

Non-hegemonic beauties: a critical approach to beauty in (trans)national contexts

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journals.sagepub.com/home/fty**Julieta Vartabedian** 

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Abstract

In 2006, the *Feminist Theory* special issue edited by Claire Colebrook posed a pivotal question: not whether beauty is good or bad for women, but how beauty is ‘defined, deployed, defended, subordinated, marked or manipulated, and how these tactics intersect with gender and value’. This pragmatic approach to beauty set the tone for a new strand of feminist inquiry. In 2013, a second special issue extended this challenge, focusing on how beauty intersects with race in Latin America and the Caribbean. It emphasised that theorising gender and beauty requires close attention to race and its entanglements with sexuality, class and nation. This third special issue picks up that intellectual thread while pushing it further: we explore how beauty is not just shaped by colonial and capitalist legacies but is also a space actively reimagined from the margins by those whom dominant beauty norms exclude. Here, in this new special issue, we ask how beauty is weaponised, contested, resisted, pursued and persisted as a site of lure and ambivalence. How is beauty an ideological apparatus and a space for counter-hegemonic practices? And crucially, how is beauty reconfigured by Black, fat, trans, queer and negatively racialised subjects across different geographies and cultural contexts? This special issue expands the scope of feminist beauty studies by incorporating body size, gender diversity and transnational perspectives into ongoing discussions about decolonisation, intersectionality and self-making. By foregrounding the lived experiences of those often marginalised by dominant beauty norms, this issue insists

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on beauty's role not only as a system of power but also as a tool for self-determination and survival.

Keywords

beauty, body size, diversity, fat, non-hegemonic, queer, racism, self-making, trans, aesthetic practices, transnational, activists/activists

In 2006, the *Feminist Theory* special issue edited by Claire Colebrook posed a pivotal question: not whether beauty is good or bad for women, but how beauty is 'defined, deployed, defended, subordinated, marked or manipulated, and how these tactics intersect with gender and value' (Colebrook, 2006: 132). This pragmatic approach to beauty set the tone for a new strand of feminist inquiry. In 2013, a second special issue extended this challenge, focusing on how beauty intersects with race in Latin America and the Caribbean (Moreno Figueroa and Rivers-Moore, 2013). It emphasised that theorising gender and beauty requires close attention to race and its entanglements with sexuality, class and nation. This third special issue picks up that intellectual thread while pushing it further: we explore how beauty is not just shaped by colonial and capitalist legacies but is also a space actively reimagined from the margins by those whom dominant beauty norms exclude.

Here, in this new special issue, we ask how beauty is weaponised, contested, resisted, pursued and persisted as a site of lure and ambivalence. How is beauty an ideological apparatus and a space for counter-hegemonic practices? And crucially, how is beauty reconfigured by Black, fat, trans, queer and negatively racialised subjects across different geographies and cultural contexts? This special issue expands the scope of feminist beauty studies by incorporating body size, gender diversity and transnational perspectives into ongoing discussions about decolonisation, intersectionality and self-making. By foregrounding the lived experiences of those often marginalised by dominant beauty norms, this issue insists on beauty's role not only as a system of power but also as a tool for self-determination and survival.

The origins of this issue lie in the 8th Portuguese Anthropological Association Congress, held at the University of Évora in September 2022. There, a panel on non-hegemonic beauties brought together scholars examining diverse beauty experiences of cis and trans women across Latin America and Europe. The conversations generated at that event laid the foundation for this special issue and its commitment to documenting how beauty is lived, reworked and resisted across contexts. Beauty, as these contributions show, is never a neutral category. It is a terrain of power that structures access to legitimacy and desirability and acts as a tool for survival, self-definition and collective resistance. Beauty shapes material and affective economies, influences access to jobs, healthcare and social mobility and impacts how people perceive and relate to their own bodies. Rather than offering a contestation to exclusionary norms, this special issue insists on beauty's reshaping of aesthetic and political possibilities.

The lived experiences analysed in these articles demonstrate how beauty is continually negotiated through intersections of race, gender, class and body size, highlighting its role as both an ideological constraint and a site of radical potential. Through these struggles,

beauty does not remain a fixed aesthetic category but instead emerges as a relational and deeply contingent process – one that can uphold oppressive hierarchies but also serve as a means of crafting new ways of being. By centring the agency of those who subvert dominant beauty frameworks, this issue foregrounds the ways in which beauty functions as both a mechanism of exclusion and a resource for empowerment.

Beauty ideals have long and violent histories. They are entangled with colonial hierarchies that privileged whiteness, slenderness and cis-heteronormativity as markers of civilisation and value. These ideals were imposed through projects of domination and have been sustained by global capitalist industries that continue to define who is desirable, professional or respectable. Yet this legacy is not unchallenged. The articles in this issue explore how people contest, navigate and rework these norms – not only resisting them but proposing alternative imaginaries. They highlight how people are not merely passive recipients of beauty norms but active agents in reconfiguring them, employing beauty as a means of social navigation, strategic adaptation and counter-hegemonic resistance.

In highlighting beauty's historical and structural dimensions, we also attend to its affective and contingent nature. Beauty can also be thought of a site of *liveability* – a terrain where individuals negotiate their existence, visibility and belonging (Butler, 2004). The concept of 'distributed intensities' (Moreno Figueroa, 2010) is particularly useful in understanding how beauty's exclusions and possibilities fluctuate depending on context, revealing beauty's uneven and shifting power dynamics across different bodies and geographies. A fat body may be celebrated in a queer collective and stigmatised in a workplace. A trans person's beauty may be affirmed in LGBTQ+ communities while being subject to violence in public spaces. These fluctuations reveal beauty not as a static norm but as a dynamic field of negotiation. Such experiences distribute the intensity of oppression, giving breathing spaces of liveability in the face of the restriction to fully access a 'good life'. As these articles illustrate, beauty is not experienced as a stable or uniform category but as an unstable, deeply relational and historically contingent practice that can both reinforce and dismantle oppressive structures.

What unites the contributions here is a shared investment in how beauty is remade from the margins. Drawing on fieldwork across Latin America and Europe, the articles explore practices that contest dominant visual regimes and cultivate alternative aesthetics, often through transnational beauty economies, activism, embodied experiences and intimate self-styling. They attend to how beauty is not only co-opted and commodified within global capitalist circuits but also reimagined as a site of creativity and critique. Rather than framing beauty solely as harm or discipline, the work collected here shows it as a terrain where new values are embodied and alternative ways of seeing are forged. These interventions build on a lineage of feminist, queer, anti-racist and decolonial scholarship. The pieces explore distinct experiences of beauty across different racial, gendered and national contexts, offering rich insights into how non-hegemonic beauty practices are lived, challenged and reimagined.

Beauty practices and lessons from the margins

Together, these reflections situate beauty not only as a mechanism of oppression but also as a medium through which people can assert worth, visibility and care; not only as personal

strategies of survival but also as collective acts of defiance that reimagine desirability and belonging. Beauty is shown to be relational, contextual and historically saturated – but also available for reimagining. Rather than stopping at critiques of exclusion, these contributions push towards a more expansive view of beauty as a space of possibility – one in which resistance is enacted, agency is asserted and alternative aesthetics are cultivated, where beauty can function both as a site of harm and as a terrain for radical transformation. This special issue, situated within contemporary debates on beauty and social justice and across different racial, gendered and national contexts, brings those reimaginings into view, amplifying how people challenge and negotiate beauty on their own terms.

Gabriela Morales and María Moreno Parra's article, 'Beauty is a Constant Struggle: The Undecidability of Black Female Beauty in Ecuador' (2025), explores how young Black women in Ecuador navigate the contradictions and pressures of racialised beauty standards, both within dominant white-mestizo frameworks and Black communities themselves. It argues that beauty is not merely an aesthetic concern but a complex social and emotional struggle, shaped by histories of racism, mestizaje and gendered expectations. While whiteness remains the dominant beauty ideal in Ecuador, Black women must also contend with alternative beauty norms within their own communities, which sometimes contradict mainstream expectations. These competing aesthetic frameworks create conditions where Black women experience beauty as a site of both exclusion and belonging, depending on their physical features, body shape and personal styling choices. The article introduces the concept of undecidability to describe this ongoing negotiation, where Black beauty is neither fully embraced nor entirely rejected but remains in a constant state of tension.

The article examines how these tensions play out in everyday life, exploring how Black women respond to social pressures that define their appearance as both a marker of racial authenticity and a space of racialised scrutiny. Rather than assuming a single narrative of resistance or assimilation, the study highlights the emotional labour involved in managing conflicting expectations regarding hair, skin tone and body shape. These negotiations are shaped by family influence, community ideals and broader racial hierarchies, leading Black women to engage in aesthetic practices that are sometimes framed as empowerment and at other times as capitulation. The article underscores how these processes operate within a system where beauty is deeply entangled with power, identity and social mobility.

A key lesson from Morales and Moreno Parra's analysis is that Black beauty in Ecuador cannot be understood through a binary of resistance versus conformity; rather, it must be analysed as an ongoing and unstable process shaped by historical and contemporary racial logics. The study underlines how racialised women engage with beauty not just as a personal or aesthetic matter but as a contested terrain of social recognition and exclusion. The authors argue for a more nuanced approach to beauty that recognises the emotional complexity and social pressures that Black women navigate, emphasising the need for anti-racist aesthetics that do not impose new exclusions or unattainable standards. Ultimately, the article positions beauty as a deeply political and affective site, where negotiations of identity and belonging are continuously redefined.

Isabel Pires' article, 'Chinese Women Constructing and Negotiating an "Ideal" Beauty in Lisbon: How Women and Aesthetic Medical Practitioners Materialise "Race"' (2025),

examines how the concept of race, despite its lack of biological validity, continues to shape beauty norms and medicalised aesthetic practices. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork with Chinese women in Lisbon and white Portuguese doctors, the study explores how racialisation operates within beauty work, revealing the ways in which both medical professionals and Chinese women contribute to the persistence of racial logics. The article argues that aesthetic medicine functions as a space where racialised bodies are simultaneously pathologised and modified, with medical professionals invoking race to reinforce hegemonic white beauty standards. At the same time, Chinese women navigate these discourses by asserting their distinctiveness, seeking treatments that cater to their specific features while negotiating non-hegemonic beauty ideals. In this process, race is not only inscribed onto the body through physical difference but also extended to moral and behavioural characteristics, reinforcing broader structures of social stratification.

By engaging with these interactions in medical and beauty spaces, Pires explores how beauty becomes a site of negotiation, where individuals both conform to and resist dominant ideals. Rather than viewing Chinese women's beauty practices as simple assimilation to whiteness, the study stresses the complexities of these decisions, showing how aesthetic interventions are shaped by both personal desires and the racialised frameworks imposed upon them. The article demonstrates that medical professionals play a crucial role in sustaining racial hierarchies, using biological essentialism to justify interventions that alter facial features, skin tone and body proportions in line with global white beauty ideals. However, Chinese women also actively engage with these treatments in ways that complicate a one-dimensional reading of racialisation, sometimes reinterpreting aesthetic modifications as affirmations of their own cultural beauty norms rather than a rejection of their racial identity.

We clearly learn from this analysis that beauty and medical aesthetics are not neutral or purely individual choices but are deeply embedded in racialised systems of power. The study reveals that aesthetic medicine is a space where race is continuously redefined, reproduced and naturalised, not only through physical modification but also through the moral and social narratives attached to certain racialised bodies. Rather than seeing beauty work as simply a matter of self-improvement, the article argues that it must be understood as a political and social process, where negotiations of identity, desirability and legitimacy unfold within broader structures of racial capitalism and aesthetic coloniality. By centring these dynamics, Pires calls for a critical reassessment of how race continues to shape contemporary aesthetic and medical discourses, even in contexts where race itself is officially denied as a valid category.

'Marrón/x Envisionings: Visualising Queer Beauty as Feminist Anti-Racist Affective Refusal and Care in Sequential Art Activism', by Abeyami Ortega Domínguez (2025), explores how queer perspectives on beauty serve as tools for feminist antiracist resistance in Argentina, where racialised boundaries of *mestizaje* continue to shape national identity. Drawing from queer, critical race, feminist and visual studies, the article examines how Marrón/x (racialised brown-skinned) identities mobilise intersectional antiracist discourses through artistic and activist practices. Through an emphasis on the lived experiences of Marrón/x individuals, the article challenges dominant visual regimes of whiteness and heteronormativity, arguing that beauty can function as an act of affective

refusal and care. Through creative interventions, artists and activists disrupt exclusionary aesthetic norms and reimagine representation as a means of political struggle.

By engaging with cultural production that resists traditional frameworks of desirability, Ortega Domínguez demonstrates how beauty can be reclaimed as a site of agency. Rather than accepting racialised exclusion or seeking assimilation within dominant aesthetic paradigms, queer and antiracist artistic expressions propose alternative imaginaries that expand notions of embodiment and belonging. These interventions reveal how affect, ranging from rage to tenderness, can be strategically deployed to disrupt hegemonic ways of seeing and to assert the right to self-definition. The article thus positions artistic engagement as a form of critical literacy that fosters collective resistance and reconfigures social perception.

We leave this article understanding that beauty, when articulated through intersectional antiracist frameworks, transcends conventional standards and becomes a powerful political tool. It is not merely about aesthetic appreciation but about dismantling historical structures of exclusion and envisioning new forms of social justice-orientated diversity. Ortega Domínguez argues that by reclaiming beauty outside the constraints of whiteness and heteronormativity, artists and activists create spaces for alternative epistemologies, producing a political imagination that expands the possibilities for resistance, representation and social transformation.

Carmen Alvaro Jarrín's piece, "'Black, Fat and Travesti': Decolonial Artist Approaches to Trans and Travesti Beauty and Embodiment in São Paulo, Brazil' (2025), explores how Black, fat and travesti (transfeminine) artists and activists use activism – a combination of art and activism – to critique transphobic violence, challenge Eurocentric beauty standards and celebrate their embodied experiences. Engaging with decolonial and transfeminist perspectives, the article examines how beauty operates both as an exclusionary force and as a space for self-determination. It argues that by embracing non-normative aesthetics, these artists and activists generate counterhegemonic understandings of desirability and bodily value that resist colonial and cisnormative aesthetic hierarchies. Their work not only critiques systemic oppressions tied to race, gender and body size but also provides a 'political-pedagogical praxis' (Passos, 2022) that envisions new ways of conceptualising beauty.

Through an analysis of artistic and activist interventions, Jarrín highlights how these figures mobilise beauty as a site of struggle and possibility. By reclaiming stigmatised identities and foregrounding non-normative embodiments, they challenge dominant discourses that frame Black, fat and trans bodies as undesirable or excessive. Their creative practices – spanning music, performance and digital media – offer both personal affirmations and public disruptions of hegemonic aesthetic norms. In doing so, they craft new forms of belonging that reject the pressures of conforming to whiteness, thinness and cisnormativity, instead asserting self-definition as a radical act.

The article's key lesson is that beauty, often deployed as a mechanism of exclusion, can also be reclaimed as a transformative tool for self-affirmation and collective resistance. Rather than seeking inclusion within existing aesthetic paradigms, these activists reimagine desirability and legitimacy on their own terms, destabilising the aesthetic hierarchies that shape social value. Jarrín illustrates the power of decolonial and transfeminist

approaches to embodiment, offering alternative possibilities for envisioning subjectivity, recognition and joy beyond dominant frameworks of race, gender and body normativity.

Finally, the article by Mónica G Moreno Figueroa and Julieta Vartabedian, 'Reclaiming Beauty: Non-Heteronormative and Racialised Conversations on Fatness and Transness' (2025), critically examines the intersections of fatness, transness, racism and beauty, offering a theoretical framework for understanding how these identities are shaped by and resist hegemonic norms. It argues that beauty functions both as a gatekeeper to social legitimacy and as a resource for survival and resistance. Through an analysis of activist interventions and ethnographic research, the article explores the constraints imposed on non-normative bodies, the negotiation of bodily intelligibility within beauty norms and the fluctuating intensities of oppression and resilience. The concept of distributed intensities is introduced to capture how race, gender and body size interact dynamically across different social contexts, shaping experiences of visibility and exclusion.

By foregrounding the voices of fat cis women and trans (*travesti*) individuals, Moreno Figueroa and Vartabedian emphasise the ways in which beauty norms operate as disciplinary mechanisms while also being sites of defiant reclamation. Rather than merely seeking inclusion within dominant aesthetic frameworks, the people engaging in conversations for this study challenge and transform the terms of desirability, recognition and legitimacy. Their experiences and expertise demonstrate how aesthetic hierarchies are both material and affective, influencing not only social mobility but also the lived realities of pleasure, intimacy and self-worth. The article thus rethinks beauty beyond Eurocentric and thin-centric logics, arguing for a more flexible and nuanced understanding of embodiment.

This analysis underscores that beauty, when critically engaged, can serve as a site of radical possibility rather than simply a standard to be achieved. By embracing the complexities of fatness, transness and racialised embodiment, activists and cultural producers unsettle fixed ideals of attractiveness, forging new narratives of self-affirmation and collective resistance. Moreno Figueroa and Vartabedian call for an expanded conversation on beauty – one that moves beyond inclusion and instead interrogates the structures that define it – ultimately positioning beauty as a political tool for reimagining social belonging and bodily legitimacy.

Conclusion: reimagining beauty from the margins

The five articles in this special issue illustrate how beauty operates as a deeply political terrain, shaped by intersecting systems of race, gender, sexuality and body size. By centring the experiences of fat, trans, Black, Marrón and other racialised women, these contributions expand beauty studies beyond dominant paradigms, revealing beauty not merely as an aesthetic concern but as a site of struggle, resistance and possibility. Through empirical and theoretical engagements, the authors show how non-hegemonic beauty practices unsettle exclusionary norms while opening space for feminist, decolonial and intersectional scholarship.

Beauty emerges here not as a fixed or apolitical category but as a dynamic infrastructure of affect, regulation and aspiration. It functions simultaneously as a tool for exclusion and as a resource for self-determination. Across these contributions, fatness, transness and racialised identities intersect in shaping how bodies move through economies of desirability, visibility and survival. Carmen Alvaro Jarrín's study of Black, fat, travesti activism in Brazil, for example, demonstrates how decolonial transfeminist aesthetics reclaim beauty as power rather than subjugation. Abeyami Ortega's work on Marrona queer aesthetics in Argentina explores affective refusal – how emotions such as rage and self-love become tools for resisting racialised and gendered violence. These contributions highlight non-hegemonic beauty practices not just acts of defiance but as strategies for worldmaking and collective survival.

The issue also draws urgent attention to the politics of body size. Fatness is both hyper-visible and erased within dominant beauty discourses, its legitimacy conditional on proximity to hegemonic norms. Fat activists in Mexico and *travesti* sex workers in Brazil navigate a permissibility economy, where only certain fat or trans bodies gain conditional acceptance. Here, beauty is not a matter of individual preference but a deeply stratified social project – imbricated with race, class and gender hierarchies. Reclaiming beauty outside these logics becomes a mode of dignifying self-worth and reimagining desirability on different terms.

Gender and sexuality further complicate these negotiations. Trans and queer individuals engage beauty both strategically and subversively, refusing the demand for passability. In the contributions by Carmen Alvaro Jarrín and by Mónica Moreno Figueroa and Julieta Vartabedian, beauty is not rejected outright but reconfigured – as a terrain in which queer and trans bodies reassert aesthetic legitimacy without capitulating to normativity.

The issue also foregrounds how beauty's logics are historically and geographically contingent. Gabriela Morales and María Moreno Parra's exploration of Black women in Ecuador theorises beauty as a site of *undecidability* – unstable, shifting and constantly negotiated. Isabel Pires' work on Chinese women in Lisbon demonstrates how transnational beauty regimes shape racialised self-perceptions and medicalised bodily interventions, reflecting and refracting global hierarchies of value.

Together, these contributions demand that beauty studies account for how aesthetic norms operate through uneven intensities – what Mónica Moreno Figueroa calls *distributed intensities* – and how minoritised, racialised, marginalised subjects respond with creativity, refusal and desire. Future research might take up how digital economies reconfigure beauty's exclusions and solidarities, how non-hegemonic beauty practices – aesthetic resistances – travel transnationally or how structural inequalities continue to shape access to aesthetic self-determination. This special issue affirms that beauty is never neutral. It is a deeply contested site – at once an intimate, cultural and deeply political project. Beauty, as these contributions insist, offers a glimpse into the worlds already being built from the margins, attentive to the demands of justice, dignity and collective transformation.


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