrous opposite other' (Strings, 2019), upholding the patriarchal and Eurocentric ideal of thin, beautiful, white, heterosexual and cis women's bodies (Shaw, 2005).

It has long been established that racialised identities, whether privileged or disadvantaged, are shaped by historical and cultural power relations that position Indigenous, Black Afro-descendant, Asian, *mestizo* (mixed-race) and white people within a relational hierarchy (De la Cadena, 2000; Moreno Figueroa and Wade, 2022; Wade, 2009). In contexts like Latin America – though not uniquely – colonial legacies have assigned positive value to whiteness, while 'less white' bodies have been devalued, marginalised and dehumanised (Moreno Figueroa, 2012, 2021; Ortega Domínguez, 2022). Representations of

physical beauty predominantly centre whiteness (Canessa, 2008), associating it with desirable bodies, while non-whiteness on darker bodies becomes linked to unattractiveness (Casanova, 2004; Nelson, 1999; Rahier, 2003) and disgust (Moreno Figueroa, 2021, 2024).

When considering the lived and embodied experiences of negatively racialised cis women and trans and non-binary people who navigate and challenge intersecting oppressions of racism, fatness, gender normativity and sexual preference, the concept of beauty and which bodies are deemed permissible, acceptable, desirable, cared for and loved becomes complex – or perhaps too simple: often, none of the above. Narratives originally created by and for LGBTQI+ communities have been adapted by fat studies to explore the idea of 'coming out' as fat (Saguy and Ward, 2011; Sedgwick, 1993). Political movements advocating fat acceptance challenge the pressure to pass as non-fat (Murray, 2005; Pausé, 2012), and recent years have seen a shift towards more critical and queer analyses that move beyond the focus on white, able-bodied, heteronormative subjects (Pausé et al., 2014; White, 2014). From an anti-racist feminist perspective, fat studies and queer studies converge in questioning the concept of normality imposed on bodies that 'do not fit' due to size, sex-gender unintelligibility, racial (mis)identification and perceived attractiveness. What, then, would it mean to come out as a beautiful non-white, fat, cis or trans person?

Feminism has long questioned who sets beauty standards and why women predominantly adhere to them (Colebrook, 2006), as well as why men police and monitor women's bodies (and their own). Beauty ideals – rooted in Eurocentrism, whiteness, thinness and heterosexuality – are deeply tied to colonial history and scientific racism, shaping femininity and drawing significant critique within feminism, particularly from Black women authors who have exposed how these ideals perpetuate gender and racial inequalities (Collins, 1990; hooks, 1981; Moreno Figueroa and Rivers-Moore, 2013; Shaw, 2006; Tate, 2009). Notions of racialised embodiment, both in advantage and disadvantage, legitimise the consideration of fatphobia as 'a Eurocentric colonial technology' (Harrison, 2021; Mitjans Alayón, 2022: 259; Strings, 2019). This technology operates on a dichotomy between an 'us' characterised by white thinness (the standard of humanity) and a 'them' defined by non-white, racialised fatness. This tense, mirror-like relationship highlights what the 'permitted body' should embody by reflecting what it must not be. The binarism of these categories becomes more acute, as we have seen, when the gender dimension is included, as it is non-white, fat women who are more reproved and discriminated against for their body size than men (Fikkan and Rothblum, 2012; White, 2014), serving as cautionary figures that reinforce body control mechanisms for other women.

However, a heteronormative assumption underlies these debates and critiquing it seriously can lead to renewed discussions on beauty, incorporating the experiences of LGBTQI+ people, as well as those with disabilities and neurodiversity, which bring unique insights. As Havlin and Báez (2018: 14) state, 'LGBTQ studies and critical disability studies critique heteronormative beauty regimes and explore the potentials of non-gender-normative stylisations and more inclusive modes of recognition'. This runs parallel to studies examining beauty as challenging white iconicity while remaining

'difficult' (Moreno Figueroa, 2013), considering racial logics that go beyond the black-white divide to include mixed, brown and *marrón* beauties (Moreno Figueroa, 2021; Ortega Dominguez, this issue). The push to decolonise beauty studies and to decentre white iconicity, as advocated by Shirley Tate (2009, 2010, 2018), has been crucial for researching and understanding these diverse forms of beauty without reifying them or

> … essentializing racialized models of beauty, such as those proposed by Black nationalism. This essentialization can erase, or make us lose sight, of the processes by which beauty is embedded with racism and social exclusion or the ways in which the workings of racism are operationalized through beauty practices. Thus, it can make it difficult to get out of the moralizing conundrums and banalization that surround beauty. It can make it difficult to deal with beauty as also an inescapable tendency, an inclination, a lure that gives solace and pleasure. (Moreno Figueroa, 2021: 57)

As stated in the introduction, we argue that understanding beauty as a multifaceted experience – one that brings a racialised, gender non-binary and body-size diversity lens to it – and recognising it as an ever-evolving, intersectional dance (Moreno Figueroa and Viveros Vigoya, 2022) with varying intensities, underscores the complex and intriguing task of holding multiple perspectives together. This approach allows us to appreciate our two additional arguments: first, how the tension between societal constraints and individual agency reveals the limits of permissibility and the consequences when those limits are defied; and second, how beauty functions as a source of emotional reprieve, self-expression and belonging, all of which remain in constant negotiation.

This overview illustrates how an approach that gives space to the distribution of intensities of oppression, grounded in specific empirical examples, brings to light the nuances of human experience within profound inequality and injustice, highlighting the need to expand our analyses to 'hold the complexity' from our situated perspective.

Permitted fats: navigating fatness and the slippery terrain of beauty

In early 2024, one of the authors, Mónica, held a series of six non-structured conversations on beauty, fatness and racism in Mexico[3] with a group of experts: fat activists, academics and social media content creators occupying varied racialised spaces as Black, Indigenous and brown mixed-race/mestiza Mexican women, most of whom were fat.[4] The group consisted of cis women, some non-binary, with diverse sexual identities, engaging in fat-activism, art and academic research on related issues. Some focused more on fatness and gender, others on gender and sexual diversity and some on ethnic differences and racism. All the women are public agents advancing discussions on fatphobia and fat oppression in academic and public spheres, working towards a collective anti-fat oppressive social justice agenda, and as such they have all agreed to be named in this article. They are, in alphabetical order, Gabriela Quintero Camarena, Georgina Diédhiou Bello, Izchel Cosio Barroso, Marbella Figueroa, Patricia Matus and Yadira del Mar.

Our conversations centred on their thoughts, expertise and experiences of weaving (anti)racism, beauty, and fatness together, and what is needed to sustain such discussions. We explored their ideas on change and malleability as essential for understanding beauty practices and fatness, as well as reconciling the desire, as Yadira del Mar expressed, for 'us to stop feeling the need to diet, not that we stop dieting'. The main issues that we want to bring to this article's discussion are, first, the insights gained by untangling 'empirical moments' and examining how intensities come in and out of focus, distributing relevance and pertinence in discussions of beauty and racism. Secondly, we want to explore how the tensions around the permitted fat person appear in their understanding of the field of fat activism. And finally, we wish to address the understandings of beauty that emerge from their experience and that could be considered non-hegemonic.

Asking 'the other question' around beauty and trying to get to how racism and fat oppression appear in everyday experiences reveals a gap in emerging debates. Discussions on fatphobia and beauty often lack a clear connection to discussions on racism, and vice versa, despite their deep historical links (Gilman, 1999; Strings, 2019). Conversations around racism and beauty do not always explicitly maintain a connection with fatphobia. Marbella Figueroa, a fat dark skin queer black activist, noted that:

> There are moments when these two aspects of my identity – being a Black woman and being a fat woman – have diverged, if that makes sense. It's a bit difficult to separate myself, to break down my experience, but it has happened, hasn't it? For example, I remember during my teenage years, maybe between the ages of 14 and 16, being very preoccupied with dieting. I was on every diet imaginable, taking laxatives, getting pellets, injections – basically, focused only on that issue without reflecting on or feeling negative about my skin tone, for instance. So, at that point, my concern was the size of my body, not my skin tone or my lips, and so on. Even though I have experienced both, it has always been a burden that has felt more present at certain times in my life, right? When these two aspects converge – not to call them problems, but I can't find a better word right now – when they come together, it's not just a case of worrying about being thin or worrying about being less dark; my whole complexity is questioned, rejected and so on. That's when I feel there is a kind of unity between these issues.

In this context, fat oppression and racism have intensities that ebb and flow, sometimes intersecting in lived experience, but not always in overt or fixed ways, even as they persist continuously in the structural background. When they do converge, the experience of inequality becomes even more pronounced, illustrating what a framework of the intensities of inequality entails – understanding what is relevant, when and to what extent. A recurring theme, however, is the role of gender and the demands of femininity within these relations. The experience of being gendered is fundamental to initiating conversations about fatphobia, beauty, skin colour and racism. This gendered lens becomes essentialised as the primary platform from which to assess fatness, race and beauty, all of which are fraught with worry and rejection when 'my whole complexity is questioned'. Here, we argue, beauty concerns intensify the intersection of racialisation and fatness.

Marbella's preoccupation with beauty revolves around dieting, body size, skin tone and features such as 'my lips'.

Another surprising pattern that emerged from these conversations was that the most nuanced critiques of both racism and fat oppression emerged when discussions of heteronormativity and class were layered, and patterns of intensity emerged. These 'queer critiques', which challenge gender norms, appeared particularly incisive in their reach in Gabriela Quintero's opinion:

> And on the issue of sexuality, it seems heterosexual women are the most affected by fatphobia, right? Lesbian women, who work closely with other women, don't encounter the same pressure or body hatred that heterosexual women face, largely due to their relationships with men, who often uphold a specific body ideal. (…) I also find it interesting that, from what I've observed, mixed-race and Black women seem more accepting of fat bodies than white, especially rich white women. At Ibero, a university of super-privileged people, you rarely see fat women in the student body. There's much more pressure among the upper classes to maintain a slim figure, with access to treatments, girdles, surgeries, diets and even 'non-weight-centric' nutritionists, whose fees are unaffordable for most. I mean, they're not payable, full stop. That it's an outrage. A month's consultation can cost 200 or 300 euros. Who can pay for that? Some girls at Ibero have a lot of money, perhaps. Super strict, ridiculous diets – organic Norwegian salmon, organic chicken, extra virgin olive oil. Well, only rich girls eat like that, don't they? They have more choices.

Gabriela is a light brown mestiza, fat activist and academic. She highlights how heteronormativity and class privilege reinforce specific body ideals and beauty standards, with heterosexual women and affluent individuals facing particularly strong pressures to conform. By contrasting the experiences of lesbian and heterosexual women, Gabriela underscores that beauty standards are not only gendered but also deeply classed, with 'acceptable' bodies supposedly accessible only to those who can afford costly diets and treatments. This critique challenges the neoliberal notion of beauty as an attainable, universal standard.

Furthermore, within the fat activist scene, another of the experts I had a conversation with was Yadira del Mar, a queer Zapotec brown indigenous woman, who described how she noticed the predominance of white-mestizo women in discussions on fatness. These discussions often promoted fashion as a gateway to attractiveness, empowerment and a sense of respectability and beauty, viewing it as one of the most significant debts owed to (heterosexual) fat women. This realisation led her to question how narrow an approach focused solely on fashion as reparation for fat women could be when viewed through a queer lens:

> This inclusion of fat women in the fashion world feels like falling into the same void, because that's all they talk about. Fat women can wear make-up and certain types of clothes, right? But the topic of beauty is being left behind, isn't it? (…) What about women who are fat but don't fit those parameters? I'm not white, I'm not interested in fashion or make-up and I'm not aiming for visibility in those networks. Becoming a

> fashion influencer is not something I'm striving for. And what about fat women who don't fit the accepted image? (…) What kind of inclusion are we really talking about when we speak about the fashion world?

The critique is bold, challenging the mandates of femininity that underpin the demands of white beauty and thinness. Here is where Yadira del Mar points out the emerging stereotype of *la gorda permitida* (the permitted fat woman) and questions the possibility of not being interested in make-up or, similar to the quote introducing this article, demanding the right to be 'scruffy' (*fachosa*). This stance moves beyond recognising class differences and sets a new standard for beauty. With a strong critique of how the idea that every woman has the right to choose what to do with her body gets wrapped into a profit-orientated beauty industry that is only accessible to some, Yadira del Mar highlights the pervasive discourse promoting skin care regimes:

> A friend reflected on make-up and how it has become an investment of time and money. They mentioned self-care routines, like using ten different products for skincare (…), requiring more money and time, buying from big companies. There was controversy as many women invoked the feminist maxim 'my body, my choice', but we're realising these concepts are losing political content and becoming distorted. (…) It's not about criticising any individual woman's choice but opposing a structure that compels us to conform to a duty to be – now involving 10 products to look 'natural'. (…) I have always said that when women give up the mandate of wanting to be beautiful, we will gain so much.

This claim stems from what she perceives as the exclusion of *la gorda de a pie* (the everyday fat woman), particularly the fat Indigenous woman who is also a lesbian challenging normative beauty standards. Indigenous fat women face a constant battle against normative regimes and stereotypes: between a white-mestizo world with Eurocentric values that deems women always too fat, and a Zapotec standard of acceptability where women with wide hips, embodying fertility and capable of wearing traditional dress, are often seen as too thin (Matus Alonso, 2019). According to Yadira del Mar, Indigenous women experience unique difficulties as they endure what she called the colonisation of their tables and kitchens, with food and eating practices under scrutiny amid conflicting body ideals. In this context, she argues, resisting beauty mandates is essential. When I asked her to elaborate on whether challenging beauty mandates meant embracing a sense of ugliness, as some have suggested, she was quick to clarify that this was not her point. Instead, she advocated for engaging in the exercise of 'defining what is beautiful for me':

> In my case, it's not that I call myself ugly. When I talk about renouncing these beauty mandates, it's about this external construction of beauty that defines me from a place I know I won't occupy because I am not a white woman, I am not a heterosexual woman (…). I think about beauty, for example, through a poem I wrote when I reflected on perceiving myself as ugly due to existing stereotypes. I started to look at my face and realised I have freckles like my mother and niece, whom I see as beautiful – not just because they are

> part of my family and genealogy, but because I think they are beautiful women. So I thought, if I consider myself ugly because of my freckles, my round nose or my thick lips, I am denying my genealogy and myself. I began reconstructing what beauty could mean to me, thinking of bodily beauty from a different perspective than what we've been taught. My body is beautiful because it has supported me; my legs are fat but strong, allowing me to walk. This body has kept me connected to life, and that began a process of re-evaluating what is beautiful for me. So, I would talk about beauty not by calling myself ugly but by rejecting those other mandates and building a concept of beauty that values my genealogy, my roots and the strength of my body that lets me keep living.

Yadira del Mar challenges the imposed beauty standards by emphasising a personal redefinition rooted in self-acceptance and connection to her heritage. Rather than accepting the notion of 'ugliness' as an alternative to mainstream beauty, she highlights a radical process of valuing her genealogy, her features and the strength of her body. This perspective not only rejects societal beauty mandates but also constructs a different sense of beauty that invites us to see the body anew. Her approach exemplifies a transformative view of beauty – one that defies external expectations and centres on her own identity and lived experience.

The extracts presented in this section, while offering only a limited perspective on the depth and breadth of the conversations held,[5] illustrate the complex and intense intersectional dance involved in weaving together discussions of racism, fat oppression and beauty mandates. These conversations reveal the challenges and contradictions inherent in sustaining a dialogue that encapsulates these oppressions. The narratives highlight that discussing these issues becomes more fluid and possible when approached through queer and lesbian critiques, which challenge binary and heteronormative structures. Furthermore, a lens that considers class distinction allows for the different intensities of the empirical moments to be revealed more clearly. This flexible lens opens up space to question and destabilise rigid norms, allowing for a broader, more inclusive understanding of beauty.

The reflections shared by some of the women in these conversations, from the challenges of confronting Eurocentric and heteronormative beauty standards to redefining personal and collective notions of beauty, underscore the idea of distributed intensities (Moreno Figueroa, 2010). These intensities – moments when different elements of oppression, such as racism, body size exclusion and sexism, converge and interact with varying levels of impact – become evident in their lived experiences. The conversations show how certain aspects, like fatness or ethno-racial identification, may flare up or recede in importance depending on context, highlighting the fluid and dynamic nature of these intersections.

By examining these distributed intensities, we can better understand how different forms of oppression interconnect, sometimes clashing with or amplifying each other. The experts' stories demonstrate how moments of heightened focus on one oppression can reveal the compounded yet differentiated effects of multiple oppressions, making the experience of inequality more acute. Yet, these same stories also point to the potential

for redefining beauty on the speaker's own terms, moving away from imposed standards towards a more inclusive and affirming understanding.

The politics of beauty: race, gender and survival in Brazilian *travesti* sex workers' experiences

In the Latin American context, *travestis* – within the wide range of trans identities – are people who were assigned as male at birth and, generally, live full time *as* women (without pretending to *be* women), that is, they incorporate and perform their particular way of understanding femininity. The other author of this article, Julieta, conducted a multisite ethnography in Rio de Janeiro and Barcelona with a group of Brazilian *travesti* sex workers (Vartabedian, 2018).[6] Most of the participants of the research were very young (18–30 years old), from the lowest socio-economic strata, with a very basic level of education, who identified as mixed-race and Black and engaged exclusively in prostitution. Becoming *travestis* requires a lot of effort, money and dedication and, among the participants, involves migrating to big cities where they can live their gender identities with less oppression, fleeing from highly transphobic contexts and family environments that punish and expel them as *bichas*.[7]

To permanently modify their bodies, most of them employ a series of practices such as taking hormones, using industrial liquid silicone to exuberantly increase certain body volumes (buttocks and hips, faces, breasts) and – those who have more resources – undergoing various cosmetic surgeries to obtain large breasts, reduce or refine the nose and retouch any feature that can be interpreted as masculine. For the *travesti* interlocutors in this research, *feeling* beautiful is not a banal, hedonistic goal; on the contrary, it is through the body and ideas of beauty that *travestis* 'produce' themselves as subjects situated within an internal hierarchical scale of 'success' or 'failure' that regulates their interactions with other *travestis* and clients. At the same time, their beautification practices transform and feminise not only their bodies but also their own identity as they construct themselves as legible social subjects. Considering themselves 'beautiful' *travestis* gives them the possibility of finding their place in the world, even if that position is very unstable and marginal in a social context of enormous transphobia and violence (Vartabedian, 2018). In attempting to embody an ideal type of woman, *travestis* do not rely on just any woman, but on those they consider powerful and glamorous, who have modified their bodies through cosmetic surgery and, above all, are white and thin, i.e. successful singers, models or actresses who represent a lifestyle unattainable for the vast majority of people (Gisele Bündchen, Angelina Jolie or Madonna are some of their referents).

According to the *travestis*, society demands more from them than from cis women – that is, they must be extremely feminine and conform as much as possible to certain hegemonic aesthetic ideals based on a cisnormative model. This heightened surveillance of their bodies can result in severe punishments, particularly in highly transphobic contexts when they attempt to live as women but their bodies and identities are read as 'men'. Reyna, a participant interviewed in Rio de Janeiro, asserts that:

> Society is cruel: if a bearded woman has a face full of hair, people will say she has superfluous hair, right?, like several women I've seen who have hormonal problems, sometimes they have a thick beard but people say she has superfluous hair. If a *travesti* has fuzz on her face, people will say she is bearded. (…) because if the world is cruel to those who were born women and are not to blame for not being beautiful, imagine how it is for a *travesti*.

As previously mentioned, the bodily transformations and beautification processes of *travestis* are intimately tied to their gender self-affirmation, as they believe they are 'taking care' of themselves or, in other words, becoming more socially intelligible subjects. In their identity construction, the relationship between the natural and the artificial plays a central role in shaping their understanding of beauty. For *travestis*, perfection often means becoming a 'doll' – investing time, money and strategies to resist the 'natural destiny' of their bodies. As a result, ugliness is frequently associated with what is considered 'natural'.

Interestingly, this contrasts with how natural beauty is – according to *travestis* – often celebrated among cis women. As Priscila explains, 'A woman is already born beautiful, she is different. There are beautiful *travestis*, but women are different, women are women. When a woman is born beautiful, she is already beautiful'. In this context, artificiality is highly valued by *travestis*, as it symbolises not only their belonging to the group but also the considerable investments they make in constructing their identities as *travestis* (Pelúcio, 2009). This essentialisation of womanhood can also be critical when it comes to evaluating women's naturalness. For example, Reyna shared that when a woman provokes a *travesti* by saying 'I don't have any cosmetic surgery', her response is 'I can see that there isn't any, you ugly woman!'.

This insight reveals a significant social dynamic within Brazilian *travesti* sex work culture: the 'permitted *travesti*' is one who conforms to the mandatory aesthetic ideals of femininity and body modification. Their ability to navigate these rigid beauty norms is crucial to their social and economic survival. However, *travestis* are not merely embodying or being forced to embody heteronormative beauty standards. Their embodiment can also be seen as disruptive, as they engage with and negotiate these ideals from the margins, resignifying what it means to be a 'beautiful' trans/*travesti* (Bettcher, 2013; Stryker, 1994). The mere existence of *travestis* challenges heteronormativity, as they navigate and survive in contexts where strict gender binarism prevails, and any deviation or unintelligibility in their bodies can lead to severe punishment.

Moreover, we can observe particular tensions around the experiences of *travestis* with mixed-race and Black bodies in a culture that elevates white beauty ideals. Brazil's national identity, constructed around the myth of 'racial democracy', promotes the sensual mestizo or mulatto as a key symbol of Brazilian identity (Edmonds, 2010), obscuring a deeper racial hierarchy rooted in a Black/white binary complicated by a social allowance of mixedness. Despite this idealised image, the legacy of eugenics remains strong, with whiteness positioned as the normative and aspirational standard (Jarrín, 2015). In stark contrast, a presumed purely Black African heritage appearance, without any apparent racial mixing involving white features, is often equated with ugliness in Brazil, as it is in many other Latin American contexts (Casanova, 2004; Nelson,

1999; Rahier, 2003). This brings particular intensities to the relationships between racism and beauty.

These notions help us better interpret the practices that *travestis* in Brazil (similar to cis women) engage in to whiten their appearance (Vartabedian, 2016). It is common to see *travestis* proudly displaying tan lines from their bikinis under tiny or strapless tops, showing how 'white' their untanned skin contrasts with the rest of their body. Some also enhance their appearance by wearing blue or green cosmetic contact lenses, dyeing their hair blonde, and undergoing cosmetic surgeries like rhinoplasties, with small, narrow noses being highly valued – even among Black *travestis* (Jarrín, 2017). However, in transnational contexts, such as when Brazilian *travestis* travel to Europe, rather than solely 'whitening' their appearance, they often emphasise their 'mulatto-ness'. This is because mulatto or Black bodies are highly sexualised in these settings, where the competitive transnational sex market prizes them for their perceived 'fiery' and sensual performance (Duque, 2011). As Martine from Rio de Janeiro recounts, 'all of us who have mixed Black blood are more attractive, we are spicier, and I'm talking about all of us, all Brazilian mulatto women, it's something … Really, Brazilian men marry white women but sleep with mulattas'.

By engaging with both gendered and racialised beauty standards, *travestis* are not simply passive recipients of these norms. They actively negotiate and resignify them, creating space for their own embodiment of beauty. This ability to navigate multiple layers of oppression while using beauty as a resource for survival and self-expression underscores the complexity of their lived experiences. It demonstrates how beauty operates not only as a difficult experience but also as a means of social positioning within contexts where rigid gender and racial hierarchies persist. Many of the *travestis* interviewed saw their racialised (and sexualised) bodies, as well as their unique expressions of beauty, as defining characteristics that distinguish Brazilian *travestis* abroad. As Roberta emphatically puts it:

> Perfect body, bikini tan lines, sun-kissed … Brazil, always. You can be sure, if you see a trans woman, a *travesti* in Europe with bikini tan lines, a perfect body, beautiful, go and ask her, you'll see she's Brazilian, for sure!

This notion of a distinctly Brazilian beauty standard highlights how these individuals actively shape their identities in both local and transnational contexts, blending physical appearance with national pride.

Similarly, body size plays a crucial role in the aesthetic ideals that *travestis* must navigate. The near absence of fat bodies among the participants in this research highlights how thinness occupies a central position in these ideals, especially for those engaged in sex work. However, the ideal of thinness in Brazilian society is not entirely shaped by Eurocentric standards. Rather, Brazilian society places a high value on curvaceousness, particularly in features typically associated with Black and mixed-race women, such as pronounced hips and buttocks (Caldwell, 2007). As a result, aesthetic practices among both Brazilian cis women and *travestis* often seek to 'Blacken' and enhance these areas of the body, while simultaneously 'whitening' or 'thinning' facial features

(Edmonds, 2010; Jarrín, 2015). Many *travestis* even dream of undergoing aesthetic surgery to achieve, with pride, a 'doll nose'. These beauty practices reveal how racialised body ideals, often centred on mulatto or Black female bodies, intersect with standards of femininity in complex and often contradictory ways.

This interplay of beauty ideals can be seen in the experiences of *travestis* Bruna and Lorna in Rio de Janeiro, who navigate these standards in different ways. Bruna, who gained weight due to hormone use, nonetheless retains a highly valued aesthetic. Her 'angelic' face, perceived as white, combined with a more 'natural' form of femininity, allows her to maintain desirability among both clients and peers. Her fuller figure, although outside the typical thinness ideal, does not compromise her position within the *travesti* community, as her whiteness and facial features align with the group's beauty standards. Lorna's experience, on the other hand, highlights the racial and physical disparities that complicate this negotiation of beauty. Dark-skinned, mixed-race and suffering from health issues related to silicone injections, Lorna does not meet the group's ideals of femininity or beauty, who mock her appearance. Her voluminous body, however, is seen by clients as a sign of 'good health', defying the stigmas of HIV/Aids and drug addiction that often affect thin sex workers. This contrast between Bruna's admired 'natural' femininity and Lorna's ridiculed but still desirable body underscores how beauty standards among *travestis* are deeply entangled with race, health and the embodied consequences of survival in sex work.

These insights into the universe of *travestis* help us reflect on their relationship with beauty, body transformations and ideas of whiteness, Blackness and, ultimately, fatness. Beauty is a central element that *travestis* use to make sense of their gender identities. By becoming 'beautiful' *travestis*, they simultaneously construct themselves as social subjects, asserting a certain intelligibility. Their modified and feminised bodies become their main allies in living as *travestis*, embodying an idealised, hegemonic femininity that privileges whiteness – and the 'successful' life it is believed to entail – as the norm guiding most of their racial-aesthetic practices and strategies, particularly given that their bodies are predominantly non-white. Thinness defines nearly all the participants in this research – a thinness that must be contextualised concerning the particularities, meanings and values that Brazilian society assigns to female bodies, including the special eroticisation/'Blackening' of certain attributes.

Ultimately, the construction of 'beautiful' *travestis* – as subject-others outside heteronormativity – challenges their appropriations of normative values tied to hegemonic beauty, represented by whiteness, thinness, frequent aesthetic interventions and association with a 'successful' way of life. As we have seen, their performance of the 'permitted *travesti*' negotiates a specific form of passing – not one aligned with heteronormative or medicalised understandings of femininity, but rather a performance deliberately tied to being recognised as beautiful *travestis*. They embody hyper-feminine shapes contoured by a conscious use of artificiality to stand out. In doing so, they actively redefine beauty from the margins. This resonates with Reyna's words at the beginning of this article: 'I don't want to pass as a woman or go unnoticed. Absolutely not. I truly want to succeed; I want to be a glamorous, powerful *travesti*'. Their very existence, however, and daily survival within societies that often view *travestis* as abject beings

left to die (Butler, 2004), transforms their performances and feminine embodiments into bold assertions of identity, challenging dominant gender and beauty norms. Through these embodiments, *travestis* not only assert their right to visibility and desirability but also resist a culture that typically excludes them from definitions of beauty and worth. Their beauty practices become a form of subversive agency, with each modification or self-presentation adding to a counter-narrative that redefines the boundaries of femininity and the concept of 'normative' beauty. Thus, the presence and determination of *travestis* have the potential to contest deeply ingrained societal values, fostering new understandings of gender, beauty and survival.

Conclusions

By bringing a racialised, gender non-binary and body-size diversity lens to beauty, we set out to achieve three goals: first, to better understand what becomes visible or remains hidden, what is in or out of focus and which identities or expressions are permitted or suppressed; second, to analyse the hierarchical logics that intensify certain identity markers or diminish others, shaping who is allowed to embody specific ideals; and finally, to outline paths for mobilisation that challenge these oppressive structures, creating actionable routes towards dignity and acceptance for everyone across all identities.

Reflecting on the experiences of Mexican experts on fatness and fat activists, and Brazilian *travesti* sex workers, shared themes emerge that underscore the complexity and strategic power of their approaches to beauty. Both groups show us how people occupying spaces of fatness and transness navigate an intricate matrix of race, gender, body size and social status, with each factor interacting dynamically in what Moreno Figueroa (2010) describes as 'distributed intensities'. This concept reveals how oppressive experiences – such as racism, body size exclusion, sexism, homophobia and transphobia – do not simply accumulate but fluctuate, becoming more or less prominent depending on the context.

Within these shifting intensities, both groups allow us to consider survival strategies that redefine beauty as plural and inclusive, extending beyond aesthetics to serve as a vital mode of self-affirmation and existence. The distribution of oppression through lived experiences creates opportunities for negotiation, provocation and resistance against imposed notions of permissibility, carving out spaces for more expansive ways of living. As introduced earlier, we have demonstrated how beauty functions as an atmosphere, sign and pathway central to this terrain of liveability.

In this article, we have woven a multifaceted dialogue on fatness, transness, beauty and racism to critique dominant norms and highlight the gaps in understanding bodies that exist outside these frameworks. By engaging with diverse lives, experiences and expertise, we have showcased empirical moments where distributed intensities of oppression – racism, body size exclusion, sexism, homophobia and transphobia – dynamically shape differentiated experiences of beauty. Our approach highlights how examining distributed intensities can uncover unique constellations of oppression, offering sharper, more imaginative and ultimately more inclusive understandings of embodiment and beauty.

By challenging societal boundaries around which forms of beauty are deemed acceptable, these conversations make beauty a carefully crafted space for self-presentation that pushes beyond dominant expectations. Brazilian *travestis*, through hyper-feminine and stylised performances, engage with beauty in ways that are both subversive and selectively assertive. Their exaggerated artificiality signals a unique visibility that neither conforms to heteronormative standards nor aims to 'pass' within binary gender norms. Operating within a racially charged and transphobic social context that privileges whiteness, *travestis* adopt aspects of this ideal strategically to claim legitimacy and space, redefining what it means to be a 'permitted' *travesti* in society.

Similarly, Mexican fat activists and experts critique Eurocentric and thin-centric beauty standards, pushing back against ideals that devalue larger bodies and instead envisioning beauty as inclusive and body-affirming. Informed by queer and lesbian perspectives, these activists frame beauty as a form of body autonomy, challenging restrictive standards of attraction and worthiness. This vision offers a pathway for recognising diverse oppressions and celebrating beauty that transcends dominant norms, positioning beauty as a site that questions and redefines what society permits. Here the concept of la *gorda permitida* also brings a sharp critique to the table, illustrating how certain bodies are selectively permitted into spaces of visibility while others are sidelined. This aligns with our analysis of beauty as a gatekeeper for social legitimacy. In resisting narrow mandates of femininity, the experts and activists defy the superficial empowerment offered through fashion and instead demand an inclusive standard of beauty that honours self-defined perspectives.

Both Brazilian *travesti* sex workers and Mexican experts and fat activists actively redefine beauty standards, not merely seeking inclusion but reshaping these norms as part of their survival. *Travestis*, often marginalised, use beauty to demand visibility and assertiveness, establishing a presence that defies societal exclusion. Likewise, Mexican experts and activists expose and challenge societal beauty standards that marginalise larger bodies, reframing beauty as an inclusive space that validates diverse forms of embodiment. By reshaping these norms, both groups create new ways for fat and trans people to live visibly and meaningfully within their communities, expanding notions of desirability and self-worth that can reshape societal values around gender, race and survival.

Additionally, *travestis* may embrace certain aspects of femininity or whiteness to bolster their self-image, while Mexican experts and activists work within queer and lesbian critiques to dismantle binary and heteronormative frameworks. This shared strategy is not submission to dominant norms but a reimagining that allows each group to assert individuality and belonging for fat and trans people. Their reflections and experiences of their beauty practices reflect active engagement in embracing, rejecting or reshaping dominant ideals, each choice adding to a new narrative around body, identity and autonomy.

One of the key lessons of this exploration is that systems of oppression affect everyone's lives, not just those at the supposed margins. Fat oppression, for instance, organises thinner individuals to focus their energy on avoiding weight gain, while simultaneously pushing fat individuals into a continual struggle to lose weight, limiting their options for

autonomy. This paradox reveals how body autonomy is heavily constrained by systemic pressures. While fat and trans activists strive for self-determination, they often feel compelled to align with medical or societal expectations, including medical interventions, to secure healthcare or social acceptance. However, for trans people, care should not be exclusively tied to medical transitions. While such interventions are crucial for some, not all gender-nonconforming individuals adhere to this narrative. This struggle highlights that bodily autonomy is not simply about individual choices but involves dismantling the societal systems that dictate which bodies are considered valid and worthy of care, and recognition. Such systems reflect deeply embedded standards of bodily 'intelligibility' and 'acceptability', which dictate the kinds of bodies that are deemed 'normal', 'worthy' or 'desirable'. The need for dismantling these structural conditions – such as healthcare, beauty norms and gender performance expectations – is crucial, particularly for those whose bodies exist outside hegemonic standards. If these deeply ingrained societal standards are so limiting, how do we begin to unravel these multiple positionings? And could those who exist outside the permitted hegemonic standards lead the mobilisation and organisation of this social transformation?

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Notes

1. *Travesti* is an *emic* term frequently used in Latin America to refer to individuals assigned male at birth who adopt and express femininity in their everyday lives. This involves physical modifications and aesthetic practices that go beyond mere cross-dressing, allowing them to live continuously *as* women. However, they may not fully identify as women or seek gender reassignment surgeries (Vartabedian, 2018).
2. Association for Size Diversity and Health (ASDAH), https://asdah.org, and the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA), https://naafa.org.
3. Six conversations were conducted in Spanish online in March 2024, following the approval of the project 'Thinking Intersectionally About Fat Oppression' by the University of Cambridge

Sociology Ethics and Risk Assessment for Research (SERAR) committee. Conversation guests provided consent for both the dialogue and its recording. The conversations were recorded and transcribed, and relevant excerpts were translated. The article was subsequently translated into Spanish to allow the invited experts to read and review its arguments, along with the specific excerpts from their conversations. All experts reaffirmed their consent after reviewing the final draft of the article.

4. This group is part of an emerging network of Spanish-speaking influencers, public speakers, academics and activists, including: @acuerpada, @aliciaduran11, @ginadiedhiou, @lafatshionista, @lagordafeminista, @magda_pineyro (Piñeyro, 2021; Piñeyro and Mapache, 2019), @marbellabrilhinho, @marianadenhollander_libros, @raquelobaton (Lobatón, 2024) and @yadiradelmar; collectives like @afrochingonas, @malvestida and @nutriológicas; and activists such as Liz Misterio, Alejandra 'la Bala' Rodríguez and Erika Bülle, who bridges activism and academia alongside Alejandra Oyosa (Sánchez Neria et al., 2018), Quintero Camarena (2023), Izchel Cosio Barroso (Cota and Cosio Barroso, 2022), Aranda Delgado (2021) and Mitjans Alayón (2022). More on the academic side, some researchers include Saldaña-Tejeda and Wade (2018, 2019), Claudia Martínez-Cordero (Daza-Hernández et al., 2023), Bertran Vila (2010) and Matus Alonso (2019), among others.
5. For example, we do not use extracts of the conversations with Georgina Diédhiou Bello, Izchel Cosio Barroso and Patricia Matus, although we do quote their research work and integrate the 'flavour' of our discussions, as well as their feedback, into this article.
6. The fieldwork unfolded in two distinct phases, each lasting six months, in Rio de Janeiro (2008) and Barcelona (intermittently between 2009 and 2011). Participant observation and 26 in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with Brazilian *travestis*, plastic surgeons and NGO agents connected to *travesti* sex workers. This article emphasises my experiences in Rio de Janeiro, where, as a Latin American Spanish-speaking cis woman fluent in Portuguese, I engaged more closely with *travestis*. Much of my research took place in the *casarão*, a communal house in Lapa managed by Reyna, a *travesti* leader and sex worker who permitted my involvement in the area. The *casarão* was more than a residence; it was a vibrant hub for social and political organisation, enabling me to interact with numerous *travestis* and to gain insights into the complexities of their community dynamics. Additionally, I participated in municipal initiatives such as the 'Ladies Project', which provided professional training for *travestis* to access formal employment, and the 'Programme to Combat Child Sexual Exploitation', which distributed condoms to sex workers, including *travestis*, in different prostitution zones in Rio de Janeiro.
7. In Brazil, the term *bicha* is commonly used as a derogatory term for gay men, similar to 'faggot' in English. It carries connotations of effeminacy and is often used to insult or demean individuals perceived as not conforming to traditional masculine norms.

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