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Bodies in the mirror. Reflections on reflections
Edited by Chiara Pussetti

visual ethnography

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Interior de una habitación que
alberga a cuatro trabajadores. Como
se puede apreciar, faltan camas,
muebles y baño
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Introduction

Bodies in the mirror.

Reflections on reflections

Visual Ethnography

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Abstract

Mirrors are not accurate reflectors. They multiply images, producing reflective doubles and funhouse mirror distortions, inversions, exaggerations and deformations. They allow us to observe ourselves and feel observed, creating an uncanny overlap between the self and the other; they challenge phenomenological boundaries, creating endless possibilities. Their false transparency can provide illusory perceptions and visual tricks. Mirrors reflect back to us, and usually what we see is not exactly what we expect. Mirrors are uncanny and disturbing objects from a phenomenological and experiential point of view. Taking the mirrored perspective as a metaphor for contemporary Euro-American society, which is dominated by the primacy of the image in both the real and virtual spheres, this special issue brings together six articles, a photo essay and a short documentary devoted to evidence of the inseparability of image and body, including idealised body images, self-representation, appearance, social display, normativity, beauty work, body normativity and unruly bodies, aesthetic labour and self-reconfiguration.

Keywords

Anthropology of body; Gender studies; Beauty studies; Appearance; Embodiment.

The author

Chiara Pussetti, Ph.D. in Cultural Anthropology from the University of Turin (2003), is currently a researcher at the Institute of Social Sciences of the University of Lisbon and a professor in the DANT.UL doctoral programme. With a teaching background spanning Italy, Portugal and Brazil at both undergraduate and graduate levels, Pussetti has made significant contributions to the fields of anthropology of the body and emotions, medical anthropology, and gender and migration studies through a wide range of publications. She has recently published the book *Be Fu**ing Perfect* (Etnográfica Press, 2024), and co-edited four anthologies: *Exercícios de Antropologia Narrativa* (Colibrí, 2023); *Remaking the Human* (Berghahn, 2021); *Bioteχνologias, transformações corporais e subjetivas* (UFRGS, 2021); and *Super-humanos* (Colibrí, 2021).

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Mirrors are not accurate reflectors. They multiply images, producing reflective doubles and funhouse mirror distortions, inversions, exaggerations and deformations. They allow us to observe ourselves and feel observed, creating an uncanny overlap between the self and the other; they challenge phenomenological boundaries, creating endless possibilities. Their false transparency can provide illusory perceptions and visual tricks. Mirrors reflect back to us, and usually what we see is not exactly what we expect. Mirrors are uncanny and disturbing objects from a phenomenological and experiential point of view. For this reason, stories, rituals, fairy tales, myths and superstitions about mirrors, reflections, ghosts, vampires and souls abound. Taking the mirrored perspective as a metaphor for contemporary Euro-American society, which is dominated by the primacy of the image in both the real and virtual spheres, this special issue brings together six articles, a photo essay and a short documentary devoted to evidence of the inseparability of image and body, including idealised body images, self-representation, appearance, social display, normativity, beauty work, body normativity and unruly bodies, aesthetic labour and self-reconfiguration.

The first article, by Caio Rotta Bradbury Novaes, uses the metaphor of the mirror to talk about one of the environments in which male subjectivity is constructed through body modification: the gymnasium. The allegory of mirrors and windows represents the tacit game of looking and being looked at in a gym, where performances take place. Novaes' ethnography, based on xxx months of fieldwork in Lisbon, Portugal, reveals the spectacularisation of the self through gymnastic exercises in the construction of stereotyped masculinity. Drawing on embodiment theory and gender studies, this ethnography reveals the subtlety of the subjective dimension in the embodiment of techniques/worldviews/dispositions among gym-goers, revealing the symbolic and material interplay between the individual and the social environment.

Marcos Moura, who reveals an extraordinary intimacy with his subject, follows transsexual women's relationship with the mirror with great sensitivity. Through the presentation of two ethnographic accounts, the author wants to take the reader to the places where these bodies are transformed and to the most important questions that arise in the daily lives of these women. By implanting prostheses or injecting hormones, fillers and industrial silicone, transsexual women attempt to achieve "*passabilidade*" (passing) as a marker of the female gender. Passing occurs when an individual presents him or herself, or is perceived by others, as a member of a social group other than the one to which he or she belongs, such as race, ethnicity, caste, social class, gender, sexuality, disability, and so on. In the specific case analysed by Moura, the concept of "*passabilidade*" refers to the quality of having an appearance and characteristics that allow the transgender person to be socially recognised as someone of the sex to which they believe they belong, without their condition being noticed or discovered, guaranteeing them the possibility of a peaceful transition without revealing their incompatibility with the sex they were assigned at birth. In a society where beauty, especially for women, is based entirely on cisnormative standards of beauty, the concept of passing is extremely demanding and places a burden on trans people of unrealistic gendered standards of beauty that many cis people neither meet themselves nor expect other cis people to meet.

Emerson Pessoa observes the reflection in the mirror of the beauty work of Brazilian trans and "*travestis*" (transvestite) sex workers in their construction of an ideal of European beauty. The aim of Pessoa's article is to understand the construction of bodily biographies of Brazilian trans and "*travestis*" sex workers who travel to Portugal and/or the European continent. Through in-depth and comprehensive interviews, and guided by a sociology of the individual and the body, Pessoa analyses the processes of body modification and the production of transnational subjectivities. Mobility to Europe proved to be a significant turning point in the life courses of these people, as it led to the

accumulation of economic, social and cultural capital, which is transformed into different types of bodily and symbolic capital. If geographical transits give substance to different bodily biographies, they all ultimately converge towards the ideal of embodying the European, in other words the acquisition of symbolic capital represented by the embodiment of resources and symbols perceived as aspects of glamour and luxury in prostitution fields in Europe. If European beauty is not a destiny or an accident, but rather a project that is constantly 'under construction', what kind of cosmetic practices, techniques, technologies and products do people use to embody or produce an ideal/desired/legitimate/attractive European body? What does the ideal, desired 'European body' look like? What are its physical contours, features and colours? What are people's motives, desires and aspirations to produce an ideal 'European beauty'? What is the pattern of beauty that is actually desired? How is the European body constructed, shaped and produced? European-ness is not something that simply is, but rather something that must be done, and this 'aesthetic self-fashioning' or 'investment in appearance' is not limited to the physical body, but also includes ways of dressing, personality, language, relationships and lifestyle. We are obviously not talking about the natural body, but about representations and fantasies of 'European-ness' that are constantly reproduced to delineate the boundaries and physical contours of stereotypical others in the European imagination. This article highlights that the idealised 'European body' depends on clothing, accessories, hairstyles, make-up and so on: in other words, 'European is who European does'.

Based on an autoethnographic photographic study and dialogue with 42 Portuguese interviewees who identify as female (age range 40-70), Pussetti's article explores how women experience ageism in relation to their changing physical appearance in the context of their personal relationships. In today's image society, we all strive to overcome ageing and its signs, especially given the ageist message in the media that only young and toned bodies are attractive and healthy. Although both women and men experience ageing, women are more vulnerable to a combination of ageism, sexism, classism and lookism. Fantasies of 'eternal youth', 'frozen age' or 'sleeping beauty' are firmly rooted in gender norms, expectations and moralising aesthetic values, linked to a neoliberal ideology of individual responsibility and self-discipline. Focusing on the body as it is presented to the world, through a multi-method research strategy using in-depth ethnography with middle-aged Portuguese women and art-based autoethnography, Pussetti describes the experience of femininity and ageing in relation to the youth-loving, male-dominated mirror of the dominant culture. By observing the signs of time in the social and medical mirrors, and discussing our ageing bodies with other middle-aged Portuguese women, she explores cultural and personal perceptions, attitudes and concerns about ageing, and reflects on the embodiment of anti-ageing messages and values about bodies, beauty ideals and their relationship to age. Anti-ageing advertising often adopts heteronormative, hegemonic beauty norms to establish an idealised version of middle-aged womanhood. Current media representations of ageing women not only prescribe what women should look like, but also impose an ideal of positive and graceful ageing that is increasingly linked to an ideal gender performance of normative, white, middle-class, heterosexual femininity that denies structural determinants. Anti-ageing work reveals structures of power, inequality, moral paradox, cultural complexity and political resistance in the way women perceive and choose to accept or resist the physical changes associated with the passage of time.

Federica Manfredi presents the results of an artistic and scientific exhibition as an anthropological case to look at the invisibility of vulvar diseases. Manfredi explains that our society does not recognise vulvar pain sufferers as patients with legitimate pain, confirming that an illness is not just a biomedical condition, but a social construction influenced by power imbalances. Female genital pain is socially normalised and medically under-researched, resulting in

delayed diagnosis, unresponsive interlocutors and meaningless pain that silences sufferers' voices. To survive vulvar pain, resistance is essential: political, cultural and therapeutic. Manfredi's paper presents the artistic and scientific exhibition *Vulvar Pain*, based on anthropological research that Manfredi started in 2023 to explore the experience of vulvar pain through qualitative methods with 17 Italian women. Considering the multiple lenses of the exhibitions, the article, privileging visual narratives to facilitate dialogue between biomedical discourse, social sciences and the embodied knowledge of sufferers, analyses how vulvar pain struggles to be no longer meaningless and invisible. Manfredi's article is also a statement and a struggle. It is a demand for the recognition and legitimisation of women suffering from pelvic pain and a fight for the assertion of rights and for more dialogue and education on women's sexual health.

Isabel Pires' provocative essay 'chimera manifesto' uses ethnographic data, social media research and AI-generated images to explore how women's bodies are being reconfigured in the realm of plastic surgery, à la carte aesthetic procedures and the liberal market. In Greek mythology, the chimera is a monstrous creature composed of different animals. Etymologically related, "chimeric" refers to something "fantastic or imaginary". This visual essay is dedicated to the (de)construction of the modern chimera. This fantastic female creature is made up of parts of rabbits, crows, turkeys and bats. She carries bananas on the back of her thighs and wears saddlebags. Drawing on Donna Haraway's Cyborg Manifesto, Pires has come up with terms such as 'rabbit lines', 'crow's feet', 'banana rolls', 'turkey neck' and 'bat wings' to define the unique conditions of the female body. The aim, as Haraway encourages, is above all to be blasphemous.

This special issue dedicated to reflections on reflections, with the mirror as a central metaphor and allegory, concludes with a photo essay presenting some images from the Barbara series by the multi-award-winning photographer Evija Laivina. Evija Laivina (1978) is a Latvian photographer and artist (www.evijalaivina.com). She studied Contemporary Art Practice at the University of the Highlands and Islands in Scotland. Her work explores identity, the body and beauty standards, with a particular focus on women's appearance and non-traditional beauty routines. Evija Laivina had worked with me on the realisation of the exhibition *Be Fu**ing Perfect*, which took place in Lisbon in September 2022, and a high level of trust had already been established prior to the project. Evija was invited to work with me as a co-author and was involved in the results of the anthropological research. With her photographs, Evija made a significant contribution to changing the way we think about and experience our physicality and our being in the world in the age of perfection. In this dossier, Evija and I have decided to work together again, mirroring each other in a female dialogue, in the presentation of the photo essay dedicated to Barbara. Who is Barbara? Barbara is a beautiful woman in her forties. She is alive and strong, with her passions, secrets, dreams and insecurities. Barbara is a reflection, she is an avatar, she is a challenge, she is a superheroine. Her surreal world draws the author and the audience in, and sometimes unexplainable things happen. Over the months, Barbara has grown and changed: sometimes Barbara is a self-portrait and sometimes she is another person, and these dynamics can change simultaneously. She is a product of uncertainty, constant questioning and analysis. Looking through Barbara as if in a mirror, Evija perceives things about herself. At the same time, the audience discovers new meanings and possible interpretations.

The special issue concludes with the short documentary '*An archive of enhancement practices in Portugal*', made by Francesco Dragone as part of the EXCEL project, which I coordinated, and which was first shown at the ethnographic art exhibition *Be Fu**ing Perfect* in Lisbon, Portugal. This documentary opened the doors to the most curious and attentive audiences, from both the academic and artistic worlds, who are investigating the use of the body, who are questioning the meaning of hegemonic beauty and what it means to grow old.

Articles

Through Mirrors and Windows in the gym:

Manhood in the making

Visual Ethnography

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to present an insider ethnography about the construction of the self around the appearance of an ideal of manhood in a gym, revealing the *spetacularization* of the self through gymnastic exercises. Performances of gymnastic techniques and social media posting show the gendered way they are practiced and conceived, and how the embodiment of those practices and discourses reflects a set of contemporary values. The simplification of life through individualism and self-centering leads to a subjectivity deprived of the large spectrum of social affection, reducing the individual to a somatic entity instead of a sensitive embodied being. The allegory of mirrors and windows represents the tacit game of gazing and being gazed at in a gym, where the performances take place. Through embodiment theory and gender studies, this ethnography revealed the subtleness of the subjective dimension in the embodiment of techniques / world views / dispositions among the gym-goers, unveiling the symbolic and material interplay between the individual and the social environment. Thus, a conceptual frame interlinking this triad is presented as one possible understanding of how a stereotyped masculinity is practiced repeatedly through gymnastic sets, unveiling the paradigmatic spirit of our times.

Keywords

body; embodiment; gender studies; masculinities; gymnastics

The author

Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Aberta University in Portugal. I have a previous background in Physical Education, which granted me an interdisciplinary overview of the classical set of anthropological antinomies (nature/culture, agency/structure, mind/body). My research interests are body and embodiment theory, gender studies, religion, body techniques and technology. Lately, I have been dedicating myself to developing and applying design anthropology as a transformative tool for any kind of cultural scenario.

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1 “Ontologies are materially constituted, and materials are negotiated ontologically. There is never a clear gap between a material thing and a person’s ontological engagement with it.” (2012: 677)

Introduction

To understand better how the ideal image of the male body carved through gymnastic exercises was set and how it reproduces its social structure, I propose a framework that includes gender studies and a perspective of embodiment theory. Csordas (2003) presented a set of premises for an embodiment theory, considering the body as the ‘existential ground of culture and the self.’ This existential ground is also a relational ground; between space and the way it is inhabited, between form and function, and agency and structure. It implies a symbiotic ontological conception between the *materiality* and *immateriality* of space construction, inhabited by the symbolic representation of the body.

It is a premise of my argument that the intersection between the abstract and the material dimensions constitutes a dynamic ontological condition. A liminal area: ‘power vs powder,’ as Harris and Robb¹ point out. The Foucaultian dilemma about the disciplinary power as constraint and as empowering technology is considered, providing a balanced approach to embodiment and its cultural ‘milieu.’

My claim is that a certain type of masculinity is performed in the gym embodied and practiced through gymnastic body techniques; it reflects a part of the contemporary society and its visual culture through social media posts. These displays of ‘hyper-masculinity’ are associated with a set of ways of being and the materiality of their practice through an interpretation of their ‘body techniques.’

Although it would be interesting to investigate a broader gender perspective and its relations, other models of masculinity, I chose to focus on this particular stereotype when my attention was drawn to understanding why some guys slammed the weights in the machines and dumbbells on the floor, screaming and growling while exercising. I knew that exercise could be somewhat cathartic, but this was something else. This was a desperate call for attention, the ultimate kind. Or at least, the loudest. I wanted to understand what else was behind it. I knew that it was possible to train heavy without such a performative display. Working as a personal trainer, both in fancy health clubs and small gyms in the suburbs, I knew it transcended class.

Another aspect of the contemporary culture that contributes to understanding the values and attitudes associated with this hyper-masculinity is the ‘corpolatria’ - idolatry of the body and individualism. Some of these values were demonstrated in social media posts, that generally portrayed individual success related to an emotionally distant and indifferent masculinity, which lifestyle reflects an exaggerated sense of agency.

The ethnographic data presented here was collected in a gym (HC Club) in the central area of Lisbon, Portugal, where I had previously worked as a personal trainer. I returned one year later as a client to conduct this ethnography. The purpose of this paper is to present an insider ethnography about the construction of the self around the appearance of an ideal of manhood in a gym, revealing the spectacularization of the self through gymnastic exercises. Let us have a quick look at the beginnings of bodybuilding as a physical activity developed in the United States, which shaped the aesthetics of a way of life through mass media all over the world, including in Portugal, where it established itself as a growing industry that gave rise to multinational companies.

The forge of men

Near the end of the XIX century, the new demographic, economic and social conditions in the United States demanded a renewed entrepreneurial spirit, within the new industrial order. Sports and entrepreneurial spirit would replace the frontier spirit in the minds of many American men (Courtine 1995), becoming since then a measure of self-appreciation, dignity, and manhood. The self-made man became a tale of effort, hard work, and success.

Jean Jacques Courtine's study about the bodybuilding² culture and American puritanism indicates that bodybuilding was also boosted by a response to the significant groundbreaking advances of the feminist movement. To compensate for the feeling of 'loss' of the symbolic and social ground, men turned to building up themselves, occupying more 'physical space,' becoming a muscular presence that must be recognized.

The popularity of bodybuilding could be an ostensive demonstration of that phenomenon, besides its undeniable physical benefits. Bodybuilding set the standard of the ideal body type to the modern man all over the world. In order to understand this process, let us take a closer look at the origins of bodybuilding.

Where it all started

Venice, California, home of the iconic Gold's Gym³, might be considered the birthplace of the bodybuilding movement of the 80's. Ed Connors, former owner of Gold's Gym, explained in an interview⁴ for Ric Drasin's YouTube channel in 2012 how the gym came to life, with the assistance of bodybuilders in the construction and planning of the building:

(Ed) I played architect on this and hired the bodybuilders from the gym to do the building. (Ric) So one can say that bodybuilders designed that room, in the sense of how the mirrors are placed, how the images are arranged. Is that correct? (Ed) Yes, the mirror layout and the photos, that's all basically the bodybuilders' doing.

Connors' and Drasin's conversation nostalgically revealed a glimpse of the mentality that ultimately gave birth to the entire phenomenon of bodybuilding and the healthy lifestyle culture it nurtured. From Connors' perspective, a sense of community still seemed to linger, with memories of training sessions and meals they shared together, although he recalled that the infrastructure was completely different.

Remembering the gym itself, both Connors and Drasin emphasized remarkable differences back then. For instance, there were no female showers; it was a milieu almost exclusively dominated by men. The locker rooms were very basic, and the gym itself was much less equipped. There were no stationary bicycles or treadmills, only weightlifting equipment. When they wanted to do some aerobic exercise, they would go running on the beach.

Connors pointed out that with the changing times, it was necessary to adapt to a new clientele, who sought a healthier lifestyle but did not aspire to be bodybuilders. Thus, the gym acquired treadmills, stationary bikes, step machines (which simulate climbing stairs), etc. They reserved a dedicated space for this, called the cardio theater, where the machines were usually equipped with TVs with touch screens and internet access.

At 10:30, Connors speaks about bodybuilding, commenting about the lifestyle changes that the sport has undergone: "I don't like where it is right now [...] it's taken to extremes. People are overeating, overtraining, over supplementing [...] it's not a lifestyle I'm comfortable promoting right now."

His interviewer, Ric Drasin, a former bodybuilder and professional wrestler himself, was responsible for keeping some of the 'old-school' bodybuilding culture alive. In another video⁵, he comments on the striking difference between magazine covers and photos of bodybuilders from the 1940's to 1970's comparing to today's generation: in the past, bodybuilders' poses were always accompanied by a beautiful and healthy smile. Nowadays, you see them grimacing, perhaps trying to look tougher. Drasin does not understand what changed; he wonders why, if someone has a good and healthy lifestyle, they would not be smiling. "You wouldn't see a woman go to Miss America and growl at the camera, they all smile, they show their teeth, and they're pretty." Top of Form

² "Curious postures, which seem to resurrect classical statuary, just when the immoderation of anatomies rises as an affront to the art of the ancient sculptor. Unusual muscular masses, purely decorative, which serve neither to run nor to throw, and thus break with everything that, within the sporting logic, associate muscle with movement. Impressive confrontations in heavy choreographies, duels of images without contact or violence, pure fights of appearance" (Courtine 1995: 83).

³ Gold's Gym, <https://www.goldsgym.com/>, is considered one of the most prestigious sites for popularizing bodybuilding in the 1980's and the associated healthy lifestyle. Today, it is one of the largest franchises in the world, with approximately 600 gyms in 27 countries. However, the original gym is considered a tourist attraction to this day. In 2012, it entered into an acquisition phase by Google but remained part of the TRT Holdings company.

⁴ Ed Connor's Gold Gym in studio. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LiZmU78diUA>

⁵ "why do modern bodybuilders...". <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c45FU-3J3qZY>

6 originally delivered in a radio broadcast in 1966 and published in 2004.



Figures 1 and 2 Bodybuilding magazines, February 1984 and April 2012. Examples of smiling and grimacing expressions in magazines, referred to in Ric Drasin's video.

When I heard his statement, what struck me the most was a question left unanswered: what happened? What caused this change in male perception about the body and the presentation of the male image as an icon of health and beauty? Why was the friendly smile replaced by a grimacing, angry expression?

Something had definitely changed.

Body representation and meaning

If the magazine covers reflect society's ideal of body type at their time, they also indicate its spirit. To better understand how the image of the ideal male body changed, it is important to understand a deeper meaning associated with the representation of the body. Let us review Foucault's understanding⁶ of the utopian body, and the relation between a utopian self and its representation. Foucault considers that the omnipresence of the body in itself and the inseparability of lived experience is the very impetus for all utopias. Utopia owes its richness and beauty to its embodied condition, the possibility of a place where an incorporeal body can exist, without the limits of mundane conditions. Foucault (2004) points to the construction of the soul as this utopia, as a kind of photographic negative of the body, an Other, or its double:

[...] the most powerful of these utopias by which we erase the sad topology of the body, it is the great myth of the soul that has provided it to us from the depths of Western history. The soul operates in my body in a wonderful way. It resides there, of course, but it knows well how to escape to dream when I sleep, to survive when I die. It is beautiful, my soul, it is pure, it is white; and if my muddy body - in any case not very clean - comes to soil it, there will be a virtue, there will be a power, there will be a thousand sacred gestures that will restore it to its original purity. It will last a long time, my soul, and longer still, when my old body rots. Long live my soul! It's my luminous body, purified, virtuous, agile, mobile, warm, fresh; it's my smooth body, castrated, rounded like a soap bubble (Foucault 2004: 2).

The soul as the utopia of the body creates a metaphysical space, where its potentiality comes from a projection of the perfect body; but primacy of the soul can only be conceived from the possibilities of the body. So if the ideal

of the male body, presented in the media with a friendly smile, was replaced by a grimacing, even ferocious expression, what does it tell us about that ideal of manhood, and how it is reproduced in gyms?

In the following sections, I present the context of the study, the theoretical background and the ethnographic vignettes that inspired this argument.

Context of study and theoretical background

In Portugal, the social progress that followed the revolution of 25 April 1974 led to increased leisure time and work regulations, creating ideal conditions for cultural changes and the search for new body practices. It was a striking difference from the normative physical culture promoted by the Estado Novo regime: hygienic and moralizing gymnastics, where health was also seen as a duty to serve the nation. For the regime, the ‘new trends’ coming from across the Atlantic Ocean were practices that promoted frivolous aesthetic and hedonistic values: “In a context where men and women began to exhibit and carefully attend to their appearances, the private forces of capitalism ended up contributing more than the public hygienist institutions to the spread of new habits and bodily care.” (Ferreira 2011: 238)

In the 1990’s, Portugal saw noticeable growth in the fitness sector, leading to the emergence of new service models and market-oriented operators, many of which were multinational franchises with millions of Euros in revenues. The individualization and customization of services related to health and fitness became highly specialized.

A central figure of the highly specialized services was the personal trainer, who catered to the aesthetic desires of body sculpting of businessmen – the greatest consumers of this service. They envisioned the attainment and projection of the perfect body as a symbol of success. This corporal capital delineated the contemporary distinction between the successful individual, who maintained control over their lifestyle and habits, and others.

Body studies related to body image and gym culture display the body as dominated by and subjected to power mechanisms, “corpolatria” – the commodification of beauty and extreme individualism through obsessive perfection. (Sibilia 2004; Ortega 2003; Castiel and Álvarez-Dardet 2006). Sibilia (2004) denominates these strategies of subjectivity as bio-asceticisms: ways of purifying the body of its abject ugliness in pursuit of a utopic ideal of appearance, practiced in the gym and presented on social media.

This social phenomenon is fostered by a health promotion narrative. This is described as ‘healthism’ by Illitch (1990)⁷ – consisting of a massification of a concept of health turned into a commodity, and an exclusively individual pursuit and responsibility – the result of neoliberal policies. Therefore, businessmen seem to be more inclined to accept responsibility for their health, and to monitor and self-regulate themselves.

Traditionally in Western societies, masculinity is also related to athleticism, in a competitive and aggressive way. Through a very detailed historical analysis, Segal (1990) traces back to 19th century England, the birthplace of the sportsman, pointing out how this affirmation of manliness⁸ was born, too:

[...] a pure masculinity cannot be asserted except in relation to what is defined as its opposite. It depends upon the perpetual renunciation of ‘femininity’ [...] the capacity for sensitivity to oneself and others, for tenderness and empathy, the reality of fear and weakness, the pleasures of passivity – all, of course, quintessentially ‘feminine.’ (Segal 1990: 114).

Physical strength was praised as a masculine attribute, associated with agency and power, in a broad sense.

Therefore, this hegemonic masculinity grants only certain men social prestige and privileges over all other men – and all women. (Vale de Almeida 1997). So, how about non-hegemonic masculinities? And the fluidity of all cat-

7 “In the same way as this happiness, modern-day health is the fruit of possessive individualism. There could have been no more brutal and, at the same time, more convincing way to legitimize a society based on self-serving greed” (Illich 1990: 3)

8 “Crippling levels of manliness” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wogb2ctOfV4>

egories, how is it experienced by the subjects? The author also highlights the importance of studies about the body that interlink social context and subjective dimensions, and studies about the embodiment process that surpass representational approaches that envision the body as a passive structure of power.

Let me present some insights about how these social phenomena can express themselves through embodiment. I used to have coffee in the cafeteria nearby the gym and often had a chat with Joana (an instructor) and Marcos (a gym client). We chatted about a lot of issues, but mostly about working out and the gym.

Joana is a 34-year-old gym instructor who works as a personal trainer and teaches swimming and water aerobics, as well as other group classes. She considers herself fit and has a strong physical constitution. She has always worked in the fitness industry and says she really enjoys what she does. She practices weightlifting, among other activities.

Marcos is a 63-year-old retired engineer who stays in good shape due to the good habits he has always sought to maintain in his life. He considers himself in good shape and looks much younger than he is, although he has recently experienced some ailments that he attributes to age. He started practicing Pilates, although he played sports in his youth and practiced weightlifting for many years.

What I present now is an analysis of conversations and recorded interviews with Joana and Marcos, followed by my fieldwork observations and final remarks.

Gendering gymnastics and what it means to be active

One afternoon, I saw the two in fits of laughter, as I was entering the cafe. It was about Marcos' experience with Pilates, and how he felt after trying pelvic floor exercises. It got interesting when he shared his perception about gender, sexuality, and his pelvic floor.

Marcos said that at the beginning it felt 'strange,' joking about a homosexual 'conversion.' He was quite clear about not having any issues regarding people's sexuality: "equal rights for everybody," he said, "I am comfortable with my boring, old-school manhood." But the implicit association between pelvic floor exercises (contraction of both the urethra and the anus) and the idea that these exercises were designed for women, felt strange to him: "[...] at first, I thought...this is strange, these exercises. I never thought someone could train their [...] pelvic floor like this, you know (laughs, imitating the gesture). I felt weird at first. Now, jokes aside, I understand the effects, and I think the 'iron head guys' in the gym should try this too!" (Marcos).

It is interesting how the exercise went from sexuality to affirmation of manhood. Marcos' perspective changed after the practice.

But nevertheless, Marcos talked about the 'iron guys' as being 'tough' and femininity as being associated with softness. For weightlifting enthusiasts, all the other gymnastic activities where you do not 'give it all' – meaning going for the maximum effort – are considered feminine. A common joke about what is considered 'training lightly' is, "You should be doing ballet."

Next, Joana presented her perspective on gender boundaries. Regarding group classes, attended mostly by women, she considered the workouts 'too soft.' She recalled how men used to stare at her when she was doing heavy deadlifts: "I remember that sometimes the guys looked at me strangely when they saw me training...you know, like 'ok, she's cute but too muscular.' Maybe they still think that women should only do cardio or butt exercises! (laughing)."

Maybe the class instructor might not be inspired; or maybe the whole concept of this kind of class is designed to be lighter? Craig and Liberti (2007) pointed out through an extensive bibliographic review that women's engagement in these activities is perceived by them as self-empowerment, but also

as subjugation. However, the authors emphasized that in practices generally understood as ‘feminine,’ the organizational process and the glorification of cooperative practices accompanied by the relative absence of competitive traits “emphasized femininity in which women are constructed as nice and niceness is the absence of pushiness or competition.” (Craig and Liberti 2007: 686)

Thus, ‘feminine gymnastics’ – or rather, feminized – is in this sense “[...] nonthreatening, nonathletic, nonexpert and noncompetitive – but they are nice” (Craig and Liberti 2007: 686), making their practitioners somehow show that they don’t like to exercise.

And Joana liked to exercise. That was another reason why Joana used to train in the afternoons, before her own group exercise class: it was that only time of the day she could use most of the equipment in the heavy weights area. In the end of the afternoon, the heavy lifter men would arrive, and ‘take over the multipower hack, the 45° leg press, and most of the dumbbells’, leaving Joana with few options for her heavy leg day.

Even though it is more common each day to see women in the heavy weight training zone of the gym, Joana stated that her strong arms and muscular look garner a lot of attention. Joana likes to train heavy and acknowledges what she describes as a ‘healthy addiction’.

Joana considers herself a very energetic woman, and regrets not having enough time to do even more activities. She says that the problem with most people is that they don’t follow their dreams and worry too much about what other people think. I asked her if she didn’t also see the opposite nowadays: when people live their dreams and personal desires disregarding others, aren’t they feeding the feeling of ‘not caring about each other?’ Joana then responded by giving the example of her dance classes: she is the oldest person there, but simply doesn’t care what others think of her. Joana says she has never felt discriminated against because of her age, she insisted on mentioning her boldness in continuing to train hard, even when the doctor told her to slow down because of her lower back pain. I asked Joana what she takes away from her physical training, what impact it has on her way of living. She then highlighted the constant feeling of pushing her own limits, challenging herself even when she feels like giving up:

[...] Sometimes I’m so tired, you know... I just feel like collapsing on the couch and sleeping... a lot!! (laughs)... but I also know that I feel worse staying at home, and I tell myself: ‘get your butt off the couch and go to the gym!’ [...] You don’t get anywhere if you don’t push yourself every time. I think that’s what I’ve learned, and I’ve tried to pass this on to the members, when they get a little lazy. (Joana)

Joana said that people are afraid of suffering and that you need to ‘enjoy suffering’ to get results. She mentioned that she has cried even in cycle and rpm classes. She then explained how people cheat in cycle classes: it seems like they are ‘riding,’ that is, swaying their hips from side to side without really putting force on the bike pedals. It happens when the bikes are ‘unloaded’, or with a very low resistance on the wheels: “People are just bouncing on the saddle!”

Joana’s social media posts (Fig 3) are humorous and joyful, often highlighting values and attitudes associated with ‘hard work / working out hard’ in the gym and life in general, the value of investing in oneself, and motivational phrases related to enduring challenges:

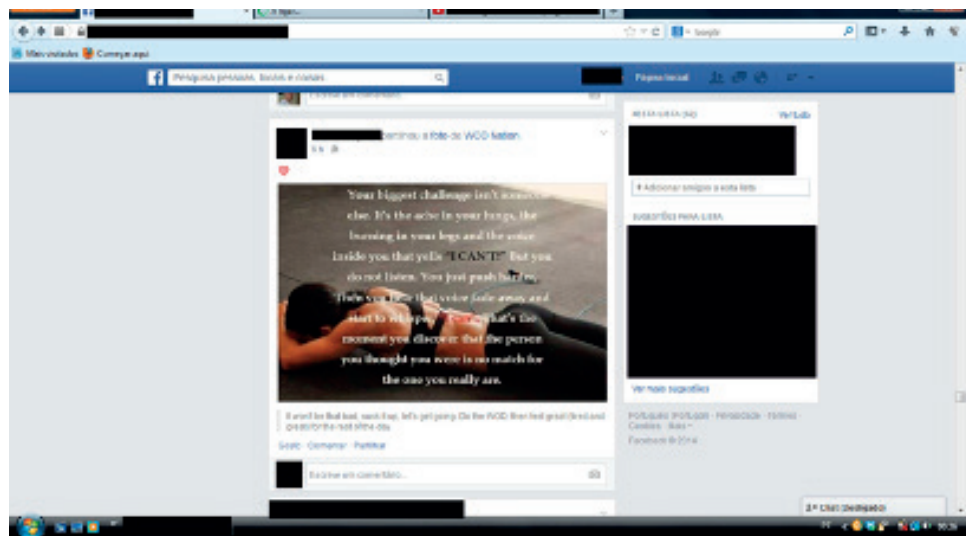


Figure 3 “Your biggest challenge isn’t someone else. It’s the ache in your lungs, the burning in your legs, and the inner voice that yells at you “I can’t”. But you do not listen. You just push harder. Then you hear that voice fade away and start whisper “I can”. That’s the moment you discover that the person you thought you were is no match for the one you really are. Comment: It won’t be that bad, suck it up, let’s get going. Do the WOD, then feel great (tired and great) for the rest of the day.”



Figure 4 “I’ve had a longer, healthier and more satisfying relationship with crossfit than any man, and someday I’ll have the six-pack abs and two dozen cats to prove it”

Fitness devotion, a busy life and solitude: The comment below says: “And a thought just popped into my head while I was finishing a task... ‘So what now... I have nothing to do!?!’ It’s gone now, it lasted exactly 3 seconds... Lol Busy Life!!!”

The content of Joana’s post somehow reflects a sublimation of affection for practicing gymnastics (CrossFit), reminding one of some kind of neo-as-ceticism. An interesting comment from a client of the club, who also shares a busy lifestyle, emphasizes the value of an active lifestyle / an active body. To have an active agenda, and to be – especially to appear – active, is one of the greatest signs of achievement and success on social media.

Marcos, in turn, advocates that you need to be born with this desire/ motivation to train. I asked if it was easier for one to ‘cheat’ at the gym than in group classes – meaning ‘not putting much effort into it’. Then he told me

the story about the ‘rowing guy’, who was seen sliding in the seat, but with minimal effort. When he extended his legs to row, he would pull back his arms. It appeared like he was exercising when he was just sliding.

Marcos’ posts (figure 5) showcase his progress in training, both in performances with weights or difficult exercises, and in the bodily changes achieved. For Marcos, the reward only comes for those who work hard.

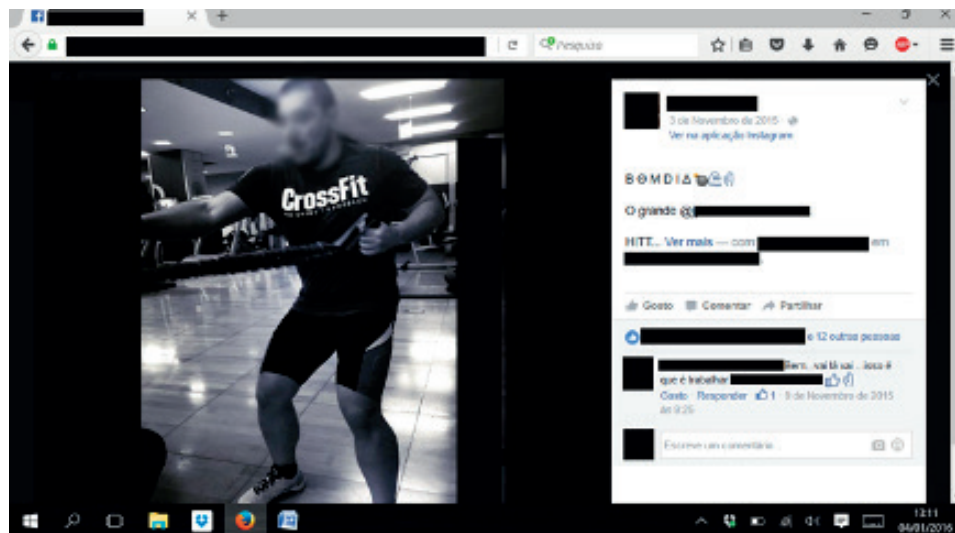


Figure 5 Working out hard and legitimacy.

Joana and Marcos provided interesting insights about the materiality of the exercise, and how social values were associated with body capital. The understanding of the ‘gym economy’ and its inner logic implied that the way of doing the exercises – going hard or soft – was an element of a distinct lifestyle.

Being ‘in shape’ or ‘out of shape’ can personify the representation of a ‘good person,’ balanced and self-disciplined – which obviously highlights, by default, its negative side, or its antithesis: the condemnation of laziness and pretentiousness.

Being someone ‘active’ implies an association with being active in life – the agency of someone who accomplishes and masters their schedule, their time, and their appetite. As a highly valued characteristic, simulating being active implies an active attitude towards life, as opposed to a passive one. Therefore, hypermasculinity means more than being merely active.

If body capital is associated with being active, when being passive is ‘quintessentially feminine’, like Segal demonstrates, hypermasculinity is about going the other way: ‘go hard or go home’. The masculine conquest of his own health, looks and fate in general, involves the idea of struggle and suffering. That is why some exercises are disqualified as ‘not real training’ because they are considered too gentle, meaning too feminine.

In the following section, I will present the observation and analysis of these ways of performing masculinity in the gym and on social media (Facebook). At the end, I will present a final analysis from an embodied perspective about the ways of executing body techniques in the gym, and their association with performances of masculinity.

Gesture and gaze: posing code

There is tacit code of permissions and intercessions about how and when to look⁹ at other people’s bodies in a gym, and also, when it is allowed to show yourself.

The episodes described below illustrate how a certain type of masculinity is practiced through a certain way of performing weightlifting

⁹ A note about observation: to qualify my observation in the field work, I employed an allegory of the differences between looking around through mirrors and windows. Mirrors are part of any gym in the world – except for, as far as I know, women-only gym franchises that specifically advertise not having mirrors in the weightlifting room. A mirror in a gym serves as a technical resource but also multiplies the observational angle, preserving the anonymity of the ‘voyeur,’ to a certain degree. It also allows a gym-goer to check his postures and perform gymnastic movements – and be seen while doing it. The window works differently: a direct but subtle gaze, through the frames of the equipment and its moving parts, and people passing by, allows multiple gazing opportunities. This is the space where the performances take place, and the tacit game of gazing and being gazed at.

exercises, and through gestures and poses that assert and legitimize this masculinity.

Here is a perspective about the way that hegemonic masculinity expressed itself in the fieldwork, establishing legitimacy and exclusion among the male practitioners.

One day I was entering the locker room bathroom when I saw Tiago (a very assiduous member of the gym) posing away from the sink and right in the middle of the bathroom, staring at himself in the mirror. To be precise, I witnessed the transition from the pose to his gesture of dissimulation. I greeted him briefly and chatted about something random – noticing how uncomfortable he was with the scene.

There is a code of conduct regarding how a man should look at himself in the mirror. In the gym, the gaze at oneself in the mirror (during resting periods, meaning there is no need to correct exercising postures) simulates an 'external' perspective, the gaze of someone else. This type of gazing, nevertheless, must obey some rules: one does not block the image of whoever is using the mirror to control the technical execution of some exercise, and the posing is generally discreet (preferably, with no one noticing).

This code for posture and gazing reveals the legitimacy in belonging and conformity with the hegemonic masculinity.

In the episode in question, Tiago seemed apparently embarrassed to be caught in this moment. Maybe he did not consider himself 'fit' or having a shape 'worthy' of being gazed at. Or maybe he did not want to be identified as narcissistic or shallow.

Perhaps that is why Tiago was posing in the bathroom. When one is not part of the spectrum of hegemonic masculinity, one must avoid excessive posing in public. The penalty for that 'transgression' is to be labeled as a show-off, a pretentious beta-male, trying to be something else.

A good example of how this logic is perceived in the gym happened when Bruno, a mid-thirties, tall and muscled guy, joined the gym at the time of my fieldwork.

His training routine used to be the center of attention, when he performed very heavy lifts followed by guttural sounds of effort and the noise of dropping barbells and weights on the floor – usually extremely heavy loads were dropped in a spectacular and loud way, resembling a 'mic drop' gesture, as displayed in figure 7. Showing no signs of shame, Bruno posed in the mirror and seemed to be quite aware of all the people staring at him.

Bruno was praised as someone who knew how to train hard, since he was always pushing himself to the maximum, even using extra loads on the machines. The posts on Facebook (which were becoming trendy in the gym at the time) were quite illustrative of the individualist values and the way of living associated with having body capital (figure 6).

Social media posts portrayed a way of being of an individualist masculinity reduced to a body shape that sums up its values and lifestyle. The embodiment of those practices and discourses reflects a simplification of life's social and emotional dimensions, resulting in a shallow subjectivity.

But of course, this is just one side of the story. After all, some people enjoy hitting the gym more than others and can become quite 'addicted.'

So where can we draw the line between empowerment and subjugation?

Gymnastics and its healthy lifestyle involve both an embodied process of internalizing techniques and improving physical conditions. It implies adopting rituals and norms of behavior that reflect/promote ideological dispositions and worldviews. As previously mentioned, the commodification of beauty and health creates a body idolatry, reducing the subject to the shape of his body, as shallow and stiff subjectivity.

But for many, hitting the gym is a promise to completely change their lives. In Foucault's considerations about self-cultivation and improvement, body and soul are interlinked in the same process:

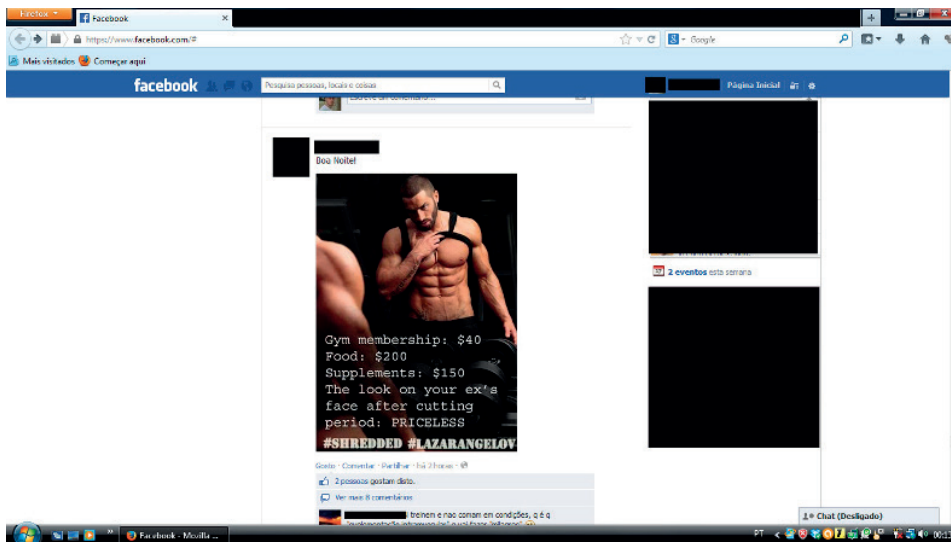


Figure 6 Body capital



Figure 7 The spectacular masculinity – ‘mic drop gesture.

Technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality (Foucault 1982: 1).

The dilemma about which side of the coin – empowerment of the individual or its submission to the mass media appeal to pursue an ideal image of perfection – still stands¹⁰ as an interesting challenge for gym studies.

It seems to be certain though, that techniques have an agency of their own; or in other words, they have a profound and inconspicuous effect on the subject as well. Let's take a closer look at how it works, and the analytical proposal of qualifying body techniques in the gym, to understand their role in the performativity and display of hyper-masculinity.

¹⁰ Questions about the causality were not addressed in this essay, but I believe the dynamics between agency and structure could be a good investigative lead.

11 The studies of JJ Gibson about the concept of affordance are fundamental for embodied approaches, but this topic will be explored another time. Tim Ingold and Csordas provide fine examples of applying this concept in anthropology.

Notes on a microscale: qualifying the effort in body techniques

The interviews and conversations with Joana and Marcos, and field notes about how gender was perceived and performed through body techniques in the gym, but I wanted to know one more question. How is it done? What are these techniques/technologies, and how are they executed? I would like to propose an analysis of the body techniques, qualifying the effort applied in each method.

In a large study, Ulseth and Seippel (2011) presented a typology of gymnastics based on a survey conducted at a gym in Norway. Figure 8 shows a graphic representing their typology:

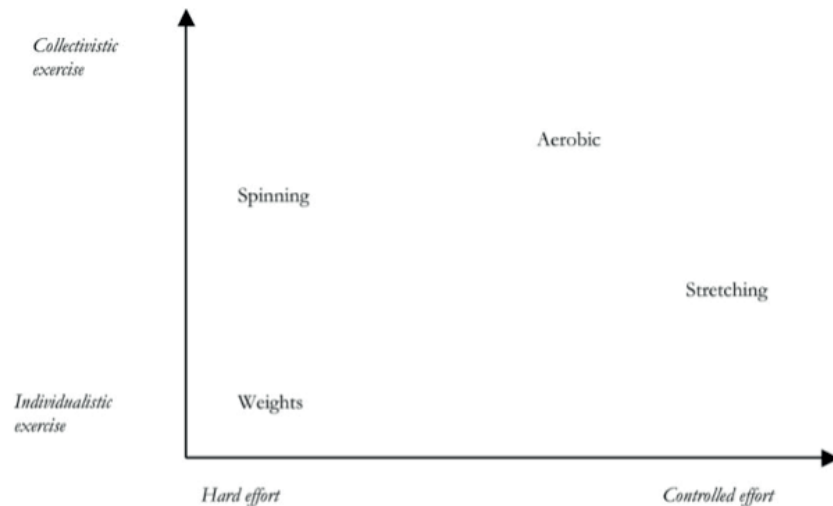


Figure 8 Gymnastic typologies (Ulseth e Seippel 2011:7)

This study correlated age, class, educational level, gender, and cultural consumption. The authors observed that these factors influenced the choice of the participants for each activity including the quality of effort (hard vs. controlled). Cultural consumption was also determinant:

Cultural consumption was included to see if there are links between factors pertaining to lifestyle and fitness activity, and two of our fitness activities were clearly associated with culture: stretching was more of a music-omnivore activity, and thus closer to 'traditional' high-brow culture, and weights was more of a 'rock and roll' male culture (Ulseth and Seippel, 2011: 13).

This data presents how other cultural factors relate to each other and express distinct gym 'tribes' or groups, and how they choose their activities. I would like to add that not only the practices, but the way one engages in them, is quite determining for the cultural dynamics of identity processes. The way of engaging in those tasks basically relates to the level of effort applied, which determines the level of control and skill of a certain movement¹¹.

I denominate the ability to apply maximum force with high commitment as 'will power' and the ability to flow with other surrounding forces, applying just enough force, as 'flow power.' These categories relate the materiality of the techniques with abstract and subjective qualities.

The best way to explain this concept is with a practical example where one can spot a striking difference between two gymnastic practices, focusing on the embodiment of each technique.

Weightlifting is the most archetypical form of exercise in a gym. The straightforwardness of just lifting heavy objects is appealing, where strength is all. Despite technological advances in the exercise machines and training methods, in the fitness universe, willpower is the ideological pinnacle and the path through which anything becomes possible, for those who are willing to work hard.

Pilates, on the other hand, like other mind and body activities, values optimum, not maximum effort. Mr. Joseph Pilates was himself a dancer, a boxer, and a gymnast. The control, wholeness of movement, proprioception, and stretching are principles of this practice.

I will refer here to this practice/way of being as flow power. The popularization of yoga from the counterculture of the 1960's paved its way as clever and efficient gymnastics, especially among women. Figure 9 below shows a graphic representation of the association between subjective traits and the materiality of each way of doing / physical attribute.

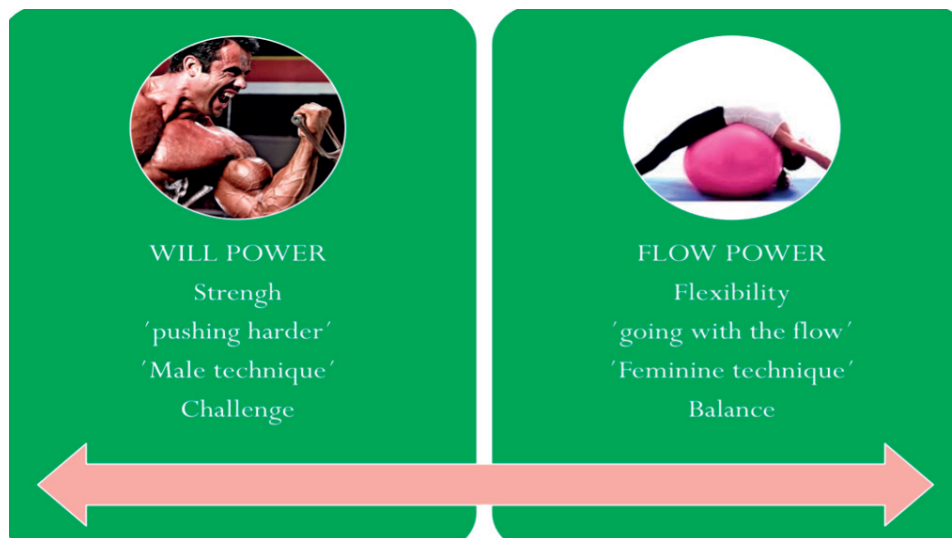


Figure 9 Ways of being and body techniques.

Final thoughts

In this paper, I presented some field notes and interview analyses that provided a broader understanding about how gymnastic activities are gendered, and how a certain type of masculinity is performed and reproduced.

Through embodiment theory and gender studies, this ethnography revealed the subjective dimension in the embodiment of gymnastic techniques / ways of being among gym-goers, revealing how these activities are gendered, and the expression of shallow and selfish hyper-masculinity.

The conceptual framework interlinking practices and ways of being was presented as an analytical proposal of embodiment theory, qualifying body techniques with its subjective dimension.

In this hyper-masculinity, pushing harder is a way of performing their will power as a definition of a manhood in 'beast mode,' a subjectivity reduced to a shallow somatic entity instead of a sensitive embodied being. Distancing itself from any trace of femininity, it reveals how a stereotyped masculinity keeps being practiced repeatedly through gymnastic sets, unveiling the spirit of our times. Maybe the 'grimacing' of the new generation of bodybuilders, which puzzled Ric Drasin, was a reflection of hyper-masculinity's reaction to the late social and political advances promoted by feminism.

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Ric´s Corner – Youtube Channel

Ed Connors Gold´s Gym Venice in Studio: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LiZmU78diUA>

Why do current bodybuilders make such a facial grimace when posing as ap-
posed to years ago?:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c45FU3J3qZY>

Within the mirror of a transsexual woman:

Unveiling issues on body adequacy aesthetics

Visual Ethnography

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Abstract

The article seeks to present the process of body improvement among transsexual women in the search for adequacy to the gender to which they identify. From the use of hormones and industrial silicone, bodies are built with the aim of achieving “*passability*”¹ as markers of the female gender. However, when seeking such improvement, the starting point is from clinically healthy bodies, even if psychologically questioned by the women themselves, to a continuous process of illness to the detriment of the processes and products used. Ethnography was used as a methodology, as it is the method of anthropology. By presenting two ethnographic accounts, the author hopes to take the reader at the places in which these bodies are transformed, and the main issues brought to the daily life of these women.

Keywords

Aesthetics, transsexuals, violence, bodies, modification.

The author

Marcos Vinícius Moura Silva has a master's degree and a BA degree in anthropology from the University e Federal Fluminense (Rio de Janeiro - Brazil), and he is an anthropology PhD student at the University of Lisbon. For more than 15 years, he has dedicated himself to investigations related to gender, violence and public safety. At the meantime, he has contributed to some audiovisual works, taking part in five feature films and two television series. Nowadays, he is working on his thesis about the sexual work of Brazilian transgender women in Portugal.

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¹ Be recognized as a woman.

2 Continuity between sex, gender and sexual practice, and the coherence is what makes intelligible genders. Butler's idea of "intelligible genders" suggests that society imposes norms and expectations about how bodies should behave according to gender categories. People are encouraged to conform to these norms in order to be recognized and accepted as legible members of a given gender category.

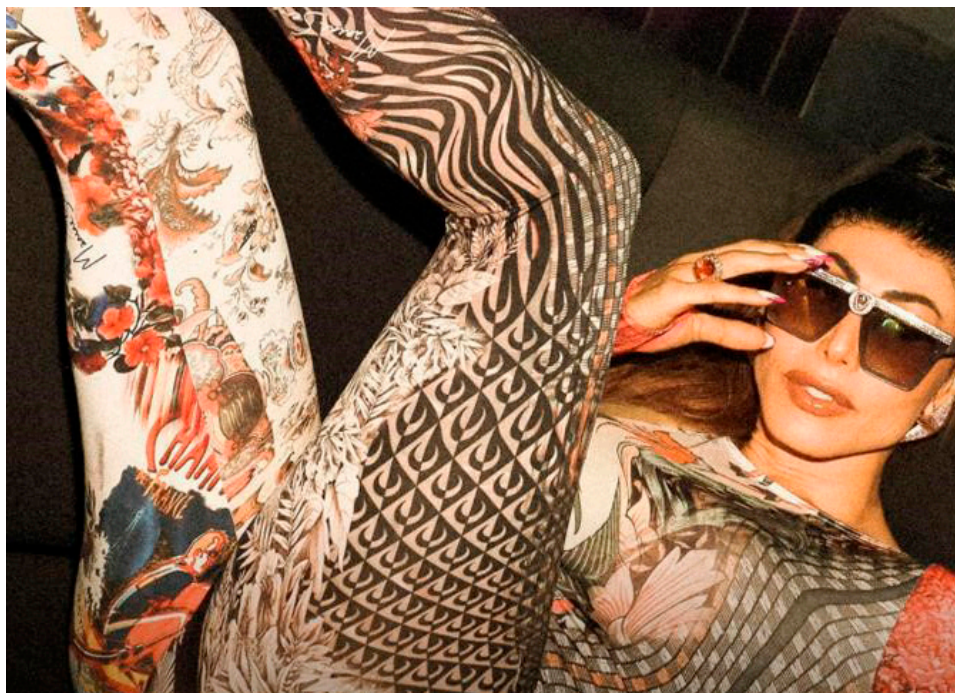


Figure 1 Giovanna Tavares, Lisboa. Photo by Ariel Moraes, 2022.

Introduction

The following discussion proposes a reflection on the procedures and aesthetic uses of cosmetic, hormonal, and surgical products as strategies for body improvement (Pussetti and Pires, 2020; Pussetti, 2021). I will specifically address procedures used by trans women during their gender identity realignment process. To explore this topic, I will present ethnographic data obtained over the past years (2012 and 2013) from various fieldwork experiences with this community.

For every trans woman, becoming “perfectly gorgeous” (Pelúcio, 2005) is primarily a *raison for living*. Being “perfectly gorgeous” is an aesthetic-moral classification indicating a set of care practices directed towards the body and, consequently, identity construction. The goal of becoming beautiful is to construct what is termed “intelligible genders”² (Butler, 2002; apud Pelúcio, 2005 and Brosin, 2017), where the induced changes allow coherence between sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire.

This process involves a network, often including other trans women who have undergone similar processes. Contact with the “beauty network” teaches, for example, the quantity of *perlutan* pills (female hormone) to be taken daily, clothing choices, walking style, sitting posture, gestures, and which type of silicone and “pumpers” (amateur and clandestine individuals performing aesthetic procedures) to consult. In broad terms, the adaptation to the desired gender involves what some transvestites and trans women call “dressing” (an emic category).

The moment this adaptation ends does not exist. A trans woman is always seeking new procedures to appear more feminine and beautiful. As the beauty industry introduces new procedures, these become the dream for many of them.

The costs for these services and aesthetic procedures are never cheap, making it challenging for many to afford the aesthetic realignment process as they would like. Lack of family support, whether financial or emotional, leads many to engage in sex work as the most logical way to obtain resources for aesthetic purposes.

As they initiate this activity (sex work) and start receiving compliments from clients, and as they attract more clients, the procedures become more

routine. The equation in these cases is as follows: [aesthetic procedures] + [more desired in the “market”] + [greater passability] + [more clients] + [more financial resources] = new aesthetic procedures.

As analyzed by Rocon (2017), in the case of trans women who are sex workers, the preferences and requests of clients play a crucial role in decisions involving body modifications, shaping the trajectory of their body production.

The aesthetic pressure persists from clients and society, tending to victimize less those trans individuals who can produce an image of a feminine body aligned with heteronormative binary ideals, [re]produced in these cases by the notion of greater possibility as a feminine body.

Trans bodies challenge and resist the dichotomous standard, promoting new aesthetic arrangements produced through various attempts at classification and standardization orchestrated by biopower (Benedetti, 2005, and Rocon et al., 2017). On the other hand, this pressure is not always met by the majority of these women who end up resorting to risky procedures with technically inadequate products, operated by non-healthcare professionals.

The transformations that trans women undergo aim at an alignment with their gender category and not their sexual practices (Benedetti, 2005). Body transformations aim to produce images and signs related to beauty.

These “plasticized bodies,” as Larissa Pelúcio (2005) describes them, contest the supposed biological and cultural destinies of their lives. In the pursuit of human improvement, they resort to industrial silicone, makeup, hormones, prosthetics, tanning, hair straightening, wigs, nails, foam fillings, clothes that highlight their forms, and various other “tricks” taught by experienced trans individuals, known as “*babadeiras*.”



Figure 2 Giovanna Tavares, Lisboa. Photo by Ariel Moraes, 2022.

“Travesti isn’t a Mess!”

It was around 3 pm when I arrived in Lapa, a bohemian neighborhood in the center of Rio de Janeiro (Brazil). Passing under the Arcos da Lapa and walking along Mem de Sá street, I spotted a large old house with a store on the ground floor, its doors graffiti-covered with the image of a transvestite and the words: “Travesti não é Bagunça!” (Travesti isn’t a Mess!).

It was a hot afternoon in Rio de Janeiro. As I reached the location, I saw a staircase next to the door leading to the house. After calling for a while, a *travesti* came to attend to me: “Hi handsome, good afternoon! Do you want service?” I replied that I had arranged to meet Luana, and he quickly allowed me to go upstairs.

Ascending the stairs, I encountered a small altar on the right with images of saints from Candomblé and some candles. Upon entering the house, I was fascinated because I knew I was in the home of the woman considered the new *Madame Satã* in Lapa. The house had a very old appearance, with peeling paint, leaks, and many rooms and divisions. Accompanied by a *travesti*, we crossed a long corridor to reach the main room.

In the room, Luana sat smoking a cigarette, with long blond hair, many tattoos, red nails, a headscarf, and a loud, hoarse voice. As soon as I saw her, I went to kiss her and thank her for receiving me. The topic we had to discuss that afternoon was about a film that the production company I worked for would shoot on Rua da Glória, a famous location in Lapa known for being one of Rio de Janeiro’s main prostitution areas.

Our conversation flowed as Luana told me about the dozens of photos on the wall. The house had over 30 *travesti* residents, passing through the place all the time. Luana would inquire about objects out of place and the daily lodging fees that had to be paid. All of them paid a fee to live in the house, and, in return, they received the necessary security to work on the “track.” Being Luana’s daughter meant protection and assurance that the worker would not fall victim to any kind of “sweet” (crime or trap).

It was my first time entering the house, and my fascination and amazement were noticeable. At one point, I asked to use the bathroom and, upon being directed, ended up closing my open bag, as was my habit. I noticed that Luana didn’t like this gesture, although she didn’t say anything; her gaze was piercing. Quickly, I positioned my bag next to her to convey a message of trust.

Upon returning to the room, I found Luana attending to some girls to settle the lodging payments, which should be made after each night on the “track.” At this moment, some of them approached with a syringe in hand and said the following phrase: “Mother Luana, can you administer hormones to me?” Luana took the syringe from the *travesti*, lowered her clothes, and applied the medication to one of her buttocks. The ritual of hormone application took some time, as other “daughters” approached her with the same goal.

Observing these scenes, I maintained the familiarity expected of anthropological work and began to understand the “improper” uses of hormones intended for the feminization process.

The use of hormones by trans women and *travestis* (an emic category in Brazil) is described by different authors (Pelúcio, 2005; Rocon, 2017, and Kulick, 1998) as the first step in the process of [re]shaping the body and gender identity. In their perception of having an “unhealthy” body, they hope to achieve health through the use of different hormonal doses, which may vary based on recommendations from friendship networks, solidarity, and even from procurers (Rocon, 2017).

According to Benedetti (2005), the “construction” of the body also involves definitive means such as plastic surgeries, the implantation of liquid silicone in various body regions, but it is primarily through the use of hormones that a woman “builds” herself. As Pelúcio (2005) mentions, quoting a *travesti*: “A *travesti* who doesn’t take hormones is not a *travesti*, they think it’s carnival and go out dressed as a woman” (cited in Lopes, 1995).



Figure 3 Luana Muniz, Rio de Janeiro. Photo by <https://mundot-girl.blogspot.com>. 2013

The use of hormones causes significant bodily changes, and among these changes, the one that holds greater symbolic meaning for *travestis* is the emergence of “little breasts.” The breasts are a central element in the process of recognition as a travesti by others. In other words, *travestis* only recognize each other as such if they (at least) use hormones resulting in breast gland growth (Ramalho, 2020).

Observing Luana’s role in administering hormones to other *travestis*, I realized that this process requires someone’s support. Therefore, it is common for *travestis* to seek the assistance of fellow *travesti* friends; few are those who self-administer injections (Ramalho, 2020).

Despite the considered positive effects that hormones produce on bodies, some adverse effects can also be perceived. For example, a decrease in erec-

tile capacity and sexual performance becomes a problem for those who are sex workers. Pelúcio (2005) also identifies mood alterations and increased irritability, perceived by users as “nerve control loss,” causing them to “explode” at any circumstance. Control over feelings and emotions becomes more unstable.

Despite these adverse effects, hormones are perceived as the “purchase of beauty.” Through these medications, the concepts of beauty and femininity are structured. The change in voice, breasts, reduction of body hair, rounding of hips/thighs/legs, waist definition, change in skin texture, among other effects, outweigh all the problems that their use without medical supervision may cause.

Spending an afternoon at the Mansion on Mem de Sá Street, I realized that it was not just a place where they slept and rested from the intense overnight work routines in Lapa, but also where they shaped their bodies and exchanged experiences on which procedures to undergo and which “pumpers” to turn to.

After three hours of sitting on the sofa next to Luana, she finally gave me the answer I needed to proceed. Not only did she approve the recording, but she also allowed me to conduct fieldwork in that region for a few months. To feel secure, she accompanied me on the first day and introduced me to the main security guard, whom I became friends with and spent numerous nights with.

These streets where I conducted fieldwork (2012) became my main leisure and conversation spot. On days when I wasn’t doing fieldwork, I would head to the same place to drink and chat with the *travestis*. All their stories fascinated me; it was like being in a movie theater or watching a real-life theatrical performance.

On May 8, 2017, around 5 a.m., the “Queen of Lapa” bid farewell to everyone. Five years after our first meeting, Luana Muniz passed away due to a cardio-respiratory arrest. Her story was told in cinema through the films “Rainha da Lapa” (Theodore Collatos and Carolina Monnerat) and “Luana Muniz – Filha da Lua” (Rian Córdova and Leonardo Menezes). Like Madame Satã, she became a legendary figure among sex workers.

The use of industrial silicone

The second case I will present refers to the use of industrial silicone as a strategy for bodily adjustment. Through contact with Milenna Passos, a *travesti* and activist in the trans movement in Salvador, Bahia (Brazil), it was possible to perceive the direct effects of using industrial silicone to “shape” her hips and buttocks.

I met Milena in 2013 through a project (Moura, 2013) developed for the Ministry of Human Rights of Brazil. At that time, I was supposed to bring a case that could be reported as a human rights violation from the perspective of the 12 rights recognized and provided for in the International Human Rights Instruments of the United Nations.

Choosing the group and region of the country I wanted to work in, I contacted grassroots community organizations as the first way to enter the field. This led me to the Grupo Gay da Bahia (GGB).

The GGB is the oldest association defending the human rights of homosexuals in Brazil. Founded in 1980, it is registered as a non-profit civil society in 1983, declared a municipal public utility in 1987. In 1988, it was appointed a member of the National AIDS Commission of the Ministry of Health of Brazil, and since 1995, it has been part of the committee of the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC). The GGB, as its coordinators define it, is an umbrella entity that provides space for other civil society entities working in similar areas, especially in combating homophobia and preventing HIV and AIDS among the community and the general population.

As a data collection strategy and to understand the daily lives of *travestis*, I chose to stay for two weeks in a house of sex worker *travestis* located in Salvador, Bahia. Although the time was excessively short, I considered it more relevant for obtaining data than conducting individual interviews as the main

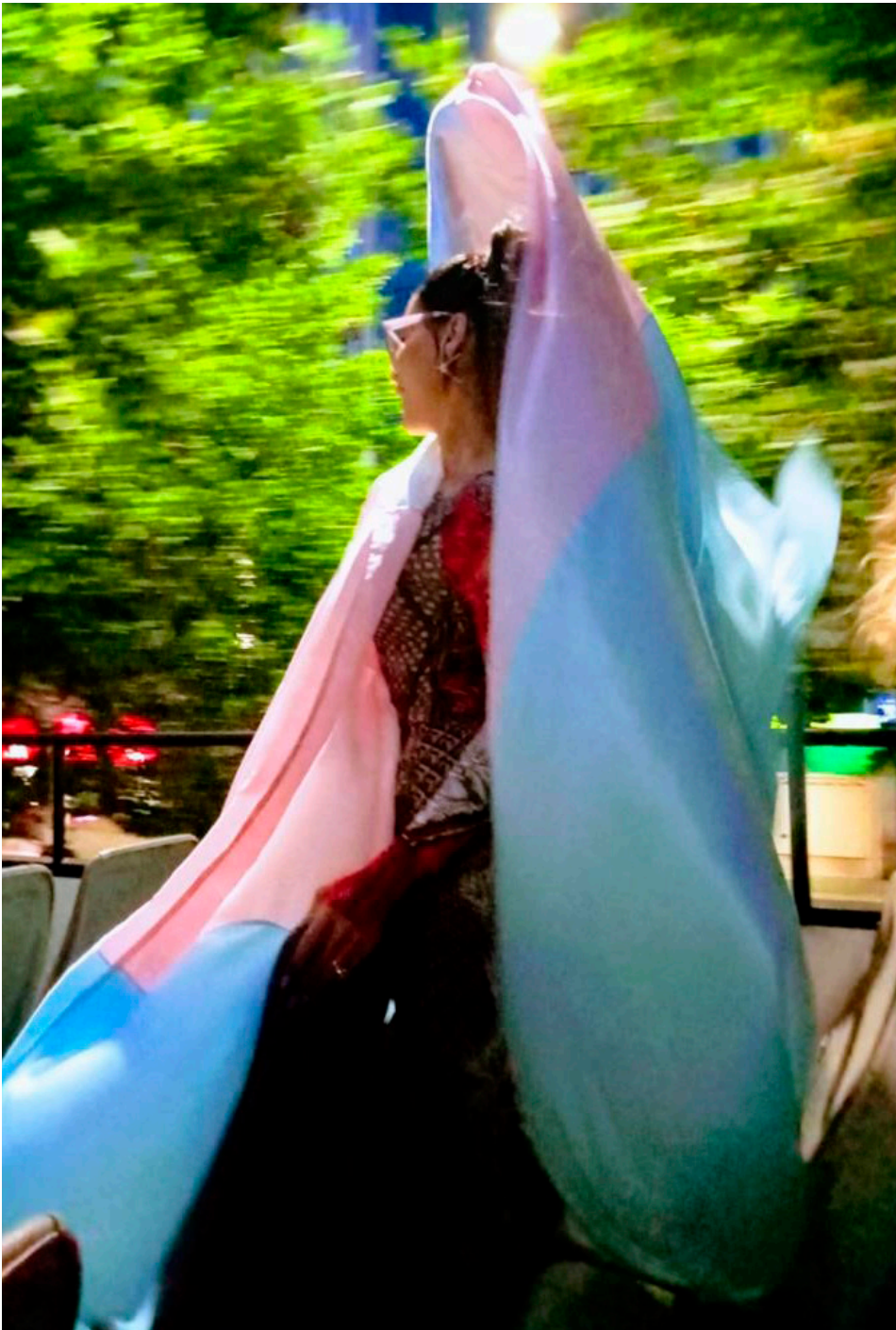


Figure 4 Giovanna Tavares, Lisboa. Photo by Marcos Moura, 2022.

method. After sharing this goal with the GGB, I was introduced to Milenna, then the president of the Travestis Association of Salvador.

Through contact with Milenna, I got to know the house of the travesti Rogéria Maria. At that time, four travestis and Antonio, a cisgender man, the husband of the property owner, lived there. They rented rooms to live and work and walked the “track” along the Pituba beach during the nights.

Until that moment, I had not realized the degree of involvement Milenna had with this group. Their close relationship was crucial for us to spend time together over the days. During this period, I visited her house, workplace, friends’ houses, the “track,” bars, and supermarkets. I could perceive the effects of industrial silicone on her daily life.

Arrival at the house:

The vacant room was used by the “girls” to receive clients they found on the “track.” The amount I had to pay for the days I would stay was defined by Antonio. The house is located in the Pituba neighborhood, a middle-class neighborhood in Salvador. The residence has two floors, front and back yards, and a garage for two cars. With high walls and wooden gates, passersby cannot see what is behind the walls. On the first floor, there are some rooms located near the entrance door where the “girls” receive clients. They were decorated with a bed with a leather headboard, a wall with red texture, a recessed chandelier, red curtains, a fan, and a table with various items such as wigs, handcuffs, gel, condoms, towels, dildos, high heels, and panties. Near the staircase leading to the second floor, there is a bathroom used by the “girls” and clients. On the ground floor, there is also a kitchen with a door constantly open to the backyard and a TV that is on day and night. In this backyard, everyone gathers, and there is a large table and a bathroom under construction.

Upstairs, the transgender women have their rooms. The area reserved for the owner of the residence and her husband has two rooms, a space for the bed, a closet, a Jacuzzi, and a large mirror. Next to this area is the room where the “girls” rent spaces. In this place, there are three beds, a TV, and three fans. Next to each bed, there is a suitcase with clothes and personal items. The house has four dogs, two large ones outside and two smaller ones inside.

The residence where the transgender women rent rooms belongs to transgender woman Rogéria Maria, 41 years old, married for 19 years. When I met Rogéria, I was struck by the volume of industrial silicone she had in her body, around 11 liters, shaping her desired feminine form. The other transgender women in the house were Ketelen Elwira, 19 years old, Juliana (Gigi), 30 years old, and Nayla, 21 years old.

With a large and medium-standard dwelling, a car, and many furnishings, Rogéria says she achieved everything thanks to “prostitution” and also thanks to Antônio, who managed the money well for the house to be built: “If it weren’t for his management, I would have spent all the money,” says Rogéria Maria. Her life in “prostitution” alternated between Salvador and some Italian cities, where she stayed for three years and even married a woman. During this period, Antônio also went to Italy, where they worked together for a while, and then he returned and took charge of the construction.

At the time of the construction work, she had returned to her studies and was finishing high school (12th grade). Besides the place they lived in Pituba, they own two more houses that they rent. The street became a less frequent option as it is occupied at night due to school. The possibility of continuing with education is uncommon among transgender women. Many of them cannot attend school due to prejudice, ranging from the use of the bathroom to the attendance list, where they are called by their legal names and not by their chosen names. In Rogéria’s case, she considers the return to school a significant achievement, despite still facing prejudice in the school environment.

In the activism of the transgender movement, she met Milenna, and they became very close over the years, considering themselves as sisters. This closeness became apparent through my interaction with both of them. Living with Rogéria also meant contact with her “sister.” Milenna, despite being 34 years old, sees herself as an “old transgender woman.” When I express surprise at this term, she says:

“A transgender woman is born at 19 and dies at 30; many of them die due to drug use, HIV, silicone, and violence. Ranella and I are survivors, that’s why we are respected among the other transgender women.”

(Milenna Passos, transgender woman, 34 years old)

Regarding her education, she mentions that unfortunately, she had to drop out in the 1st year, a common reality among transgender women. Cur-

rently, she plans to return to studies in the second semester. Regarding job opportunities, she reports facing many difficulties in getting a job due to being transgender and having embraced her transgender identity at a young age.

Popular in her neighborhood, she is constantly approached by various children when walking down the streets, mentioning that they saw her on TV, referring to a recent protest she participated in. Having been born and lived in the same place until now makes her highly respected by everyone. Her house reveals how challenging her life is in that neighborhood. With only three rooms and no running water, she transformed the space into a place to receive neighbors seeking some kind of “advice.”

Family composition was one of the points emphasized during various informal conversations with all of them. The fact that many of them do not maintain contact with their families and they left home at an early age may explain the motivating factors for restructuring a family model that deviates from heteronormative standards. The coexistence among them (residents of the house) made me realize that they are emotionally connected not only by legal or blood ties but also by affection.

The almost daily visits of Milenna to Rogéria’s house allowed me to understand the difficulty she had in sitting on the right side of her buttock. Also, when walking on the streets or standing for some time, it was common to hear her complain about leg pains. The inability to sit was caused by inflammation from industrial silicone injected by a “pumper.” Since the product started causing problems, she has faced difficulties in movement and strong pains. Removing the product may bring other complications or even lead to a generalized infection. Unable to afford a safe surgical procedure, she lives with the unwanted effects of silicone on her body.

According to Pelúcio (2005), the use of silicone represents the “pain of beauty”; the “whole made” body is the dream of the majority. Turning to a “pumper” is the most common path for Brazilian transgender women in the last 40 years. The “pumper” is usually another transgender woman or a friend who agrees to perform the procedure (Kulick, 1998). With thick needles, liters of industrial silicone are introduced into the body; after forming a “ball” in the area, massaging begins until the expected shape is achieved. The holes are filled with “super glue” type adhesive.

The symbolic aspect that leads a person to undergo these types of procedures has its own logic (Mott, 1997). Pain and personal sacrifice are considered inevitable factors in achieving a personal victory linked to aesthetics. In this case, it is built on the use of silicone, despite possible problems. For Pandora, a transgender woman interviewed by Rocom:

“In my time, I spent about five liters: thighs, buttocks, hips, chest, my face – I did everything. And the process after this silicone in the body, I regret it. I regret it a bit because I didn’t have rest. [...] Silicone went down to the foot.”

(Rocon, et all. 2017:5)

In Milenna’s case, the silicone did not descend to the foot but caused an inflammatory process. Years after this initial contact, we talked on the phone, and the problems with silicone had eased. Just as she did not have financial resources for a clinical surgery, this time she also does not have them. All treatment is provided by the Brazilian Unified Health System (SUS); the possibilities of surgery are limited given the situation. In the pursuit of a healthy body, an effectively sick body was created.

The indiscriminate use of silicone stems from a culture where bodies undergo social approval to be validated. What Milenna desired when undergoing the procedure was to establish her identity, be accepted by other transvestites, and achieve greater passability, which would apparently result in experiencing less social prejudice.



Figure 5 Giovanna Tavares, Lisboa. Photo by Marcos Moura, 2022.

Final considerations:

The final considerations of this text will shed light on the exhibition “Be Fu**ing Perfect: The Pursuit of Excellence” and the results published within the scope of the Excel project. This project investigated, among other things, the use of biotechnologies and different ways of enhancing the human body and aesthetics. Various articles were published (Pussetti, 2019; Pussetti, 2021; Pussetti and Pires, 2020) indicating the logic of operation of markets dedicated to the use of silicone prostheses, cosmetics, plastic surgeries, hormones, and more.

In the current context, approximately 10 years after the ethnographic reports here, the variety of products and information has significantly increased.

The audience of trans women has developed a market niche focused on themselves, emphasizing the importance of building self-esteem through small daily cares. Even though surgeries with “pumpers” persist, the number of trans individuals using surgical prostheses instead of industrial silicone is growing.

The desired body is, in its essence, synthetic, artificial, a consumable product defined by circumstances and tastes inherent to cultural, historical, and political contexts. The standards incorporate models that sustain rather than undo bodily inequalities (Pussetti, 2021).

In the context of Brazil, in 2008 through Ordinance No. 1,707/GM/MS, norms were established for the accreditation of public health units regarding the Transsexual Process in the Unified Health System (SUS). In this context, the goal is to enable services in public hospitals that can ensure comprehensive healthcare for transgender individuals, addressing all their needs and ensuring access without any form of discrimination. Registered services must have a multidisciplinary team, including endocrinologists, nurses, social workers, psychiatrists, and psychologists. The transsexual outpatient clinic is an initiative that allows for risk reduction and lifesaving. The state acknowledges that these procedures were performed without proper oversight and that its intervention was urgent.

According to Pussetti (2021), aesthetic procedures and the use of biotechnological tools, from a liberal perspective, imply that everyone can reach the pinnacle of the social pyramid if they do something about it. Correcting supposed “defects” does not aim to improve health but rather to construct human beings more suitable for the aspired

Every discussion about body improvement, aesthetic change and the trans transition process comes up against the issue of *passability*. This term appears in different investigations and therefore deserves due attention, as it is discussed several times by different trans women. In general terms, it is linked to the idea of a trans person physically passing as a cis person (Paulino et al., 2020). This process is connected to all the possibilities of interventions that the person can make.

Physically passing as a cisgender person implies being able to benefit from some heteronormative privileges to which these people are subject; passing as a cisgender person is a relevant objective for many transgender people (Vergueiro, 2015). Suffering less violence, getting a job, getting a boyfriend, not being watched all the time on the streets are some of these benefits. In this way, *passability* is also achieved through plastic surgery, aesthetic procedures, ways of speaking, dressing, and behaving. They are a set of elements that make trans women, when going through the transition process, more accepted in society.

What is at stake is the possibility of presenting an identity that allows for a feeling of recognition and belonging. This construction does not uncritically deny the heteronormative binary (Paulino et al., 2020). It is an attempt to “play” with socially accepted forms and find a way to survive a hostile social environment.

According to Debert (2001), from the 1970s onwards, lifestyles that demarcate the boundaries that indicate the different age groups began to go through a process of “blurring” (Siqueira, 2004). In the case of trans women, there is a dichotomy with a profession that requires a beautiful, healthy, and apparently young body. Age is not perceived as a behavior and lifestyle marker, but rather as something that must be aesthetically overcome through surgeries and aesthetic procedures.

It is important to say that the cases mentioned can lead us to an articulation between beauty and old age, in which, in a negative way, trans aging is perceived. Allied to this are the difficulties inherent to a profession (sex work) that works, above all, with the aesthetics of the new and young as a synonym for professional success. The aging process, in this case, not only brings changes to the body and health, but also practically makes them change the way they work. In general terms, it can be highlighted that it is difficult for transvestites and trans women to reach old age, it is not an exaggeration to say that

death comes early for this part of the population (Siqueira, 2004). Thus, old age is also anticipated when we consider life trajectories marked by contexts of violence of all types (Antunes, 2010).

Finally, it is important to highlight the ethical issues surrounding body enhancement. Although many trans women currently turn to specialized doctors, it is clear that many of these people seek the help of friends or people who are not in the health field to make the body adjustments they desire. It is important to emphasize that these procedures occur in an amateur manner and without any legal protection.

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Embodying the European in the mirror:

corporeal biographies of Brazilian trans and *travestis* sex workers in Lisbon

Visual Ethnography

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to understand the construction of corporeal biographies of Brazilian trans women and *travestis* sex workers who travel to Portugal and/or the European continent. By corporeal biographies we mean the entanglement between the process of body modification and the process of social production of subjectivities during their travels through different social, geographical and historical contexts. The analysis is based on data from comprehensive in-depth interviews with fourteen participants, oriented by a sociology of the individual and the body. Mobility to and through Europe proved to be a significant turning point in their life courses, as it led to the accumulation of economic, social and cultural capital, which is transformed into different types of body and symbolic capital. At the same time, transnational mobility changes the heritage of dispositions related to gender expressions and models of femininity, which are differentiated by factors defined by the subject's body and by generational issues. While geographical transits give substance to different corporeal biographies, they all ultimately converge towards the acquisition of symbolic capital, represented by the embodiment of resources and symbols perceived as aspects of glamour and luxury in the European sex work field.

Keywords

Brazilian trans women and *travestis*; corporeal biographies; sociology at the individual and on a body scale; transnational mobility; sex work field.

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¹ We understand *travestis* identity as an expression of transgender limited to the Brazilian reality, like *muxes* in Mexico or *ladyboys/kathoey* in Thailand. For this reason, in this article we have not translated the expression into English and have used the noun in italics. Roughly speaking, for some time in Brazil, academic discussions affirmed the differences between transvestites and transsexuals in terms of their desire to undergo gender-affirming surgery, a process that transsexuals wanted, and transvestites would not want. However, the greater circulation of information, the advances in public policies and the complexification of gender and sexuality identities and identification processes have demonstrated the difficulties of conceptually framing these identities. As state by Bento (2006), nowadays there is no such thing as a transsexual identity, “but rather identity positions organized through a complex network of identifications that are made effective through movements of denial and affirmation of the models made socially available to define what a ‘true’ man/woman is” (Bento 2006: 201. Our translation). Anyway, in our research it was possible to understand differences in the processes of self-defining the gender identity among the participants, varying namely between the ones defining themselves as *travestis* or as trans people. As concluded by Benedetti (2005) “these conceptions are related to class origin. Informants who self-identify as transsexual are, as a rule, better educated; they therefore have easier access to technical bibliographies on the subject and are socially closer to institutional and scientific explanations of the issue” (Benedetti 2005: 113. Our translation).

² The reflections made in this article are an offshoot of the doctoral thesis “Embod-

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Theoretical starting point

In this article, we aim to identify the representations of beauty embodied by Brazilian trans and *travestis*¹ sex workers who travel across the European continent, having established their activity in Lisbon, either permanently or for short periods². Our focus is on understanding how different experiences of sex work in Europe are linked to different processes of constructing corporealities, aesthetic perceptions, subjectivities and femininities at the intersection of social markers of class, racialisation and generation.

Theoretically, we start from a conception of the body as a social operator that projects an image of the self onto itself and also (re)presents it socially (Ferreira 2008). The body is living matter - an organic physical basis in becoming - but also an accessory of the self (Le Breton 2003) and an artefact for individual and social recognition (Sullivan 2001). The lived body is a first-person experience, but always acting and experiencing specific historical, socio-cultural and spatial contexts (Young 2003; Ferreira 2013). It is useful here to mobilise the concept of somatic culture to circumscribe the production of the body within a system of specific rules, behaviours and codes of production, perception and consumption associated with it (Ferreira, 2018). Whether related to a specific socio-historical or cultural context, or to objective social conditions such as social class, age, generation, gender or ethnicity, etc., bodily experience is always embedded in specific somatic cultures (Boltanski 2004).

The concept of somatic culture allows us to grasp the contemporary structural conditions within which we can understand the recent processes of objectification and privatisation of the body. The body has been seen as an accessory, an object of manipulation, used, treated, thought of and classified as personal and private property, within a somatic culture characterised by the dictum of bodily improvement through the available technical, technological and (bio)molecular devices and services for bodily (re)production. This historical social context, marked by the development of biotechnologies for body design, has brought about changes in the conditions of socialisation of the body (incorporation), thinking about the body (bodily reflexivity) and experiencing the body (embodiment) (Ferreira 2013).

Regarding the specific condition of migrant sex workers, we can say that their somatic culture is branded by what Preciado (2018) calls the neoliberal logic of appropriation of diversity in the (re)production of capital. As migrants, non-white, undocumented workers, and unrecognised by masculine supremacy, their bodies ‘can be penetrated [by capital], bodies that cause ejaculation at the lowest possible price’ (Preciado 2018: 310. Our translation). From this author’s perspective, the sex industry is part of the communication and entertainment apparatus of contemporary capitalism, in which working bodies are the result of a process of sex-political specialisation: a form of biopolitics that has emerged from capitalism and aims to regulate bodies and (re)produce capitalism (Preciado 2018).

The Transgender Europe (TGEU) report by Fedorko and Berredo (2017) shows that sex work by trans women and *travestis* is one of the few sources of income for migrant and undocumented trans people, due to the structural, institutional and interpersonal violence they experience throughout their lives. Therefore, we analysed how such experiences in different sex work fields in Brazil and Europe shift their embodied subjectivities in terms of gender identifications and gender expressions. At the same time, we seek to under-

stand how social markers such as class, racialisation and generation affect the construction of corporealities and, consequently, access to different fields of sex work in Europe. In this perspective, international mobility is perceived as a turning point in their life trajectories, as it allows for radical transformations in their corporealities and subjectivities.

In this sense, we have formulated the concept of corporeal biographies, i.e. the decision-making processes related to dispositions to modify the body and thus produce and express the self, during the life trajectories of *travestis* and transsexuals who move between different social and historical contexts, namely between different regions of Brazil, Portugal and/or Europe. We operationalise the concept of life trajectory, intertwined with a sociology at the level of the individual and the body, in order to understand the role of different experiences in Brazil in the constitution of a dispositional heritage towards the body, taking into account the processes of its construction, vigilance, reproduction and transformation with new experiences arising from mobility (Lahire 2004). Turning points, crises and ruptures in life trajectories are crucial moments in the processes of subjectivation (Martucelli 2002), because their resolutions are synthesised as updates of dispositional heritages.

What does it mean to do sociology at the individual scale? As suggested by Lahire (2004), the sociology at the individual scale aims to examine how dispositions are constituted and incorporated by actors through the particular relationships they establish with institutions, groups, fields of forces, etc., and in this way to fill the gaps in theories of socialisation. Sociology at the individual scale is based on the idea that there is no single, general principle that guides the actions of actors, as *habitus* has been conceptualised by Bourdieu (2007), but rather that heterogeneous dispositions are constituted in the relationships between different institutions and social groups within and along the various socialisation processes to which an individual is always exposed.

Against this wall, we sought to analyse and understand the processes of incorporation of the research participants' dispositional legacies from their Brazilian social contexts, taking into account the generated local social markers of difference, along with the changes and updates resulting from the experiences of geographical, social and cultural journeys. In order to do this, we have developed the specificity of looking at these processes through the lens of what we call a sociology at a body scale. This means that the analysis of dispositional legacies and their constitution in specific social contexts, along with their processes of change, adaptation and transfer throughout the life trajectories of the actors, will focus on dispositions towards the body and its different socialisation contexts throughout life trajectories.

This approach seeks to understand the attitudes and practices of trans women and *travestis* in constructing, maintaining and improving their bodies at different points in their lives. This includes analysing the relationship between the body project at the beginning of female embodiment and its social markers of difference; and, after sharing experiences of body modification techniques with other trans women and *travestis* while still in Brazil, entering the field of sex work, mobility and movement across the European continent. All these factors have led to changes in attitudes towards body modification and bodily expression in relation to identity and lifestyle.

The intertwining of sociology at the individual scale and sociology at the body scale is therefore captured in the concept of corporeal biography, in order to analyse the subjective dispositions that are mobilised in the decision-making processes of body modification in specific historical and social somatic cultures, and that are shaped throughout the course of life trajectories. As a result, this perspective overcomes a perceived methodological individualism in a way that makes it possible to identify generational and contextual changes in aesthetic dispositions towards the modification and presentation of the body, in its performances and materiality.

ying the European: corporeal biographies, (i)mobilities and subjectivities of trans and *travesti* sex workers in Lisbon", discussed and approved in January 2020 at the Institute of Social Sciences, University of Lisboa, as part of the Interuniversity Doctoral Programme in Sociology: Knowledge for Open and Inclusive Societies (OpenSoc). The first author was responsible for the first version of this article, on which the second author made substantial theoretical and methodological suggestions and revisions, in his role of thesis supervisor.

Finally, it is also important to define the ways in which the dispositions formed during socialisation processes are converted into specific capitals in the disputes in the field of sex work. We start from a definition of the sex-working field as the space structured by sex workers in the dispute over the accumulation of economic capital (through payments from clients). The sex-working field, as a set of segmented and hierarchical sex-working territories, conditions the actions and practices of sex workers. Their aim is to capture, satisfy and maintain the sexual loyalty of the client (Coelho 2009), the only actor in the field who can convert the various capitals accumulated by sex workers into economic capital.

In this way, we use the concept of capital beyond financial wealth and assets of economic value (economic capital), to include other types of resources that enable the acquisition of symbolic power and that support the agents in disputes in the field (Bourdieu 1983). As examples of other types of capital, we first identify cultural capital, i.e. the resources and skills that help to differentiate sex workers and establish practices that are understood as different and differentiating in a society organised on the basis of class hierarchies. Cultural capital includes computer and language skills, access to local and national knowledge and resources, and forms of protection. There is also social capital, understood as the set of actual or potential resources associated with particular networks of people that make it possible to obtain material or symbolic benefits in the field (Bourdieu 2007). Body capital, on the other hand, can be defined as the set of symbols, experiences, practices, objects, techniques and biotechnologies embodied by research participants throughout their lives and invested in the materiality and performativity of their bodies. All of these elements can be capitalised as elements of social distinction in the contestation of power spaces in the field of sex work, namely in attracting and triggering the client's cycle of arousal/frustration.

Thus, the dispositions reflexively incorporated by the research participants during their life trajectories and their experiences in the different sex-working fields make it possible to select resources, practices and forms of knowledge that can be transformed into different types of capitals that are subsequently mobilised in the field. For example, the disposition towards certain types of body modifications allows the embodiment of biotechnologies, which are simultaneously used as an expression of gender, construction of self and stylisation of life, to be transformed into economic and symbolic capital, i.e. money and reputation in the field, which is ultimately used in the field to attract clients.

However, it is important to stress that the possession of a disposition is not enough to convert it into a specific capital. Capitals require the investment and strategic use of certain dispositions, combined with the investment and capitalisation of other subsidiary knowledge and know-how. In the case of our research participants, for example, the constitution of a mobility capital implies not only the possession of dispositions for mobility, but also the possession of a certain passport, a certain knowledge of languages, legal issues and bureaucracy.

Methods

In order to capture life trajectories and their effects on the constitution of dispositional heritage and the corporeal biographies, we mobilised the comprehensive interview technique for data production (Kaufmann 2013). The comprehensive interview can be defined as a qualitative research technique that mixes the semi-directive interview with the ethnographic interview, being and less standardised than the former and less open than the latter. Its methodological formulation is based on the principle that there is no neutrality in the conduct of an interview, as each question and even the social figure of the interviewer are not impersonal (Ferreira 2014).

The research participants were contacted through their contacts in virtual advertisements on websites for TLovers: www.viptransex.net. Between

January and December 2017, the Ph.D. researcher contacted approximately 130 Brazilian trans women and *travestis* who were passing through or living in Lisbon, according to the advertisements. The aim of the phone calls was to establish a certain affinity and to gain the trust of the potential research participants for an initial face-to-face interview. During the appointment attempts, the common nationality of the researcher and the sex workers, his work as a professor in Brazil, his activism in the LGBTQIA+ and (trans)feminist movements, and the ease of contact and meeting in the city of Lisbon were highlighted. Lack of time was often cited as a reason for not accepting the invitation. Some of the people contacted asked to be called back at another time, but then did not pick up the phone.

Based on the sense of trust established during the phone calls, 14 interviews were conducted with Brazilian trans women and *travestis* who were itinerant or permanent sex workers in Lisbon in 2017. The youngest interviewee was 24 years old and the oldest was 52 years old. The majority of sex workers, eleven, were under the age of 40. Nine identified as trans women or transsexuals, and five as *travestis*. The participants came from all five regions of Brazil. The level of education of the trans women and *travestis* sex workers contacted in this research also varied widely. All agreed to the audio recording of the interviews using a mobile phone. Informed consent (ICF) was obtained verbally.

The material produced a total of 40 hours and 45 minutes of audio, all transcribed verbatim, which took up 1157 pages of transcription in Times New Roman, size 12, 1.5 cm line spacing. The field notes produced throughout the research process amounted to approximately 300 pages of notes. We believe that we have reached a state of saturation in terms of collecting relevant information, enough to reach similar and divergent aspects of trajectories, corporeal biographies and mobility experiences.

An atmosphere of informality was present in all the interviews, allowing moments of exchange about life experiences and trajectories, family relationships and schooling, relationships with LGBT identities, choices related to body modifications and the embodiment of a specific type of femininity, difficulties faced during geographical mobility, resources and strategies used to cope with adversity. Some interviews were initially arranged in a café, and after a few minutes of getting to know each other and talking, the researcher was invited to go to the research participant's home or place of work. This demonstrates the relationship of trust that was established during the interviews. We believe that creating moments of intimacy and trust was crucial in order to capture more sensitive issues, such as transphobic violence, family problems, or even information that we would normally only share with close friends or therapists. As well as providing data for the research, the interviews also provided trans women and *travestis* with moments of reflexivity about their own lives and identities.

The first analyses of the material were carried out with the tape recorder still on, immediately after the interview. The aim was, firstly, to highlight the main points of the trajectory and corporeal biography, and some insights that might be useful in analysing the material, both in comparison with other trajectories and in the research itself. Secondly, the narrative material produced during the interviews was fully transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis techniques (Nowell et al. 2017; Vaismoradi et al. 2016). After the audio was carefully transcribed, the transcript was validated by adding details about the gestures and feelings expressed by the interviewees with their bodies and tone of voice, i.e. the heuristic context of the moment when the data was produced was recalled (Feixa 2018).

Once the initial analysis had been completed, profile sheets were created containing data on the life trajectories and corporeal biographies of all the participants. The aim of this procedure was to get a general idea of the quality of the material and the possible relationships that could be created between the participants' trajectories and corporeal biographies in an inductive way

(Nowell, et al. 2017). Finally, a list of thematic codes and subcodes was created using MAXQDA 12 software to analyse the interviews.

Ultimately, the use of such qualitative methodological techniques aimed to identify different trajectories and corporeal biographies of sex workers, looking for the divergent and convergent turning points of each life journey and their impact on their subjectivities and corporealities. The diversity of the life stories is not only a reflection of the different contexts and social positions of the participants, but rather the result of the unique way in which each person has embodied and interpreted the social structures and contexts in which their experiences unfold (Amândio et al. 2016). Thus, rather than generalisations or conclusions, the analyses allowed us to delve more deeply into issues arising from the bibliography and unpublished problems that were only possible due to this specific methodological path.

Generational differences in corporeal biographies

For at least the last three decades in Brazil, research on the bodies of trans women and *travestis* has attested to the differences in the expression of their body design, in the development of body modification techniques, and in the perception and valorisation of certain procedures and organs in the construction of their bodies. Silva (1993) shows the countless industrial silicone procedures used by *travestis* in the 1990s in the Lapa district of Rio de Janeiro to create curves in their faces, breasts, buttocks, legs, feet, etc., and already points to changes in the types of bodies embodied by younger *travestis*.

Pelúcio (2007) noticed changes in the body design of the older *travestis*, with a lot of curves and volume, as opposed to the younger *travestis*, with slim curves, smaller breasts and more adolescent clothing, in other words, “doing the ‘patricinha’ line”. The same was said to me by Dalila, 41 years old, white, born in Rio de Janeiro - RJ, with family support, her mother is a psychologist and her father a gynaecologist. Their professions are already an advantage in the process of understanding the subjectivity of their last child, identified at birth as a boy. Dalila, despite having undergone some aesthetic procedures to construct her body throughout her corporeal biography, attributes the importance of this new body model to the success she achieved in the sex industry in the early 2000s, as can be seen in her narrative:

Dalila: There's no longer this... How do you say it? This dictatorship of the big body, big hips, big arse. So now they've joined a gym, they've got breast implants, they've had their teeth whitened, they're already trans. In my day it was all a pilgrimage, you know? [...] And so I made the transition from dinosaur *travestis* to princess *travestis*. Up until then the *travestis* were very big, they were very... they were very...

Emerson: The 90s.

Dalila: You know, it was this big bottom, these big breasts. The kind of hair that you could tell didn't belong to the person. And I was in the Patricinhas phase.

Duque (2011) also noted similarities in his research with teenage *travestis*. According to the author, the use of industrial silicone to build curves was no longer a recurring practice among *travestis* in this age group. According to the author, young trans and *travestis* have only pumped up their legs and buttocks, leaving the construction of their breasts to silicone prostheses. The use of fillers to create breasts is one of the options that trans women and *travestis* find in the constitution of female body capital: “These practices have returned with the new *travestis*, there is a return to the slender body without big silicone curves” (Duque 2011: 98. Our translation).

Indeed, we can see that the group made up of the three youngest research participants - Mariana (24 years old), Verônica (25 years old) and Yara (26

years old) - constituted their bodies only through hormone therapy, clothing and less invasive aesthetic procedures such as laser hair removal. In the words of Mariana, 24 years old, born in the interior of Goiás, with the family support of her university professor mother and military father, we meet the procedures responsible for building her body capital:

3 Female hormone.

Mariana: Ah... just waxing, I've had two... Just a whole body laser. But I've never had hair. Never... with Androcur³, I started... I've been taking it all my life, so it hasn't had time to develop.

Emerson: Yeah.

Mariana: It didn't work. My male hormone production is very low.

If, on the one hand, a simple analysis of the data could confirm that this finding is due to a shorter time to obtain body modifications, on the other hand, a detailed analysis of their perceptions of body projects and idealised identities allows us to affirm that this choice and the carnal reflexivity that underlies it are justified by criteria that refer to different historical contexts in the production and idealisation of their body projects, associated with different somatic cultures. Yara, 26 years old, white, born in the interior of the state of Pernambuco, with no family support from the age of 13 to 14, a mother who works in a pharmacy and a father who is a mechanic, helps us to understand this argument when she is asked about silicone prostheses:

Emerson: So you don't want to get silicone?

Yara: No.

Emerson: No?

Yara: No. Not industrial silicone. Silicone if I...

Emerson: But if you did... Would you put it on your breasts?

Yara: Yes, but not industrial. The prosthesis. I would never use industrial silicone.

Emerson: Why not?

Yara: Oh, because I've seen so many friends suffer with silicone. Problems, reactions. So it might not work for me. My body might react to the liquid in there too. So I get scared.

Yara's narrative therefore shows greater knowledge and concern about the types of procedures used to modify her body. The fears/concerns are justified by knowledge of the unsuccessful experiences of close friends, as well as the risks and side effects of the industrial silicone used by the pumpers. Body capital involves much more than an individual desire, it involves the collective knowledge accumulated and shared by the group, which in turn is embodied individually.

In addition to questions of risk and concerns about the procedures used to build body capital, this group of trans women and *travestis* values and refers to a different model of corporeality from that shared by previous generations. In fact, it is possible to detect in the speeches of the research participants the existence of a new reference model of corporeality among trans women and *travestis*, whose adherence is expressed above all in the speeches of the younger women. If, until the 1990s, trans women and *travestis* invested in countless techno-scientific procedures to produce their identities and corporealities, in the last two decades it is possible to see that the new perception of body modifications for the expression of gender identities does not necessarily imply body modifications as invasive and structuring of morphology as in the recent past.

We can therefore say that the younger trans women and *travestis* in this research have a different perception of the embodiment of their gender identity. A perception that is more concerned with performance and emotion. In other words, they value the bodies of trans women and *travestis* represented by movements and feelings that attest to femininity, to the detriment of the countless signs that were once materialised in their bodies.

Mariana, Verônica and Yara's body projects are based on new, generational conceptions of trans women and *travestis* bodies and their relationship to the construction of gender. The body of this new generation of trans women and *travestis* has as its symbolic reference a model of the body with few curves, following the hegemonic models of beauty emanating from the cis body and currently promoted by the fashion and body design industries. For example, in the case of Valentina Sampaio, now 27 years old, a Brazilian trans woman, LGBTQIA+ rights activist and model with national and international fame, her body reminds us of the findings of the younger research participants in the study: small breasts, moderate curves, slim and slender body, following the current/most prized of the fashion models and beauty industry, as seen on the cover of Vogue Brazil magazine in December 2017.

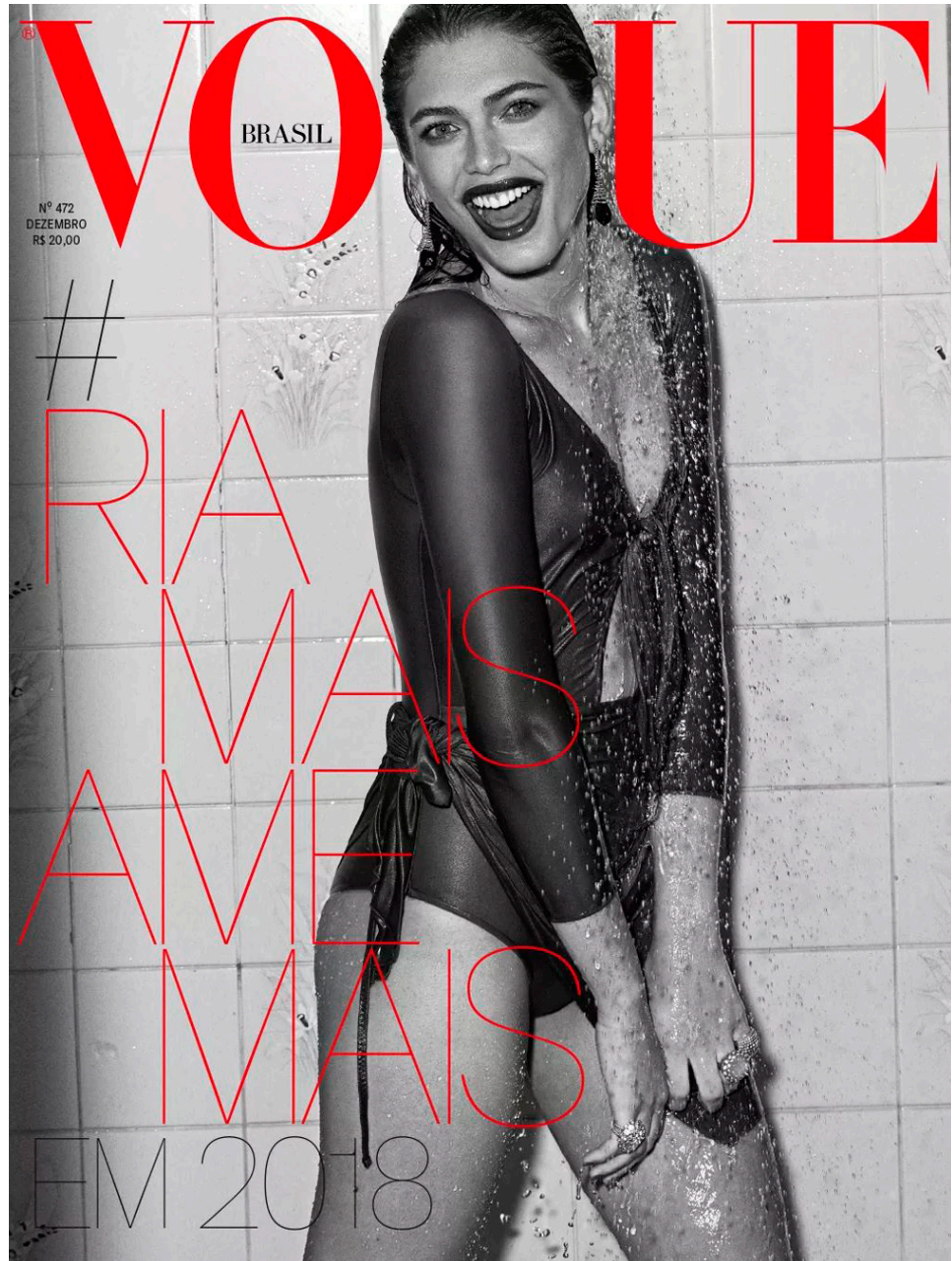


Figure 1 Valentina Sampaio on the cover of Vogue Brazil December 2017 by Gui Paganini, 2017.

The hegemony of this new model of corporeality is also felt by some of the older research participants, whose bodies are built on different reference models, rooted in a different somatic culture. The corporeality of Tainá, 35, born in Manaus, who's the embodiment of your gender identity was undertaken with the support, built mainly on the Brazilian models of the 1990s, expresses another type of femininity, limited to the possibilities available for its construction, that is, through lay biotechnologies shared between trans women and *travestis*. Tainá is aware of the generational and class inequalities that permeate her corporeality at the beginning of her corporeal biography, as well as the limits imposed by her body in the embodiment of other, more recent models:

Tainá: When my friend said: "If you want, I'll put it on now," I said: "Let's go and buy the oil! I already knew all the evils, all the... I knew everything that could happen. I knew I could die right there with her at that moment. But I wanted that body so much. Not because I saw the other one and the other one didn't... We see! But I really wanted my body. And I wanted it to be more shapely and feminine. I used that mechanism, that's what I had. For example, if you say: "Would you build your body today? Like, I'd build my body today, again, but not the way I... no, with the resources I had. For example, today I wouldn't want to be like this, more like a playboy body, because I'm busty, I've got big legs. If I put on weight, I get all chubby, as the Portuguese say, you know? I'm the Carla Perez type because I'm from that generation. If you look at my body, my body is based on the bodies of Carla Perez and Sheila Carvalho. Because it has the standards of the time. And that's the standard of the time when I started bombing. Now, today, with today's standards, I wouldn't use silicone. No, because it's very bad. Today it's even worse, because it's not the same product anymore, the product has got worse. But because today I find the tops, the slim women, so beautiful. I want to wear these loose trousers, I'm already short and busty, so it doesn't look nice, like overalls. There are certain kind of fashions I want to wear, patterns I want to get into, and I can't get into them because I can't go back. I can only go up. I don't think I can go down [emphasis added].

The narratives of trans women and *travestis* reveal the generational shifts in body projects and body modification techniques associated with somatic cultures that have changed in recent years in terms of reference corporealities and attitudes towards certain body modification techniques once shared by trans women and *travestis*. The experiences of the research participants also reveal a greater concern about the types of procedures used in the embodiment of gender identity, a reflection of the countless stories of unsuccessful procedures using industrial silicone by previous generations.

Aspects of class and racialisation

Analysing the corporeal biographies of the research participants in this study also means understanding the importance of the markers of racialisation as producers of body difference and social inequality. As Mbembe puts it, 'the principle of race should be understood as a spectral form of human division and difference that can be mobilised for the purposes of stigmatisation, exclusion and segregation, through which a particular human group is isolated, eliminated and even physically destroyed' (Mbembe 2018: 106. Our translation). In this way, understanding the corporeal biographies of some trans women and *travestis* also means questioning how racist structural violence in a global world marked by colonialism and Eurocentrism legitimises inequalities, stigmatises and subjects trajectories.

Mbembe (2018a) - by mobilising Foucauldian analyses of knowledge, power and the production of discourses of truth and postcolonial studies -

shows that the creation of the category of race by modern techno-scientific discourses legitimised the exploitation, violent techniques of governance and subjugation of non-European/non-white peoples around the world. The Cartesian epistemology that created the oppositions/binaries between the categories of nature/culture, woman/man, black/white, homosexual/heterosexual, transgender/cisgender, etc., legitimated the “European-white-cisheterosexual-male” as the holder of the episteme and as responsible for the colonisation of the world. Thus, discourses of black and/or non-white subalternity have been used as a tool to naturalise oppression, enslavement, colonial violence and reproductive control:

In the colonial order, race functioned as a principle of the body politic, allowing for the classification of human beings into distinct categories, supposedly endowed with their own physical and mental characteristics. Bureaucracy then emerged as an instrument of domination, a network that linked death and business and functioned as the essential matrix of power. Violence became law and law became racialised (Mbembe 2018a: 109. Our translation).

Examples of this are the eugenic discourses of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, translated in Brazil through discussions that linked physiological traits to moral characteristics, and the discourse on the importance of whitening the Brazilian population, of which Nina Rodrigues (1956) is one of the main proponents.

The technologies of racialisation are easily perceptible in contemporary Brazil. Jarrin (2017b), who conducts research on plastic surgery in the country, shows how the aesthetic devaluation of black bodies is intertwined with other material realities, such as police violence, lack of access to education and health, in a process that naturalises the differences between light-skinned and black people. In Brazil, plastic surgeons contribute to the reproduction and representation of racialised characteristics as traits to be corrected, such as the noses of people of African descent, which are considered “ugly” and closely associated with people from disadvantaged classes. Plastic surgeons’ discourses thus perpetuate the biopolitical desire to produce a homogeneous nation (Jarrin 2017a), which more or less allows for the myth of racial democracy and the whitening of the population.

In Brazil, issues of race are inextricably linked to class and to processes of exclusion, marginalisation, spatial segregation and marginalisation/exploitation of the black population, reflecting colonisation and enslavement. The country is predominantly made up of people of African descent (55.6%) - although only 10.1% of the population identify themselves as ‘black’ - and more than 70% of the poorest people are of African descent. Therefore, to understand the processes of exclusion of people of African descent in Brazil is to understand how the discourses of truth elaborated by modern science and its Cartesian view of the world have been used in the processes of exclusion, marginalisation and silencing of non-white people. An eloquent example was the creation of the myth of racial democracy by white elites to make invisible the stigmas and inequalities associated with black and Afro-descendant people in the country (Sales Junior 2006; Carneiro 2003).

In this sense, the reality of Afro-descendant people in Brazil establishes a relationship with what Butler (2017) calls the precarious condition:

[...] the politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from inadequate social and economic support networks and are more vulnerable to violations, violence and death. These populations are more vulnerable to disease, poverty, hunger, displacement and violence. The precarious condition also characterises the politically induced condition of maximising the precariousness of populations exposed to arbitrary

state violence, who often have no choice but to turn to the very state from which they need protection. In other words, they turn to the state for protection, but the state is precisely what they need to be protected from (Butler 2017: 47. Our translation).

In our research, only Safira and Luna self-identified as black, reflecting the processes of vulnerability, marginalisation and representations attributed to both throughout their lives. The situation of vulnerability experienced by both highlights the marginalisation of the black population following the abolition of slavery in 1888. With the end of slavery, no policies were put in place for the economic and social integration of black people into Brazilian society. On the contrary, a policy of whitening was adopted, supported by eugenic scientific discourses aimed at the immigration of white Europeans, who were already granted various privileges on Brazilian soil in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Fernandes 1978).

Luna's corporeal biography is marked by multiple forms of exclusion and silencing. Luna, 38 years old, was born on the outskirts of Campinas, São Paulo, with some family support: her mother was a cleaner and her father worked in a ceramics factory. The couple had seven biological children - including Luna - and adopted two more after their last child died at the age of two and a half. Luna only attended primary school up to grade 8. The reason for dropping out of school was threats of violence related to her sexuality and blackness, given the hegemonic representations that she was subjected to, referring to the interconnectedness of markers of blackness, masculinity and cisheteronormativity.

In this sense, Megg Oliveira (2017: 174. Our translation) states that: "The mechanisms of control that affect an adult effeminate gay, faggot and black queer are observed during their childhood with the deliberate intention of ensuring white cisheteronormativity as the only possible existence". Luma de Andrade (2012) also supports the understanding of institutional transphobia in schools. The researcher concludes that *travestis* drop out of school as a result of stigmas and representations as deviant and undesirable. Dropping out is understood as if it were the *travestis*' choice, in an attempt to hide the school's failure to manage difference and to conceal the involuntary dropout caused by the institution itself.

The constitution of Luna's body capital and the embodiment of her gender identity went through countless processes of negotiation between her, her family and her work. At the age of 16, she began the process of hormone replacement through a travesti cousin and her friends. At this point, Luna was afraid to experience body modification in her parents' home, so she decided to move in with her cousin and aunt. It was also during this time that Luna began sex work. At the age of 18, after some changes to her body, Luna decided to stop the female hormone treatment and start taking male hormones, determined to return to her parents' house.

However, after her mother discovered that her daughter was smoking cannabis, Luna decided to move out of her parents' house to live with some friends. During this time, Luna worked as a telemarketer and supplemented her financial income by giving concerts and performances in LGBT night-clubs in Campinas-SP, accompanied by her cousin. However, due to the low income from formal work (R\$350.00), Luna began to deal drugs through the people she shared a house with. The profits from the drug trade were often used for parties, boyfriends and financial help for her parents, who until then had believed that Luna was a successful artist. After three years of dealing, Luna was caught red-handed at the age of 21. Prison was a turning point in her life. The experience of prison made Luna rethink her actions and the importance of family affection in the constitution of her subjectivity. Despite the crisis in her family relationships, her mother continued to give her emotional support.

Luna spent four years in prison. After her release, she returned to live with her family and to work. The low salary was not enough to cover her personal and family expenses, and she was unable to express her femininity at work. In this context of deprivation, Luna decided to return to sex work at night in Jardim Itatinga, leading a “double life”: working in a security company during the day and as a sex worker at night.

Between wigs, make-up, self-hormonisation and industrial silicone, Luna has invested in her body capital in a provisional way, never having had the chance to fully experience her gender identity and femininity, either at work or at home. Therefore, Luna’s body capital not only demonstrates the plastic and technical aspect of gender, but also how the system, transphobia and racism prevent many *travestis* and transsexuals from fully embracing their gender identities. Luna’s body capital is the result of industrial silicone body modification techniques developed by Brazilian trans women and *travestis*, which carry high health risks. These risks are overridden by the low cost of the procedure and the desire to realise the body project.

The intertwining of markers of class, race and gender identity has not only constrained the process of constituting Luna’s body capital, but also her subjectivity and the representations she makes of herself: “Like, when I go out on the street, I know I’m going to attract attention. I know, like, I’m almost six feet tall, I’m black, I like to wear light hair, so I know I attract attention, you know?”. Luna’s fears and anxieties about accessing public space were built up throughout her trajectory as a travesti, black, poor, a sex worker, a person living in a situation of detention, and a victim of physical and symbolic violence that marked her body and subjectivity in conditions of permanent precarity. “To affirm that life is precarious is to affirm that the possibility of sustaining it depends fundamentally on social and political conditions, and not only on an internal impulse to live” (Butler 2017: 40. Our translation).

Travestis and trans identities can only be fully understood in relation to other social markers of difference. Luna’s life trajectory and corporeal biography in Brazil demonstrates the complexity of analysing lives based on class and race markers, as well as the exclusions and silences that target the poor and black population. In addition to bodily and subjective inequalities, her trajectory also demonstrates, from the beginning of her life, the processes of agency and resilience of people who are not at the centre of the economic-ethnic system that (re)produces the exclusionary social structure.

A Barbie in the mirror

Understanding the corporeal biographies of Brazilian trans women and *travestis* in transnational mobility also means going through the life trajectories of the research participants in search of the signifiers and meanings inherent in the processes of embodiment, as well as the changes in dispositional legacies with transits to Portugal and/or other countries on the European continent. Experiences in the European sex market allow for the accumulation of economic capital and its conversion into body capital, in other words, it is a turning point in corporeal biographies. The embodiment of the European experience acquires meaning in/through the body, whether through changes in the body project and/or access to biotechnologies for transforming the body.

When analysing the trajectories of the research participants, Débora’s corporeal biography shows the profound importance of mobility in the accumulation/conversion of economic/body capital and the constitution of a positive image and self-esteem regarding gender identity. Débora, 35, white, born in Fortaleza-CE, with partial family support, a seamstress mother and waiter father, left home at the age of 17, motivated to live out her female gender identity in São Paulo. Débora arrived in Lisbon in 2003, aged 21-22, after four or five years of living and working in the capital, São Paulo. Through the sex market in Brazil, Débora accumulated economic capital and transformed it into bodily capital, represented by the silicone prostheses in her breasts and the industrial

silicone in her hips. Sex work also gave her autonomy, financial security and mobility capital. After working in Portugal for a while, Débora spent a year travelling in Spain, even before the 2008 crisis: “When I was in Spain, which was the part I told you about, I was in the whole interior of Spain. And in Spain we made a lot of money, Emerson, it was also the time of the fat cow”. This trip allowed her to accumulate the economic capital to buy a house in Fortaleza, in the same neighbourhood as her parents and siblings, and to have her nose job. At this point in Débora’s life, the surgery represented her success as a transgender sex worker and the embodiment of her dream of being a Barbie:

Débora: Nobody had a nose job, so very few trans women did. And there was a very famous surgeon there, Dr [name of doctor], and I said: “How much is a nose job?”. And he said: “Oh, 2,500, 2,000 euros.” And I said: “I want to have my nose done”. My nose wasn’t ugly, but it was a Bofinho⁴ nose. So he was known as one of the best, you know? When I went in for the operation, he said to me: “You’re so beautiful!”. “Oh, thank you!”. “Do you want a woman’s nose or a doll’s nose?”. And I said: “I want a doll’s nose!”. And he said: “Barbie doll?” And I said: “Yes, yes!” [laughs]. When I woke up, my nose was swollen and he said: “Your nose is going to be beautiful!”. And I said: “I hope so! I hope so! And when I came back to Portugal, I came back... I was always blonde, but I came back with a nose like this, beautiful, tiny, and everyone said: “Look, you were lucky, huh!”. So I stayed here for a long time.

4 An emic term for a handsome man.

Débora’s first three years in Europe were marked by the accumulation of mobility, bodily, economic and cultural capital. In this sense, Vartabedian (2010: 49. Our translation) states that: “Symbolic and social well-being and bodily embellishment are some of the factors that contribute to understanding their migration to Europe as a project of personal empowerment”. The experience of prostitution on the European continent made it necessary to learn English. “To speak a language is to assume a world, a culture” (Fanon 2008: 50. Our translation), but more than that, language allows migrants to access the status of subject (Mombaça 2015). Thus, Débora began to study English on her own in Lisbon, and the accumulation of this resource allowed it to be transformed into mobility capital. Once again, it was through friendship networks and social capital with other sex workers that Débora was able to work in Greece and France.

The move to Paris at the age of 24-25 is another turning point in Débora’s corporeal biography. In the French capital, she worked both as a stripper and in sex work. This provided opportunities to meet trans women of different nationalities and expand her network of people and social capital, while also changing her aesthetic dispositions. It was through the French health system that Débora gained access to the process of gender confirmation surgery, following an HIV test at a sex worker support centre.

Faced with the possibility of realising her dream of gender confirmation surgery, Débora invested resources in time and money in order to undergo the procedure. During her experiences in Paris, she updated her mobility dispositions, her aesthetic dispositions, the accumulation of economic capital through sex work and learning French with the help of public policies offered by the French state, in other words, the accumulation of cultural capital as well as mobility. After a year and a half of medical appointments, sometimes preventing her from working, the surgery was scheduled. A week before the operation, Débora received the news that it wouldn’t be possible to carry out the surgery due to the lack of a medical board. Determined to have the operation at this point in her life, and with the economic capital to have it done in a private hospital, Débora requested her file and contacted some surgeons in Bangkok and London. This once again demonstrates the conversion of economic capital into body capital. The gender confirmation surgery took place

in Bangkok, the capital of Thailand. In addition to that operation, Débora had a facial implant to round off her cheekbones.

Débora's body capital demonstrates the myriad insights that other models of femininity provided in the process of reflecting on her experiences during her mobility, such as her relationship with facial feminisation surgery. After a friend who, according to Débora, "had a very masculine face" had good results with a Peruvian surgeon, Débora felt motivated to invest more resources in her body capital. After contacting the surgeon and discussing the details of the procedure, Débora travelled to Lima.

Débora's corporeal biography is thus the result of her work as a sex worker, the countless investments in biotechnologies made possible by her work, and the global circulation inherent in her profession. Her body project emerges from the constitution of aesthetic dispositions constituted by experiences with other trans women and *travestis* around the world. Her upward trajectory in the field of sex work has allowed her to accumulate a great deal of economic, bodily, social, cultural and mobility capital, as well as the recurrent conversion between these resources.

In addition to changes in corporeal biographies, mobility to Europe promotes re-significations of life trajectories and a change in the legacy of dispositions due to the new experiences lived during mobility. These transformations are motivated by the reflexivity induced by different and differentiating contexts and/or are the result of strategies to achieve agency and success in sex work. Frequent displacement between different economic, social, cultural and political contexts, while driving or facilitating changes in ways of being in public life, also changes representations of Europe and Brazil.

One of the aspects addressed by the research on the mobility of Brazilian trans women and *travestis* to Europe is the reference to experiences of glamour and luxury, as opposed to the situation of marginality and abjection of their subjectivities and experiences in Brazil. Europe is seen as a way of changing aesthetic dispositions and representations of gender identity and femininity. Therefore, the process of becoming European involves changes in the way femininity and behaviour are performed in public life. The narrative of Safira, 37 years old, black, complete primary education, born in the countryside of Espírito Santo, with no family support, parents who were farmers, shows that becoming European means embodying representations of the upper class and upward social mobility, in other words, being chic and glamorous, according to the narrative:

Emerson: And tell me, what did you learn during your time in Spain? What has changed in you?

Sapphire: Ahh! Europe! It's a school, isn't it? I came back with a different attitude. I stopped dressing vulgarly, I started to see, right? Just like here, before it could get as cold as it did, it was important that my legs were outside, my breasts on the tray. I realised that in Europe you can be a lady without being vulgar, you can be sensual, attractive, but without showing vulgarity. So I came back to Brazil with that mentality, with that attitude, with that culture.

Experiences on the European continent thus lead to changes in dispositions and consequently to the accumulation of cultural capital. Frequent travels to different countries, travelling between different social and cultural contexts, the heterogeneity of experiences with clients of different nationalities and social classes change the dispositional heritage of sex workers and contribute to the constitution of a positive self-image. At the same time, the accumulation of economic capital, the embodiment of performances of social distinction, the reduction of fears of violence and stigmatisation, as well as passability are conditions that allow access to differentiated and differentiating spaces.

Embodying the European

The amount of economic, bodily, cultural, social and mobility capital accumulated by trans women and *travestis* allows them to reconfigure the place of power/position they occupy in their social circle, especially in their country of origin. The representations of the different and differentiating trajectories, the countries visited, the biotechnologies embodied, the access to privileged sex work territories, the glamour and luxury all play a role in constituting an aura of prestige around the lifestyle of Brazilian trans women and *travestis* who are transnationally mobile sex workers. Therefore, understanding mobility also involves the meanings that trans women and *travestis* construct about their experiences and the recognition and respect of their distinctive trajectories by other people in their social peer group in the broadest sense. These discussions refer to Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital, i.e. the differences and rarities of capitals that are recognised as symbols of power, responsible for gaining gains of distinction in disputes between people in a given field.

Symbolic capital reveals the classificatory aspects of lifestyles, accumulated capital and hierarchical processes of symbolic differentiation (Bourdieu 2013). Symbolic capital is also related to the distinctive properties of the accumulation and incorporation of capital acquired in the field, in other words, the modification of dispositional legacies and the perception/appreciation schemes for the recognition of the power of these properties by peers. As an example, we can cite the analysis in the previous section of the representations of aesthetic dispositions and performances of femininity by trans women and *travestis* with the experiences of mobility from a hierarchical perspective, i.e. the importance of the body and its performance as a subjective expression of social mobility. Symbolic capital thus demonstrates the importance of the logic of assimilation and dissimulation in agents' attempts to identify with superior groups (reputation) or to snub groups identified as inferior (Bourdieu 2013).

In this way, symbolic capital affects all other capitals. Exactly in this sense, Oliveira and Kulaitis (2017) show how symbolic capital contributes to the constitution of prestige and public recognition of the economic and social capital of people on the move, even when they are of little importance. An example of this is the overcoming of class origins in the country of destination, which is linked to the positive representations of mobility and the acquisition of European status in territories of sex work in Brazil.

Symbolic capital is also linked to the constitution of bodily capital and the embodiment of biotechnologies, since the possibility of accumulating economic capital and transforming it into distinctive bodily capital is only possible for sex workers who are well positioned in the prostitution fields. In this sense, the performance of expensive surgical procedures, especially those performed by a few people and/or by famous plastic surgeons, valorises a person's social position within the group of trans women and *travestis*. Débora contributes to the understanding of these issues by reflecting on the perception, prestige and appreciation of biotechnologies embodied in the constitution of her body capital by other trans women and *travestis*:

Emerson: What changed in your life after the surgery? What do you think happened to Débora after that?

Débora: You're more special in the middle...[whispering]... when there's a crowd here, Emerson...

Emerson: Trans?

Débora: Of trans women... and in this crowd there are blondes, brunettes, redheads, the spectacular ones... but you say, oh... [...] this one's had an operation, everyone's going to do it like that, oh! [laughs]. Everyone, men, people want to know why, but why? because it touches people's imagination. People don't want to accept that a person is, can make a transformation beyond what they think they can do, you know?

However, the relationships between body capital, the incorporation of distinctive experiences and symbolic capital point to the importance of passability in the trajectories of Brazilian trans women and *travestis*. Passability not only provides security in the relationships they establish in social contexts marked by cisnormativity and transphobia, but also becomes an aspect of esteem and prestige for the research participants. Finally, the power apparatuses that produce cisheteronormativity also operate on the subjectivities and corporealities of trans women and *travestis*. Viviane Vergueiro (2015), when reflecting on passability as a strategy of resistance to cissexist violence, highlights the importance of understanding the issue from other markers of difference and as one of the possibilities to confront patriarchy and cissexism. In some trajectories, the strategy of passability is one of the few ways to survive the violence of the system. For the author, there are two prevailing issues:

- (1) the elitist and racist barriers that surround the viability of cisgender passability strategies (i.e. who is excluded from non-passability?), and
- (2) the limits to the 'passable' re-existence of these diversities within cis-colonial occupations (i.e. re+thinking the limits around invisibility, assimilation, the constant threat of 'picking through' what we are) (Vergueiro 2015: 158. Our translation).

For example, Luna's insecurities about accessing public life in Brazil for fear of being "picked through" are related to class issues and the features of racialisation that are intertwined with her trajectory and corporeal biography. On the other hand, the trajectory and embodiment of Dalila's and Mariana's gender identity, with the right family support and endocrine interventions in their teenage years, allowed them to achieve a high degree of passability.

What the sociological analyses of life trajectories show on an individual scale are the different meanings attached to mobility, the unique effects on physical biographies and the different instrumentalisation of sex work that underlies each life trajectory. These aspects can only be fully grasped when they are analysed on the basis of the interweaving of the different social markers of difference and the life capitals accumulated during the trajectories of trans women and *travestis* sex workers. In short, the analyses showed the complexity of the embodiment of the European and the different meanings attributed to the research participants' corporeal biographies and relationships with family members and peer groups, i.e. "there are hierarchies among the deviant bodies themselves, so that there are trans bodies that, because of their colour, their place of origin, their socio-economic conditions, are closer to the ideal of privilege than others" (Lustosa 2016: 91. Our translation).

Reflections in the mirror

Through the operationalisation of the concept of corporeal biography, this article sought to understand the role of life and mobility trajectories in the embodiment of Brazilian trans women and *travestis* sex workers travelling to/in the European continent. The narratives of the participants highlighted the role of structural inequalities in the choices underlying the constitution of their corporeal biographies, showing they affect the processes of (re)producing bodies in contemporary societies.

Thus, through the sociology at the individual scale and of the body scale, we were able to show the different processes and meanings that trans women and *travestis* sex workers, in their circulation from Brazil to Europe, attribute to the embodiment of what they recognize as the European femininity. The subjectivities of gender non-conforming people, the appearance of non-normative bodies and dissident sexualities are silenced, excluded and reduced to the status of abjection in the Brazilian historical, social, cultural and political context. marked by colonialism, patriarchy, cisheteronormativity and economic neoliberalism. Mobility to/in the European field of sex work is, therefore under-

stood by sex workers as a turning point in their life journeys, as it allows them to re-signify the bodily expression of their subjectivities constituted in Brazil.

The corporeal biographies of the younger research participants in this article confirm the changes in representations and perceptions of the body projects of trans women and *travestis* (Pelúcio 2007; Duque 2011). The corpulent, curvy model so favoured in previous decades has been modified in line with the female body standard derived from the body design and fashion industry, i.e. slim and with fewer curves. Younger research participants have a clearer idea and, consequently, more fear of the side effects of industrial silicone due to the stories and knowledge accumulated and shared by other older trans people and *travestis*.

As a result, younger female research participants prefer to incorporate more invasive techniques into their bodies under medical supervision. This new model of corporeality expresses a greater concern with female gender performance at the expense of the embodiment of invasive biotechnologies in the body. At the same time, the narratives of the older female research participants, who have built their corporeality through other types of body projects and with biotechnologies from a different somatic culture, demonstrate the limits of the body in the embodiment of other models, a subject body that subjugates them, however open it becomes to body modification projects.

The research participants' trajectories, marked by aspects of disadvantaged social class and racialisation, allow us to understand the impact of the cisheteronormativity, processes of abjection and structural and institutional transphobia throughout the lives of trans women and *travestis*. The narratives of these research participants are exemplary for understanding how the intertwining of gender identity, disadvantaged social class and racialisation become predominant for entering the sex market while still in their teens. More than that, their life journeys illustrate the role of the social group of Brazilian trans women and *travestis* sex workers as one of the few or only support networks for this social group in obtaining support and resources for the subsistence of their bodies and subjectivities. Therefore, the results of this research support Transgender Europe's assertions that: "Sex work can also strengthen personal development goals by providing networks and guidance from other, usually more experienced, trans people, serving as a means of gender affirmation in transphobic societies" (Fedorko and Berredo - TGEU 2018: 7. Our translation).

These trajectories also show how the processes of vulnerability and precarity are reinforced by the features of racialisation that are mutually constituted by the class question in Brazil. Although Luna was not expelled from her home, her subjectivity was marked by racist violence and fear of access to public spaces in Brazil. Her life story shows how the interconnections between racism and transphobia make it impossible for black trans and *travestis* people to complete formal education. They are driven to drop out of school due to fear of the violence that exists in the school environment and the relationships that are established between the school institution and the apparatus of white cisheteronormativity as the only way to exist (Oliveira 2017).

Mobility to Europe is seen as a turning point in corporeal biographies, as it allows the economic capital accumulated in prostitution fields to be transformed into bodily capital. The embodiment of the European promotes changes in bodily projects through greater access to biotechnologies of bodily transformation, the impact of different and differentiating experiences in prostitution, public life and bodily projects, experiences linked to changes in aesthetic dispositions. At the same time, the research participants understand the experiences on the European continent as motivating the constitution of responsibilities and changes in dispositions towards culture and education, as they assimilate the cultural differences between the different countries they travel through.

Mobility is perceived as a turning point in corporeal biographies because it allows for changes in ways of being based on experiences in the fields of sex

work and public life, especially those related to luxury and glamour. According to some of the research participants, experiences on the European continent were responsible for the refinement of femininity, i.e. the embodiment of upper class representations and upward social mobility. Mobility is also perceived as a conquest of agency, self-confidence and self-esteem in relation to femininity. This is due to the heterogeneity of experiences with clients of different nationalities and social classes, the accumulation of economic capital, access to public life and biotechnologies of body modification, within a process that confers passability and consequently reduces the fear of transphobic and cisnormative violence that demarcates their life trajectories in Brazil.

Thus, the different and differentiating trajectories, the countless countries visited, the biotechnologies embodied, the access to privileged segments of the field of sex work and to some resources associated with luxury and glamour, make it possible to build a capital of prestigious expressed in the lifestyle of Brazilian trans women and *travestis* sex workers in transnational mobility. These aspects help to affirm their distinct and distinctive trajectories based on hierarchical social classifications. Therefore, the embodiment of the European involves the (re)production of dispositions and practices experienced during mobility, as well as the incorporation of signs of upward social mobility obtained with economic capital to attest the unique aspects of trajectories and corporeal biographies.

What the experiences and corporeal biographies of the research participants show is the complexity that discussions about the body, gender and sexualities have taken on in the public arena as the LGBTQIA+ population has gained citizenship rights and as trans and *travestis* people have entered - albeit reluctantly - reflexive spaces such as universities, the media and others. These processes have widened the possibilities for thinking about the body, gender and sexuality of trans and cisgender people. If in past decades the experiences of trans and *travestis* people were limited to precarious body modifications, prostitution, and abjection, in the current context, and despite the vulnerability and precariousness of a significant part of this social group, we have seen an expansion of the possibilities of their experiences, corporealities and subjectivities, as well as the achievement of better living conditions for themselves and/or their families. The embodiment of the European is the resignification of the abject body as an accessory body, in other words, a bodily capital mobilised during the mobility to the territories of sex work and its conversion into other capitals.

The accumulation of economic capital provided by the different experiences of (i)mobility ensures access to different biotechnologies for transforming the body, convertible into unequal forms of body capital. All of them, however, converge towards the ideal of the embodiment of the European. The difficulties of the country of origin related to class inequalities, structural transphobia and representations of abjection of the body are thus re-signified through their experiences in Europe, leading to the acquisition of symbolic capital whose recognition depends largely on the embodiment of resources and symbols associated with the representations of glamour and luxury attributed to the European experience.

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Mirror, mirror on the wall, who looks the youngest of us all?

An art-based autoethnographic inquiry on beauty, gender and ageism

Visual Ethnography

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Abstract

In contemporary society, marked by a prevalent emphasis on visual culture, there is a widespread desire to combat the effects of ageing, largely influenced by ageist media portrayals that idealise youthful bodies as the epitome of attractiveness and health. Faced with increased vulnerability due to ageism, sexism, classism and lookism, women often aspire to 'eternal youth' in line with societal norms and aesthetic standards. Centring on the body as it is presented externally, my research adopts a multifaceted approach, employing thorough ethnographic examinations with middle-aged Portuguese women in conjunction with art-based autoethnography. Through this analytical framework, I endeavour to elucidate the intersection of femininity and ageing juxtaposed against the youth-centric, predominantly male gaze prevalent in mainstream cultural contexts. By analysing societal and medical reflections on ageing and engaging in dialogue with women, I aim to unpack perceptions and anxieties around ageing. Anti-ageing messages often reinforce heteronormative beauty standards, dictating physical appearance and expectations of graceful ageing while neglecting underlying structural determinants. Examining anti-ageing practices reveals power dynamics, inequalities and forms of resistance that women encounter in response to ageing. Through anthropological inquiry, the study illuminates the interplay of societal structures, gendered expectations and individual agency in navigating ageing.

Keywords

Medical anthropology; Auto-ethnography; Ageing; Gender studies; Beauty studies.

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¹ The notion of “clinical mirror” refers to the perspective or viewpoint provided by medical professionals when examining the patient’s body. It represents the medical gaze, a concept within anthropology and sociology that describes the way in which medical practitioners scrutinize and interpret the physical characteristics of a patient’s body through their professional lens. In the specific context of this text, the expression “clinical mirror” serves as a symbolic representation of the medical gaze focused on the ageing body, reflecting the perspective and interpretation of age-related changes through a medical lens.

J’ai pensé à ces femmes, à leur lutte pour tromper la mort, car c’est de cette désespérance qu’il s’agit, j’ai pensé à leur combat perdu d’avance contre les premières rides, les premiers relâchements de la peau, tout ce qui annonce au monde que quelque chose d’elles s’enfuit, irrattrapable, leurs corps fugitifs, leur honte, et j’ai eu envie de crier, hurler que seul ce qui ne dure pas a de la valeur, et que la menace de la perte est justement ce qui nous aide à vivre
(Delacourt 2018: 158)

Making the invisible visible

I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me
The Invisible Man, Ralph Ellison.

This article delves into the feminine experience of ageing and the perception of ageist attitudes towards women in the context of physical transformations resulting from the natural process of ageing. Although ageing impacts individuals of all genders, women often encounter heightened susceptibility due to a convergence of ageism, sexism, classism, and lookism. Notions of perpetual youthfulness, suspended ageing, or timeless beauty are deeply ingrained within gender norms, societal anticipations, aesthetic benchmarks, and moralizing principles, intricately intertwined with the individualistic ethos of accountability and self-restraint advocated by neoliberal ideology. Drawing upon an autoethnographic photographic study and in-depth ethnography, this text explores the feminine experience of ageing and the perception of ageist attitudes towards women in relation to changes in physical appearance due to the natural process of growing old.

By presenting the results of fieldwork carried out over the last thirty-six months in Lisbon, Portugal, and a photographic study of the visible manifestations of ageing on the author’s body in the clinical mirror¹, the text aims to elucidate the interplay between societal expectations regarding youthful appearance and the lived reality of ageing. Through this multimodal approach, the article sheds light on the complex dynamics of social visibility and ageing, offering insights into the nuanced negotiation of bodily identity and societal perceptions among women in the context of ageing. Exploration of anti-ageing endeavours unveils entrenched power dynamics, disparities, moral ambiguities, cultural complexities, and modes of political resistance inherent in women’s responses to and negotiations with the physical transformations accompanying ageing. Anti-ageing advertisements often reinforce heteronormative, hegemonic beauty norms to propagate an idealized depiction of middle-aged womanhood. Present-day media portrayals of ageing women not only dictate physical appearance but also impose an expectation of gracefully embracing the ageing process, frequently linked to a narrow conception of normative, white, middle-class, heterosexual femininity, thereby disregarding underlying structural determinants. From an anthropological standpoint, the scrutiny of anti-ageing practices sheds light on the intricate interplay of societal frameworks, gendered anticipations, and individual agency, offering insights into the intricate balance between bodily autonomy and societal norms among women navigating the intricacies of the ageing process.

I’ve spent three years observing and accompanying the anti-ageing ‘rituals’ of 42 middle-aged and senior Portuguese women (age range 40-70) in order to gather their perceptions and attitudes towards the ageing body, to collect products and procedures for maintaining youth, and to reveal the role of social media in constructing and promoting positive ageing lifestyles and beauty ideals. Monitoring social media messages is important for research purposes because the media not only prescribe what women should look like, but also imply that there are numerous benefits for those who conform to cultural standards of ‘decent’, ‘positive’, ‘active’ and ‘graceful’ ageing. If autoethnography has shown me how the physical changes associated with the passage of

time are considered defects to be 'corrected' by aesthetic medicine, ethnography has embedded my personal story in a wider network of experiences and practices used by women to regain social visibility by rendering the signs of time invisible.

In an ageist society in which only young and toned bodies are considered attractive and healthy, many of us make great efforts to overcome ageing and its signs. Fantasies of 'eternal youth', 'frozen' or 'sleeping' beauties are firmly rooted in gender norms, reflecting aesthetic ideals and expectations, moralising norms of active ageing and neoliberal ideologies of individual responsibility and self-discipline. Although all people age, women are more vulnerable to a combination of ageism, sexism, classism and lookism. In contemporary Euro-American aesthetic economies (Jarrín 2015: 535), a woman's value depends largely on attributes (beauty, sexual attractiveness, fertility) that irrevocably fade with age. Losing youth means losing beauty and the power of sexual attraction. Beauty and youth are important social resources, and beautification is a significant investment to ensure mobility in the social hierarchy. Especially for women, physical appearance is seen as crucial capital that can be used to gain personal advantages, opportunities and privileges, and for which it is worth investing time, energy and money (Wen 2009; Anderson et al 2010). For this reason, beauty work is seen as a responsibility and moral duty, particularly for women, and there is strong normative pressure for them to invest various resources into their appearance.

Gender differences in the preoccupation with physical appearance have been discussed extensively by feminist theorists: although men are now more concerned with their appearance, there is a clear difference between men and women in the amount of time, attention and money that can legitimately be spent on beauty work (Bartky 1990; Orbach 1988; Carryer 2001; Fuller 2017; Tischner 2013; Wolf 2002; Bordo 1993; Berkowitz 2017; Cameron et al. 2019). The loss of youthful appearance is therefore particularly damaging to women, who are harshly judged on their ability to achieve and maintain the cultural ideal of female beauty, namely a young, thin, smooth, toned, firm and sensual body (Clarke and Griffin 2008; Bartky 1990; Bordo 1993; Cortese 2004; Gimlin 2002).

Ageist stereotypes portray ageing women as ugly, asexual and unattractive, in contrast to young women who are seen as beautiful, desirable and valuable. Ageism refers to the discrimination of people 'because they are old, just as racism and sexism do with skin colour and gender' (Butler 1969: 243). Women embody intersectional discrimination at the intersection of ageism and sexism, being culturally devalued in youth-privileging cultures and the hyper-sexualisation of younger, able-bodied women. As Kathleen Woodward notes in her 1999 book, *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations*:

"Women today begin to experience ageing around the age of fifty, and this process is viewed in terms of decay and loss of aesthetic and erotic value, rather than in the neutral terms of natural evolution and transformation" (Woodward 1999: 10-13).

I have therefore decided to focus my attention on the female experience and perspectives on ageing, looking in the youth-loving mirror of a society that stigmatises female ageing and despises the appearance of the middle-aged and elderly woman.

I first reflected on the apparent paradox of the excessive attention to the physical signs of age on the one hand, and of the total invisibility of older women's bodies on the other, in a society obsessed with youth and physical attractiveness, and which discriminates against older women. The concept of the social invisibility of ageing women (Biggset al. 2000; Gullette 2004; Hurd Clarke and Griffin 2008) denotes the societal phenomenon characterized by the marginalization, exclusion, or attenuated societal acknowledgment ex-

perienced by older women as they progress in age. The social invisibilization of old women has multifaceted manifestations, encompassing diminished representation within media and popular culture, constrained presence in public spheres, curtailed opportunities for employment or engagement in social activities, and a dearth of recognition or validation regarding their lived experiences and contributions.

The hypervisibility of the signs of ageing in the “aesthetic doctor’s mirror” and the total erasure of the ageing female body in the “social mirror” underlie the economic, physical and emotional investment in aesthetic products and services (hair dye, make-up, cosmetic surgery and non-surgical cosmetic procedures). The mirror, in this discussion, can serve as a powerful metaphor for the concept of “gaze”, representing the act of observation and judgment. When handed over to different individuals, such as medical professionals or society at large, the mirror takes on varying significances and implications. The doctor’s gaze, reflected in the mirror, represents a clinical and objective perspective on the individual’s physical condition. Patients often entrust themselves to the authority of the doctor’s gaze, accepting their judgments and diagnoses as authoritative.

The “society’s mirror” is the gaze, shaped by cultural ideals of beauty, success and conformity, projected onto the individual reflecting societal norms, values, and expectations. Individuals internalize society’s judgments reflected in the mirror, leading to pressure to conform to societal standards. Women, in particular, feel the imperative to adhere to an ideal of perpetually youthful femininity, or at the very least to age with elegance and grace. This pressure is often influenced by societal norms, cultural ideals, and media representations of ageing, which promote certain standards of beauty and behaviour associated with ageing. The imperative of “ageing gracefully” forces ageing women to fight the signs of ageing in order not to disappear socially. There is a strong emphasis on maintaining a youthful appearance, often through the use of cosmetic procedures, skincare products, and fashion choices that conceal or minimize signs of ageing such as wrinkles, gray hair, or sagging skin. The social invisibility to which my interviewees referred is inversely proportional to the social visibility of the signs of ageing. Older women have become socially invisible and their ageing is characterised by resistance, reluctance, sadness, cultural devaluation and shame.

A 2010 study by Margarida de Melo Cerqueira showed that in Portugal, from television (series, game shows), newspapers (news, comic strips), radio to various forms of art (cinema, theatre, dance, painting, sculpture, literature), older characters are referred to in a derogatory way, as having a health problem that weakens them in some way, as being dependent and not very competent (Cerqueira 2010: 339). The sense of invisibility experienced by women in relation to their changing physical appearance in the context of their personal and professional relationships has been referred to as ‘gendered ageism’ (Ginn and Arber 1996), ‘double standard of ageing’ combining gender and age discrimination (Sontag 1972), or ‘sexageism’ (Bouson 2016).

Many of my interlocutors commented on the impact of not being seen by potential sexual partners, as expressed by Susana, a 50-year-old married woman:

“Something not so funny happened to me this summer. I turned fifty. And I became invisible. I never turned heads when I walked into a room, even when I was younger. But I was not completely invisible to men. Suddenly no one sees me, not even my husband. I feel like a piece of furniture. I am invisible. I am not there. I don’t exist. I am finished. I don’t even like to look in the mirror anymore. All I see are my wrinkles”.

Many of the women interviewed confirmed that the visibility of the physical signs of ageing is the reason why they are driven to make their wrin-

kles as unnoticeable as possible through the use of beauty work. Investing in anti-ageing products, treatments, interventions and procedures to disguise the signs of the passage of time feeds the hope of not losing visibility and social value. The visibility of ageing coincides with their invisibility as women, as articulated by Cristina, a divorced, heterosexual, 53-year-old entrepreneur who admitted to investing a lot of time, energy and money in beauty work:

“No one desires us if we are not desirable. And no one wants old bodies. Old bodies are invisible, or at least no one wants to look at them. If you do not look attractive, no one will be attracted to you. And old age is not attractive”.

The struggle against invisibility and devaluation (in the eyes of romantic partners, in relational and professional settings, and more generally in the social mirror) is the main reason why women engage in beauty work. However, we have to consider that none of the women we interviewed on this point declared themselves to be lesbians and, among heterosexual women, more than half of those interviewed were critical of these standards, rejecting the male gaze's obsession with young women and a femininity that responds to men's supposed desires.

Social expectations are not only felt as external pressures but also internalised as personal values and desires. This means that women engage in beauty work to meet societal expectations, but at the same time, they feel better about themselves when their reflection in the mirror aligns with societal beauty standards and ideals. Paradoxically, the beauty labour realized to regain social value and visibility in the social mirror ultimately serves to reinforce sexist and ageist notions of physicality and beauty that reduce women to their physical appearance. Women's rejuvenation work reveals structures of power, inequality, moral paradox, cultural complexity and political resistance in the way women perceive their reality and make choices.

The fieldwork

This article is based on the fieldwork I carried out over thirty-six months, from March 2020 to March 2023, using classic bottom-up, empirically grounded field methods - participant observation, focus groups, life histories, informal and semi-structured interviews. A total of forty-two informal and semi-structured interviews, mostly scheduled and recorded, were conducted with Portuguese women aged between forty and seventy and living in the Lisbon metropolitan area, to explore their perceptions and attitudes towards the ageing body and the anti-ageing practices they choose to age 'gracefully'. With the exception of three women who identified themselves as lesbian and two Afro-European Black women, all the other women I interviewed are white, middle-class, heterosexual and cisgender Portuguese women. Clearly, ageing is not just an issue for white middle-class heteronormative women. In recent years, I have researched and published specifically on the aesthetic labour of Afro-descendant women in Portugal, and have observed the emergence of a new market for cosmetic products in the Lisbon area, aimed specifically at customers who do not consider themselves white. In other works, I have also explored economic and social class differences, accompanying low-income women in the market for low-cost aesthetic procedures, often outside of the legally constituted clinical circuits, thus increasing the risk of being harmed.

If other aesthetic interventions are much more transversal - in relation to social divisions of gender, class, race, ethnicity, social status, sexual orientation, age or nationality - in the anti-ageing and skin clinics of central Lisbon, I met mainly middle-class women who identified themselves as white. Research participants were identified through participant observation and snowball sampling. Some respondents were already part of my network of personal contacts. Others I met in gyms, beauty salons, hairdressing salons, medical and

2 Funding: This research was funded by the project EXCEL, “The Pursuit of Excellence: Biotechnologies, enhancement and body capital in Portugal” (PTDC/SOC-ANT/30572/2017), financed by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology and coordinated by Chiara Pussetti (website: www.excelproject.eu).

3 Ethical guidelines in ethnographic research necessitate rigorous adherence to principles of informed consent and participant anonymity to ensure the protection and respect of research participants’ rights and confidentiality.

plastic surgery clinics, and spas while researching the biopolitics of beauty and normative bodies in Portugal as part of the EXCEL project, which I coordinated at the Institute of Social Sciences at the University of Lisbon². In addition to clients, I interviewed aestheticians, dermatologists and surgeons. I conducted interviews with a total of thirty-two beauty professionals, of whom twenty-six were men. The perspective of those who professionally sell products and procedures that promise or enable individuals to attain hegemonic beauty and wellness ideals is reflected, akin to a mirror game, in the choices and experiences of the women I interviewed.

My main research method was participant observation. Regular, unobtrusive contact with my research participants allowed me to develop intimate bonds of friendship. I accompanied them in their daily body care routines, listened to their experiences and opinions about beauty standards, aesthetic practices, consumption of cosmetic products and procedures. I was often invited to keep them company while they underwent painful cosmetic procedures, to hold their hand or simply to distract them. In each situation, they allowed me to take before and after photographs, recording their feelings and the doctor’s observations. It was through these less formal and spontaneous conversations in the different spaces dedicated to beauty in Lisbon that I gained the deepest insights into the field. This intimacy allowed me to capture a wide range of perspectives, identify different types of experience and uncover contradictory attitudes. I speak of intimacy not only in the sense of constant participation in the daily lives of my subjects, but also to refer to the creation of bonds of friendship: we shared experiences, concerns, advice, life stories, and we experienced aesthetic treatments together³.

I spent more than three years talking to customers of Lisbon’s beauty salons, often waiting for the beautician, hairdresser, dermatologist or plastic surgeon. The waiting room of a beauty salon, hairdressing salon or aesthetic clinic is a particularly good place for socialising. It resembles a ‘living room’ where people can chat over a cup of tea in a kind of suspended waiting, away from the activity of the outside world. The interview questions explored a range of issues related to experiences of ageing and the loss of precious time during the Covid-19 lockdowns: feelings about changes in body and appearance due to the restriction of staying at home, values surrounding beauty and youth, thoughts about whether beauty and ageing were under their control, aspirations and fears about the prospect of increased competition in all aspects of social life after the lockdowns, their visions of successful self-care, and the beauty strategies they adopted to survive confinement. While some women spoke of the time of the pandemic reporting feelings of fear and anguish, others recounted that they used the occasion of their confinement to “really” look at themselves in the mirror, with time and contemplation, by choice. For these women, the period of confinement was also a time when they could pamper themselves, away from the hustle and bustle of their work. My field notes were taken on my tablet and smartphone, by voice, talking to myself about my own beauty concerns due to the medical gaze, and recording conversations with the women who were generous enough to share their experiences with me. Many of the people I met during my fieldwork are now my close friends, and I have a duty to tell their stories with care, humility and honesty, and above all with political and ethical sensitivity.

Because of my age (51 years old), which put me in the position of a woman trying to preserve the aesthetic capital she was losing, I was seen as an equal by the other women in the various waiting rooms and as a potential client by the beauty professionals (beauticians, hairdressers, plastic surgeons and aesthetic medicine practitioners). They all showed interest in my research, often asking several questions and wanting to know the preliminary results. The knowledge I gained during my fieldwork about medical aesthetic clinics and beauty technologies led me to become increasingly literate in the field of beauty, and I became a beauty consultant for colleagues and friends who

asked me for advice on treatments and directions to the best clinics in town. Clearly, posing as a beauty consumer and expert proved useful during the fieldwork, both from the phenomenological point of view of sharing experiences with my interviewees, and for the privileged relationships I established in the field. During the research, my research partners and I went on spa days, tried beauty treatments and products, fasted and detoxed to get thin.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, interviews were conducted over the phone or via video conferencing on digital platforms (Zoom, Teams, WhatsApp and Skype). Other data was collected by participating in interactions in Facebook online groups and forums dedicated to beauty and weight loss. Although the pandemic is not a central aspect of this thesis, I cannot ignore the fact that much of the fieldwork took place during an exceptional time. My interviews highlighted how quarantine heightened fears of 'wasting time', of ageing faster, and of losing the wonderful things that used to occupy our time and give meaning to our lives. The sense of lost time during lockdown reinforced the desire to resume a normal life with a younger appearance. If my fieldwork conditions weren't optimal because of the lockdown, the pandemic revealed - among many other things - a veritable epidemic of problematic personal and social issues related to the obsession with appearance and staying or looking young. Many of the women interviewed expressed fears that the stress of the pandemic would make them look and feel older, and claimed that they would be prepared to do anything and pay any price to come out of the pandemic looking younger and better.

I listened to concerns and complaints about wrinkles, sagging breasts and body fat, but also to personal dramas of separation, betrayal, violence and illness. Stories that were at once personal and social, intimate and universal: stories of suffering, of broken hearts, of financial struggle, of resilience and resistance, of humiliation and dreams. Their stories were my stories, their concerns were my concerns, and so they touched me deeply. We shared similar stories: I was an insider and an outsider in the field - a living, embodied intersection of words, senses, emotions, desires and concerns. I was one of them.

The ageing body. A photographic autoethnography

I have never researched a subject that did not tell me something about myself: my tastes, my political positions, my concerns, my fears, my existential questions. All the research I do, all the academic texts I write, also talk about me and change my understanding of who I am. I am very aware of how I enter the field and how the field enters, inhabits and transforms me. I consider my individual experience to be an important part of the social relations I establish in the field, and it seems to me that to focus my attention only on subjects other than myself is to hide my own conditions of knowledge production: the relationship, the encounter, the dialogue. I have never researched from the outside, so I think it is pertinent to be honest with myself about the reasons, mechanisms, impulses, commitments and directions of my intellectual work.

The stories that inhabit me constantly intertwine, merge and collide with other stories, giving rise to untold narratives that I describe ethnographically. By revealing my personal experience and reflexivity in the process of listening, talking, observing and participating in the lives of the people involved in this research, I simultaneously tell their stories and use my experience to create 'a borderland between passion and intellect, analysis and subjectivity, ethnography and autobiography, art and life' (Behar 1996: 174). This means that I accept, as part of this process, the revelation of my vulnerability at all stages of the research, including the writing of the research.

Through my informants' stories, I see my own weaknesses; in their desires, I see my own; in their fear of ageing, I see my own image in the mirror, and our reflection becomes part of a shared story. I am a white, heterosexual, middle-class woman in my fifties: characteristics that immediately place me

in one of the most lucrative niches of the beauty market. With fieldwork that took me through the waiting rooms of plastic surgeons, cosmetic doctors and beauty salons, I had to be rigorously self-aware, meticulously open to my contradictions and, above all, attentive to how the gaze of others changed my perception of myself. By observing my body through the eyes of my interlocutors in the beauty and anti-ageing market, and through a visual research process that involved photographing the changes in my body due to ageing, I gained a deeper, more complex understanding of the changes in my social and self-perception and identity caused by the passage of chronological time.

This article adopts a specific form of visual autoethnography, using photography, self-portraits, drawings on a Barbie doll and field notes as experimental tools to explore the complexities of my personal, embodied, physical experience of ageing. My experience of ageing is presented alongside the voices of my interlocutors and other ethnographic data collected during the fieldwork. Like a mirror, my anti-ageing enterprise reflects like a mirror the experiences of the women I accompanied in the field, their relationship with their appearance, especially their face, hair, skin and weight, and their strategies for slowing down, delaying, mitigating and reversing the effects of time.

Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that recognises that personal experience informs the research process and uses autobiographical narratives about doing ethnography, as well as self-reflexivity, subjectivity and emotion, to understand social experience (Reed-Danahay 1997; Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2011). Autoethnography is a methodological approach that emerged from the postmodern rethinking of both the aims of the social sciences and their modes of inquiry, challenging the persistent dichotomies of insider versus outsider, emic versus etic positions, and individual versus culture. Autoethnography as an ethnographic method has often been criticised for its focus on the self, and has been described as self-indulgent, not scientific and not objective enough, narcissistic, and too evocatively introspective or unconventional in relation to established academic canons (Anderson 2006). Researchers' emotions and feelings have generally been neglected as a source of data in their own right, or even regarded with a certain reluctance as something to be hidden. In other words, we can talk about 'how to do' research, but never about how the field is a personal, emotional, sensual or even erotic experience.

My way of doing anthropological research, which I have defined as 'visceral and emotional' (Pussetti 2016), firmly grounds my position in the social context I observe, with all that this implies. To better grasp my field, I have used what I have defined as 'sensory devices' (Pussetti 2016): emotional and bodily engagement, as well as improvisation and imagination. Emotions, senses, creative improvisation and inventive activity are an intimate part of my empirical practice. In my other work, I have eloquently expressed my scepticism about the positivist position that sees reality as objective and independent of the researcher's gaze, and the 'double illusion of the neutral observer and the social phenomenon that can be observed and represented' (Morphy and Banks 1997: 13). My critique informs, supports, and encourages a phenomenological or experiential understanding according to which we get a taste of ethnographic things (Stoller 1989) through our emotional and bodily experience (Pussetti 2005, 2011, 2017, 2018). I have also engaged in extensive dialogue with other scholars on epistemological distinctions between art and science, reflecting on the connection between scientific and artistic production and discussing whether and why anthropology seems less scientific when it uses creative research methods and aesthetic communication styles (Pussetti 2013a; 2013b; 2015; 2016a; 2016b).

In her influential book *The Vulnerable Observer*, Ruth Behar predicted that when we challenge the orthodoxies of the academy, we create 'a borderland between passion and intellect, analysis and subjectivity, ethnography and autobiography, art and life' (1996: 174), and argued that 'an anthropology

that doesn't break your heart just isn't worth doing anymore' (1996: 177). This is the anthropology I defend, in which I am part of a shared history and a process of mutual understanding and co-construction of knowledge. When I tell an autoethnographic story, the story is not only mine - it is shared with those in my story who share the same physical and symbolic space: the ethnographic field. I am telling my point of view of a story that I am also a part of, among other people. A story made of contradictions, misunderstandings, empathy, flesh, emotion.

In front of the mirror. Ageing in the clinical gaze

*All mirrors are potentially threatening
(Kathleen Woodward 1991: 67)*

Ageing is a temporal process. Thinking about ageing and temporality brings me back to an old distinction made by the French philosopher Henri Bergson (1889) between time and temporality: the chronological and mathematical time of the universe (Albert Einstein's concept of time with its socially neutral metric) and the durational and embodied time of human subjectivity (Henri Bergson's phenomenological concept of time) (Canales 2015). According to Bergson, time is spatialized and measurable, whereas temporality is a subjective and fluid experience that manifests in the continuous flow of consciousness. While time can be objectively measured, the temporality of ageing is a subjective and fluid experience that manifests in the continuous flow of consciousness and in the awareness of the passing of time. Ageing is often measured in terms of time, with an increase in chronological age indicating how much time has passed since birth. However, the experience of ageing is much more complex and subjective, influenced by a range of factors that go beyond simple time measurement. With advancing age, people may become more aware of time and its passage. However, this awareness can vary from person to person and can be influenced by factors such as health, relationships, and social environment. As the years pass, the perception of the passage of time changes. Time speeds up, months fly by. If as children we have the feeling that we will never grow up, youth and beauty seem to slip through our fingers. All the women I interviewed reported this feeling of a mismatch between their legal age and their mental age: "It makes an impression on me when they call me 'ma'am': I still feel like a girl and I notice that others don't see me that way anymore'.

Ageing is a fluid, multidimensional and socially constructed concept. According to Peter Laslett (1989), we can distinguish five dimensions of age: the chronological, the biological, the social, the personal and the subjective. Alan Rubin and Rebecca Rubin (1986) distinguish between chronological age (the mathematical calculation of years) and contextual, subjective and contextual age. Peter Öberg (2003) distinguishes between real age (the age one has, the person's chronological age, i.e., the number of years since their birth), feel-age (the age one feels, or perceived age, regardless of the chronological age), and look-age (the age one appears to be, how old one looks, based on their physical appearance). In summary, while real age is an objective fact, both feel age and look age are subjective and depend on individual perceptions and experiences. For example, a person may be 50 years old (real age), but feel and appear younger (feel age and look age) due to a healthy lifestyle and a positive self-perception. Conversely, another person may be the same chronological age but feel and appear older due to factors such as stress, illness, or a negative self-perception. The ageing process is always and everywhere lived within specific boundaries, norms, expectations, structural constraints, cultural beliefs and values. Age is not given meaning in a vacuum; rather, age is best understood as

4 An intersectional analysis of the phenomenological experience of ageing would require a deep understanding of the multiple dimensions of identity (such as gender, social class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, etc.) and of power structures that influence individual and collective experiences and perceptions of ageing.

5 I decided to participate of the beauty rituals I was studying, both as a means of ethnographically engaging with the field I was researching and because I feel the same societal pressures and adhere to the same beauty standards, which I simultaneously reflect on critically.

part of a stratification paradigm that includes gender, class, race, disability and other systems of inequality. In my research, I have analysed the phenomenological experience of ageing in relation to other axes of difference that produce inequality, discussing with my local interlocutors our common fears of losing youth and beauty; our fears of becoming unattractive, unworthy of love, invisible in the eyes of our partner and society at large⁴. The metaphor of the mirror represents these eyes: the gaze of others, the social images and representations that guide our thinking about ageing and direct the way we see age (Bytheway 2011: 86). In particular, my photographic series represents the representation of the ageing body in the 'clinical gaze'. The gaze of medical expertise and power, but also the embodied critical gaze of socio-culturally prescribed (hetero) normative ideals of beauty and health that we turn on ourselves to judge our physical appearance.

To take my experience seriously is to understand the reality of a culture based on appearance, to uncover the entangled relationship between physical attractiveness, youth, femininity, women's social status and interactional power, with all the psychological, social and economic consequences that this entails. By participating as an ethnographer in all arenas of the beauty market, constantly confronted with hegemonic discourses of youth and beauty, I became increasingly attentive and permeable to the ways in which my interlocutors in the field commented on my appearance. During each interview in aesthetic and cosmetic medicine clinics, the professionals held a mirror in front of my face and drew my attention to the imperfections of my skin texture, the enlarged pores, the lack of youthful radiance and glow, the expression lines: the puppet, the bar code, the crow's foot. Gradually, I approached the perspective of my subjects, seeing my body through their lenses. From observer to observed, I began to incorporate a medical perspective that pathologized the signs of my ageing.

My experiences as a beauty salon customer and medical cosmetic patient, as well as the intense dialogue with other middle-aged women, made me increasingly aware of the of the negative social perception of ageing, particularly for women, associated with a sensation of loss of value (aesthetic, sexual, reproductive, professional and so on). Although I was quite critical of all the discourses and normative ideals of beauty that required women to disguise the signs of ageing, I nevertheless began to take more care of my appearance and to participate in the same beauty rituals that I was observing, thus perpetuating the practice of the pursuit of eternal youth⁵. The clinical gaze proved to be an important lens through which to reflect on the intimate and personal ways in which we incorporate conflicting socio-cultural expectations of how our bodies should be. In the medical gaze, my body presented itself as a raw and changeable material on which the surgeons could draw the ideal feminine form - carving the flesh, cutting the excess and redefining the lines, using all the pharmaceutical, medical and surgical tools of rejuvenation to construct an illusion of youthfulness - just as the sculptor shapes his marble. My body provided the canvas or clay for the artist's masterpiece.

Through an approach that combines art and written anthropological narratives, I have conveyed the emotional journey of my fieldwork and reproduced the impact of these beauty standards on my own representation of myself, balancing between what others see and think of me, with what I began to perceive as wrong or ugly and wished to change. Through field notes, the manipulation of a Barbie doll used as an alter ego or avatar according to an artistic methodology I have discussed in other texts (Pussetti, Lavina, Manfredi 2022; Pussetti 2024), and selfies, I illustrated a cosmetic surgeon's authority to define and shape my body in the light of the mirage that is the ideal, hegemonic and erotic female body of the capitalist market. My photographic reflections, using the selfie as a mirror of the photographic self-portrait, also represent the stories I collected in the field, the confessions and anxieties of my friends and colleagues about the ageing process. A combination of photographs, field notes and collage helped me to provide a visual insight into what I understood and

felt as a researcher during the process, with the aim of involving the viewer in the experience of the social actors involved.

The first and second images represent the pressure I experienced during my fieldwork to achieve and maintain the ideal of youthful beauty by masking or altering the physical signs of ageing. During my research, I experienced pressure to maintain a youthful appearance from doctors, beauticians and also from the women I interviewed. For example, Clara, a 51-year-old single woman, said:

“Many intellectual women like you think they are strong and well-adjusted, because they do not do anything about ageing, grey hair, fat, falling face... They even try to be seen as feminists, against the dictatorship of beauty: but it's all a façade! They are lazy, careless, negligent and sloppy women who don't value themselves. They have no self-esteem and no self-respect: they let themselves go; they are real failures”.



Figure 1 © Chiara Pussetti

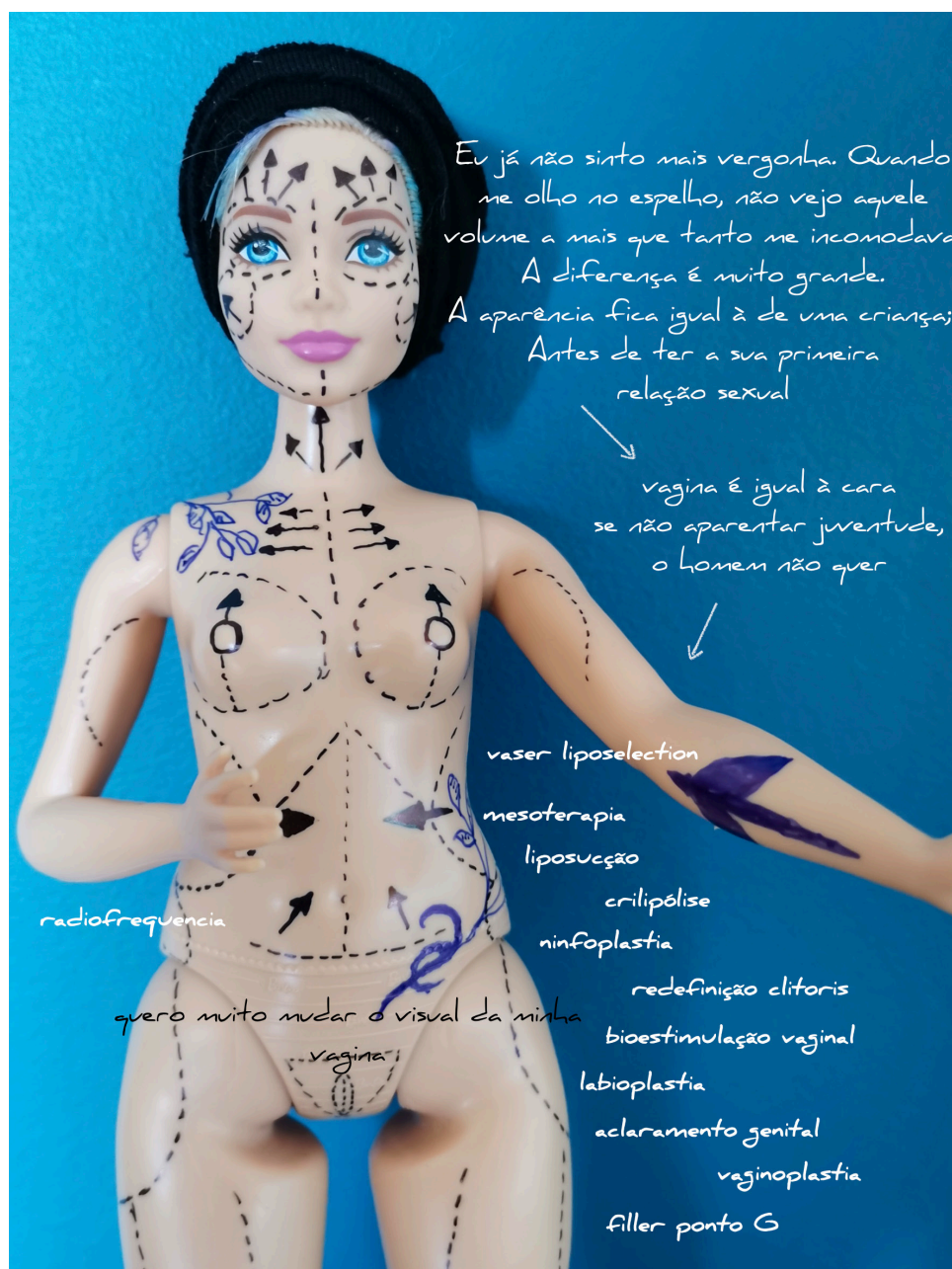


Figure 2 © Chiara Pussetti

Ana, a 46-year-old divorced woman, a recognised and successful architect, confirmed this:

“Yes, I spent a lot of money on fillers and Botox and luxury creams like La Prairie, so what? Maybe you spend more on a bag. But you get that bag of lard on your belly, which is an old woman’s belly. Everyone decides how they want to grow old. Don’t you want to try to be better? You don’t want to try to be better? Then don’t do anything. Then you’ll see what your life will be like: old, ugly, sloppy, alone”.

Joana, a 62-year-old university lecturer, agrees:

“The competition is fierce and we women have a short shelf life. We have to take care of our appearance. At your age you can still do something, but you should have already invested in prevention. The beauty

you've already lost will never come back. You should have done something earlier".

It happened suddenly. Suddenly, I looked at myself in the doctor's mirror and realised that I was no longer young. Still attractive, yes, but "the sell-by date was approaching", as my former mother-in-law once commented. It was a real shock. Until recently, I found it strange when people addressed me in the street as 'madam', because it seemed obvious to me that I was still considered a girl, with the typical naivety of young people who believe they will always be so. During the fieldwork, however, consumers, professionals and colleagues kept reminding me that the time of youth was over and that lost beauty would never return. In the course of the fieldwork, I approached dermatologists, spent a lot of time in aesthetic clinics, and created relationships of trust. I then asked these research subjects what I could do to stop this ageing process. The answers I received from these professionals surprised and frightened me even more:

"I would say that you should have had this concern at least ten years ago. You should have been thinking about prevention. The ideal would be to intervene before the structure collapses. What's more, a woman with your profession: courses, conferences and public appearances. And divorced to boot. You see, competition is fierce at work and in love! Maintaining a youthful appearance is a strategy to maintain a competitive advantage, my dear" (Miguel, dermatologist).

"Chiara, the face... the face is like a business card. You can see that you haven't used sunscreen... you see those little spots? They're not freckles, no. They're age spots. For women, I always say that taking care of the skin on our faces is an obligation. If we want to be accomplices in the shame... that's something else!" (Pierre, dermatologist).

"If you had asked me, I would never have told you not to intervene, even if you had made an appointment at twenty or thirty. It's called prevention, you know what it is, don't you? You should have intervened to prevent the appearance of the first expression lines, before the wrinkles become marks. And then, yes, our work becomes more difficult and we no longer achieve that result. Now we can try to treat, to soften: but the damage is already done" (Sofia, dermatologist).

In the third and fourth pictures, I drew on my face the lines to be corrected and the instructions I received during the research: "Fight the wrinkles! Fight cellulite! Fight age! Win the battle against time! Conquer beauty! Fight the battle against weight! Make an effort! Exercise! Close your mouth!" Wrinkles, body fat, cellulite, sagging skin, greying hair, skin spots, loss of firmness and all the other physical changes associated with ageing should be fought by energetically maintaining the body with the help of the medical aesthetic, cosmetic, fitness and food industries (protein diets, superfoods and supplements). Military metaphors such as, 'fighting wrinkles', 'winning the battle against age' or 'conquering beauty' have punctuated my life, denoting the idea of the effort and suffering involved in the work of preventing, maintaining, delaying, reversing or masking the effects of ageing. The women I interviewed consistently used these martial metaphors to define their struggle against the signs of ageing, making comments similar to those of Maria João, a 51-year-old single heterosexual woman who works full-time, uses hair dye and make-up, and has had a number of non-surgical facial procedures, including Botox, injectable fillers⁶ and chemical peels⁷:

6 Anti-ageing injectable fillers, also known simply as dermal fillers, are substances injected into the skin to restore lost volume, smooth wrinkles, and enhance facial contours. These fillers are commonly used in cosmetic procedures to rejuvenate the appearance of the skin and combat signs of ageing.

7 Anti-ageing chemical peels are cosmetic treatments that involve applying a chemical solution to the skin to exfoliate and remove the outer layers, revealing smoother, younger-looking skin underneath.

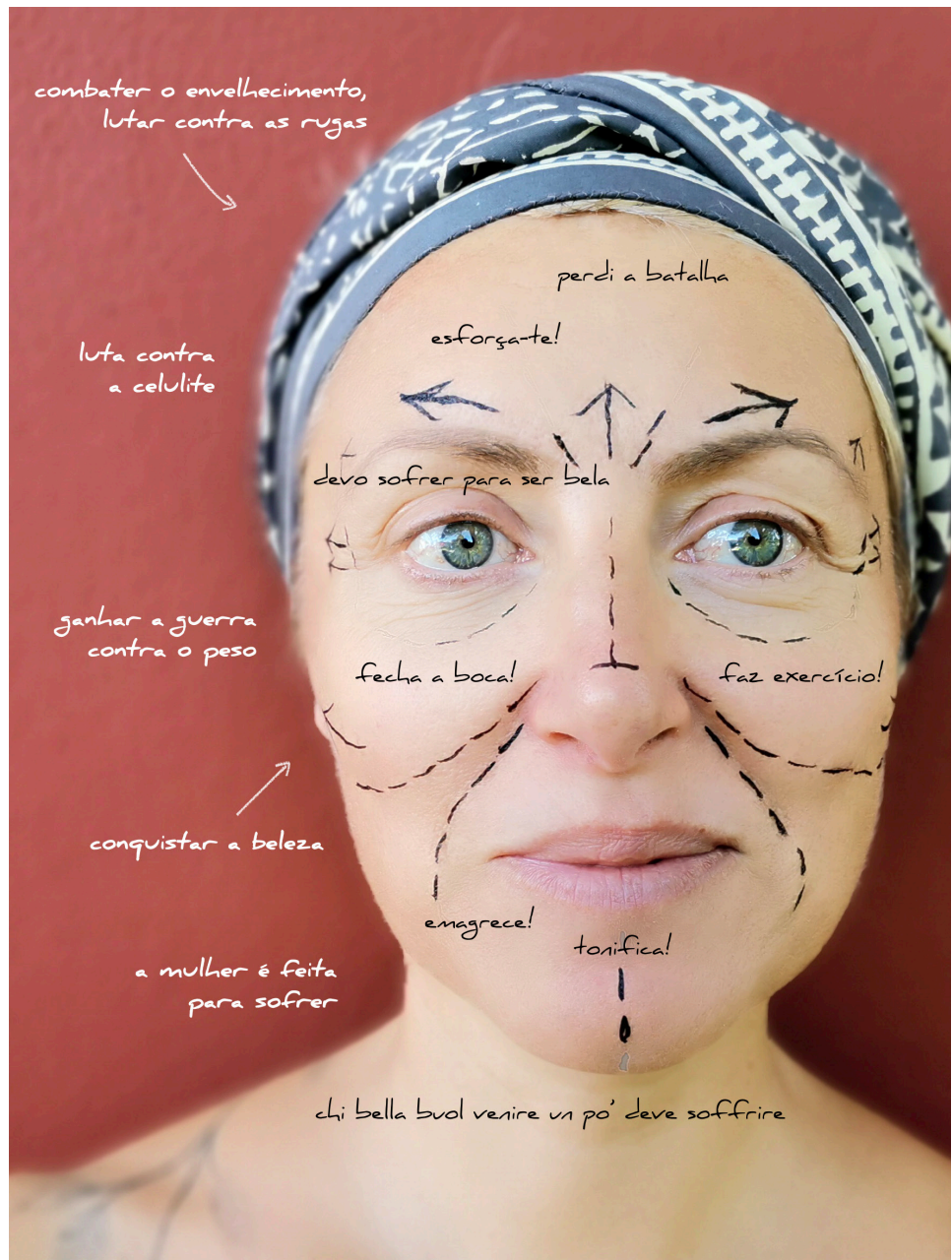


Figure 3 © Chiara Pussetti

"I look in the mirror, I watch and judge myself... my God, I look repulsive! An older woman is so disgusting! I was so beautiful until a few years ago: I would walk into a room and time would stop and everyone would look at me. I would fill the room with my presence. Now nobody looks at me, I feel invisible. Youth is so much more attractive! I wish I looked like I did 10 years ago. I would do anything to be rejuvenated, to be seen again".

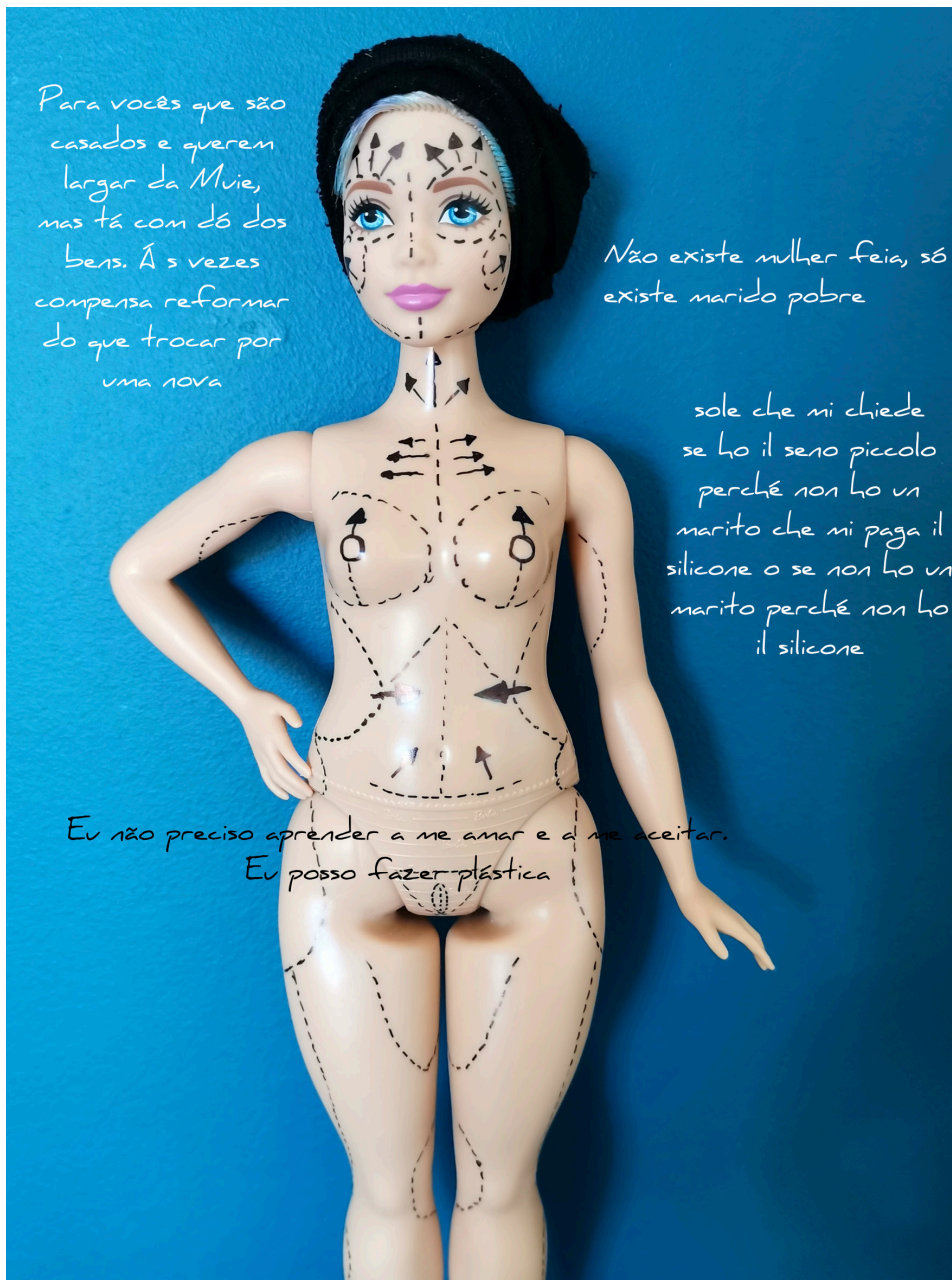


Figure 4 © Chiara Pussetti

Catarina, a single, heterosexual, 56-year-old woman who uses a lot of beauty treatments, expressed it even more strongly in the following remarks:

“I want to stay young! I want my body to slow down! Why should I let myself get old and lose this battle? I am doing everything I can: my life has been a constant battle against nature. Preserving the body is not a desperate search for lost time. It's more like fighting so that time leaves no traces: it's a war!”

Many women shared this negative view of age and the ageing body, making statements similar to those of Ana, a married, heterosexual, 43-year-old doctoral student who used a lot of beauty products and had had Botox and preventative fillers since she was 30:

“Look at this photo. Keira Knightley and I have exactly the same facial structure and about the same age, even she must be younger. But she doesn’t have Botox or fillers and she looks so much older. We’re still going to get older, but by taking precautions we won’t: we may look more mature, but at least we won’t look like we’ve been run over by a lorry. I do not believe in miracles, but in effort and commitment. If you want it, you can do it. I’m sure I can manage to stay beautiful and young for as long as possible!”

Women are told that they are unstoppable: they can change or achieve anything they want with sheer willpower. It is all up to them: with resolve and discipline, nothing is impossible. Women can control the tangible, physical, somatic reality, as well as more abstract processes such as ‘ageing’, ‘time’, ‘gravity’ and ‘the future’. The battleground is their body, in a relentless war against themselves and the natural course of life. During the pandemic period, the Portuguese advertisement for L’Oreal’s Age Perfect cream, which contains the slogan “These Days, Age is a Choice”, was widely disseminated throughout the country. The campaign works to equate ageing with the look of ageing, to problematize ageing appearance, and to offer marketized solutions to the ‘problem’ of ageing. According to L’Oreal’s brand ambassador, saying that today “age is a choice” means that women can be beautiful, well groomed, active and confident after 60 years of age, investing in maintaining fitness and beauty as ways to boost their self-esteem. One can claim the appearance of youth until later: it is in one’s hands; it depends on one’s determination not to give up. It means believing that “we deserve it”. If, in the United States, Jane Fonda personified the cream Age Perfect, in Portugal the promoters of the brand were singer and actress Simone de Oliveira, and actress and television presenter Lúcia Franco. The two ladies represent the so-called “sexygenarians”, a category that today encompasses one third of Portuguese women, and represents an important market niche. The campaign, accompanied by the slogan “It’s the difference between a Granma and a Glam-ma”, problematizes bodily ageing, and in particular facial ageing (skin, eyes, cheeks, lips), as a serious issue. Beautiful bodies are, overall, presumed to be young bodies, and the look of ageing is considered to be a problem and pathologized. The narrative format of this type of advertising messages is that of ‘problem/solution’, with ageing as the ‘problem’ and technologized/scientized/medical/pharmaceutical (even before than cosmetic (of which, more later)) products as the ‘solution’. The consumer is persuaded of two important things: (1) that it is undesirable to appear to be ageing, and (2) that she/he must assume responsibility to stay young-looking, controlling, slowing or reversing the effects of ageing.

The inspirational women who endorse the brand of anti-ageing worldwide make the moral imperative of ‘take care of yourself because you deserve it’ or ‘because you’re worth it’ (Pussetti 2021), relevant to women of all ages, proposing unrealistic beauty standards that ultimately reinforce feelings of inadequacy and increase women’s insecurities. With their imperative tone and positive verbs denoting transformative actions (‘change’, ‘empower’, ‘decide’, ‘make’, ‘develop’), these messages encourage women to maintain their beauty at all costs (Weitz 1998; Jones 2008; Gimlin 2012). According to these motivational messages, the loss of beauty does not depend on the passage of time, but on desistance, laziness and lack of discipline. Youth and beauty require economic investment, effort, discipline, dedication and perseverance. The age you display is a reflection of your moral qualities, your lifestyle and your life choices. Whatever the circumstances, your appearance reveals your essence.

The fifth, sixth and seventh pictures (the first is a picture of me and the other two are my ‘avatar Barbie’ pics) represent all the beauty treatments, surgical and non-surgical, suggested to me by doctors and by my interviewees during my fieldwork. The cosmetic procedures discussed in this paper include Botox injections, skin boosters, chemical peels, vascular lasers, injectable fillers,

laser hair removal, microdermabrasion and laser skin treatments, biostimulation, thread lifting, microneedling, liquid facelift, mesolift, vaginal rejuvenation, and others. The number of things women are willing to do to their bodies to maintain social value, visibility and credibility is impressive.

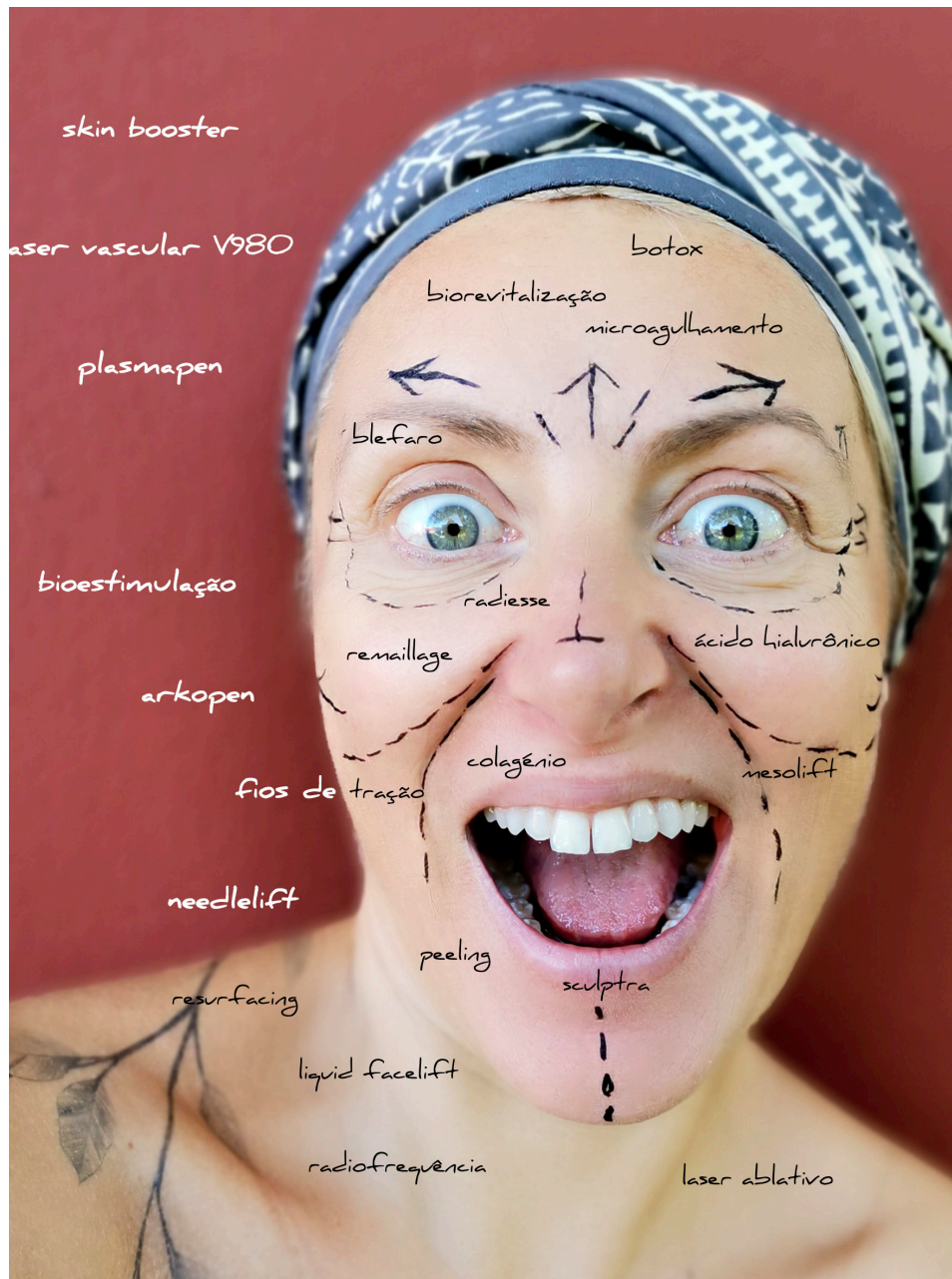


Figure 5 © Chiara Pussetti



Figure 6 © Chiara Pussetti

A divorced, 63-year-old heterosexual woman who had used hair dye and make-up and had Botox and filler injections explained:

“My face is wrinkled, my skin is sagging, my body has lost tone. But I am still alive, I want to fall in love and find a partner to spend the rest of my life with. Most men are looking for young women. That’s why we all lie about our age on Tinder. No one is looking for 60-year-old women on Tinder. That’s why I do aesthetic medicine treatments and surgeries, Botox, hyaluronic acid fillers, lasers, and for the body, radiofrequency and mesotherapy. I am seriously thinking about having a facelift. And maybe vaginal rejuvenation. Finding a man is one thing, keeping him is another.”



Figure 7 © Chiara Pussetti

Similarly, a 50-year-old heterosexual woman, divorced but recently in a new relationship with a 43-year-old man, said:

“My boyfriend is younger than me and I have to take care of myself or risk losing him. I’m going for rethreading 🧵 It means I need to be repaired. It’s like restoration. But rethreading refers to repairing the surface of worn (car) tyres. I use this term for fun because we sometimes use it in my family. I have already booked a vaginal rejuvenation with the surgeon, then a mini-lifting of the neck and a blepharoplasty. I look at myself in the mirror and examine the ruins. I want to be myself again.”

Cristina, a 62-year-old teacher, said:

“I look old, but I feel like I have thirty years. Sometimes I see my image reflected in a shop window and I think, ‘But who is this lady?’ It feels like

she's not me. I don't recognise myself. I don't look like the image I have in my head. My ideal self is the younger Cristina. My real self is who I am right now. I don't want to look in the mirror and see my mother. I want to see myself. The dissociation I feel is this, between what I think I am and what I appear to be. One day you'll understand: you'll be old enough not to recognise yourself in the mirror."

Maria, a 64-year-old university researcher, confirmed this feeling of gender/body/age dissociation:

"My face is what I see in the mirror. My self-image. That's why I make aesthetic changes to my face: to continue to correspond to the mental state that hasn't changed, because it's my way of being. I want to continue to correspond to myself. To recognise in the mirror the person I think I still am. Try to do something now, while you are still in time to preserve your appearance. Don't wait until you no longer recognise yourself in the mirror. Don't stop looking at yourself if you don't want others to stop looking at you".

Feminine beauty and its imperatives

Forever young, I want to be forever young
(Alphaville, 'Forever Young', 1984)

The beauty industry - with its economic lexicon of expressions such as 'having or losing value, preserving, monetising, betting on, devaluing, enhancing, arresting, developing' - reminds us that if we were thinner, firmer, smoother and younger we would have a more passionate relationship, a better career, more friends and success; in short, we would be happier people. The ideal of feminine beauty that I was taught to cherish includes a slender, delicate and sensual figure, with abundant, shiny hair (as long as it is neat and tied up in elaborate hairstyles), flawless porcelain skin, free of blemishes and imperfections. 'Fat is cute, beauty is thin', my grandmother used to say. She also used to say: 'It's no good to be young without beauty, or beautiful without youth'. Then she'd look at me eating biscuits and say: 'OK, fine, eat your snack! Blessed youth! Youth is beauty itself!' And again: 'Enjoy it, my granddaughter, because the beauty of youth is a gift that nothing can replace'. My parents were proud of me because I was a good student, but also - and perhaps above all - because I was a beautiful child, and their friends praised me.

This is how I learned that being beautiful is a value and an obligation that goes hand in hand with youth. This association is present in many proverbs, popular sayings and other commonplace things that I have collected over the years: 'Youth and beauty are worth their weight in gold'; 'Youth in itself is beauty'; 'Beauty and youth are a woman's most important assets'. The world around me taught me that youth is even more precious than beauty. I often heard it said at home and among my peers: 'Young women are beautiful on their own'; 'When you are young, everyone is beautiful'; 'That woman was a beautiful woman, but her lover was twenty years younger, of course there was no comparison'; 'Marilyn Monroe's luck was that she died young and her beauty remained eternal'; or 'Poor Brigitte Bardot, she should hide'.

According to the women I interviewed, getting fat and getting older are the most dangerous enemies of female beauty. Their interviews reveal a clear discourse on the suffering necessary to maintain a good appearance, along with several martial metaphors, images of restoration and recovery of buildings, as well as aesthetic economies and moral imperatives of beauty. 'A woman must suffer to be beautiful, pain is the price of beauty; a woman is made to suffer, to endure pain, to close her mouth, to shape her body', said Teresa, 42-years-old. Maintaining a youthful, attractive appearance involves sacrifices,

economic efforts, strict rules and routines, even health risks, but it is necessary to avoid disappearing into social invisibility. As in a hall of mirrors, the excess of visibility of time in the mirror of aesthetic doctors and the gaze of patients with whom I spoke in the waiting rooms of clinics came together with the recognition of the invisibility that my interviewees had spoken to me about.

In that mirror, a constant presence in my interviews, I began to examine my face in detail, noticing minutiae in my features that the medical eye, with the force of its authority, had transformed for me into defects in need of correction. I might even have remembered to put on moisturiser or sunscreen, but suddenly I felt irresponsible and careless. I explained that I didn't want to change the way I looked, that I didn't like 'botoxed' faces, 'duck-billed' lips, cheek fillers that gave me a 'cat's cheek' effect. The doctors reassured me about 'natural' results and gave me several alternatives:

"On your face it would just be baby Botox, don't worry, or a bio-revitalisation. It could even be something very gentle like micro-needling. Nothing invasive. Maybe Radiesse or Sculptra. It would just be a softening, you'd still be yourself, but an improved version of yourself. It's like you've had a long holiday". (Manuel, dermatologist)

"It would be to lighten the skin, refresh it a bit, tighten it up. It's just a few injections, it's not difficult. Here we have to replace the lost volume with hyaluronic acid... but you can't get away from Botox (botulinum toxin): you don't want those awful glabellar lines that make you look angry and very masculine. Let's put a little on the eyebrows to open up the eye and take away that tired look". (Miguel, dermatologist)

"None of the hyaluronic acid fillers that make everyone look the same, all puffy. Absolutely not, only collagen stimulators for volume, so your body reacts and does its job again. These are new generation products. Like Radiesse. The name says it all, doesn't it?" (Pierre, dermatologist)

"Fillers and botulinum toxin are the most common, but the last thing I recommend. You can also use your body's own resources, your own blood. Let's do platelet rich plasma, which stimulates cell growth factors and promotes collagen synthesis. In my opinion, it would be radiofrequency before, vitamin mesolift after. And I recommend Botox and hyaluronic acid, in a single session. In winter, think about a good peel or ablative laser resurfacing for the enlarged pores on the forehead, which are really terrible". (Sofia, dermatologist).

I was lost in this array of options and conflicting advice. Only one message came through loud and clear: 'I deserve and must value myself', 'love myself', 'take care of myself' and 'be a better version of myself'. One injection and I look less tired, more relaxed, like I've come back from a long holiday. My life is still stressful, of course, but I can project an air of youthfulness, calm and serenity. When I decided to have my first 'baby Botox', I found myself in an ethical and intellectual conflict. How could I participate in the same discourse that I critically analyse, that of the aesthetic dictatorships over women's bodies, the myth of perfection at all costs? The feminist sociologist Dana Berkowitz, speaking of 'cognitive dissonance' (2017: 95), also reports an analogous reflection on the conflict she experienced between her activism denouncing the dangerous consequences of beauty culture and her consumption of botulinum toxin.

I would say more about the confluence of the different roles required of me. Chiara/anthropologist is the one who discusses the social construction of gender, the power relations implicit in aesthetic hierarchies and the disciplinary practices that shape the female body. Chiara/woman is the one who, in her daily life, nevertheless reproduces all the micro-practices that constitute the performance of femininity, who wants to preserve the beauty and the

power of attraction of youth, who is afraid of losing value with age. Photo 8 shows the moment when the aesthetic doctor, after identifying my main facial expression lines and signs of ageing, marks the points on my face where the botulinum toxin is to be injected. In order for the doctor to mark these points, a mirror is first placed in front of the patient's face so that she can identify her wrinkles.



Figure 8 © Chiara Pussetti

Then, back in front of the mirror, the doctor asks the patient to wrinkle her forehead and close her eyes and mouth to highlight the areas of contraction and wrinkling. At the same time, the doctor points out all the aspects of the patient's face that show signs of ageing. The skin is lax, tired and dull. The patient enters a process of hyper-consciousness and hyper-visualisation of the ageing process. Photos 9 to 12 are examples of the condensation of messages from the beauty, health and fitness industries about the cosmetic rejuvenation process that I have included in my research. For months, I listened to doctors recommend products that would make my skin 'beautiful', 'perfect', 'better', 'excellent', 'prestigious', 'younger' and 'divine' like 'porcelain'. Of all these, Botox promised a real miracle: freezing my muscles, my expression, my age.

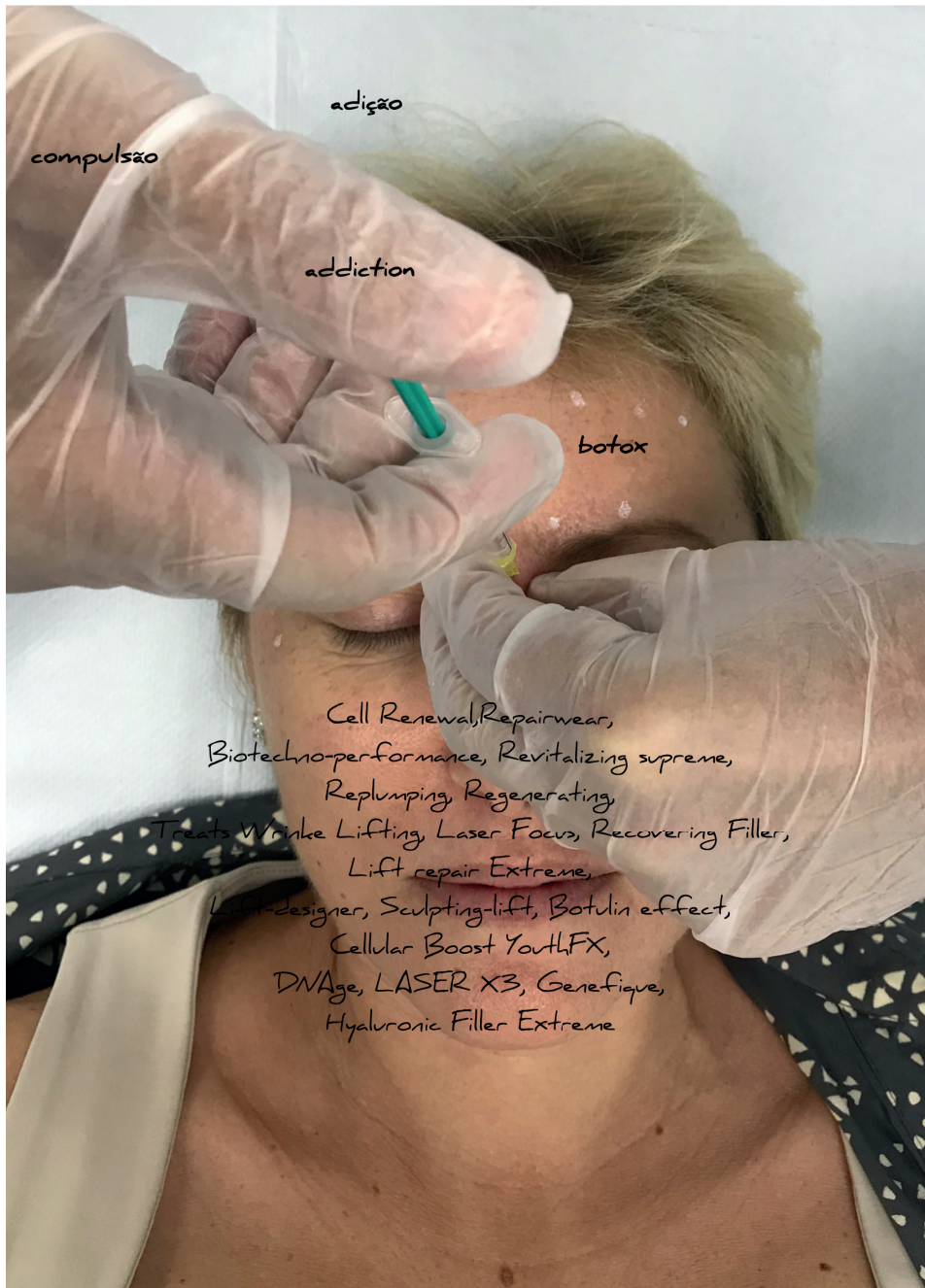


Figure 9 © Chiara Pussetti



Figure 10 © Chiara Pussetti

All the women I interviewed in cosmetic dermatology clinics, where only minimally invasive anti-ageing procedures are performed, expressed dissatisfaction with one or more aspects of their facial appearance. The most commonly cited source of dissatisfaction was the appearance of wrinkles, which more than half of the women described as 'sad-looking' because they 'indicate age'. For example, Luisa, a 67-year-old divorced and retired woman, said:

"I saw a picture of Sarah Jessica Parker on Facebook the other day. She looks terrible. She's got terrible wrinkles. Why do I get Restylane and Botox injections? For my morale, let me put it this way. I want to look younger. I want to look a lot better than they do".

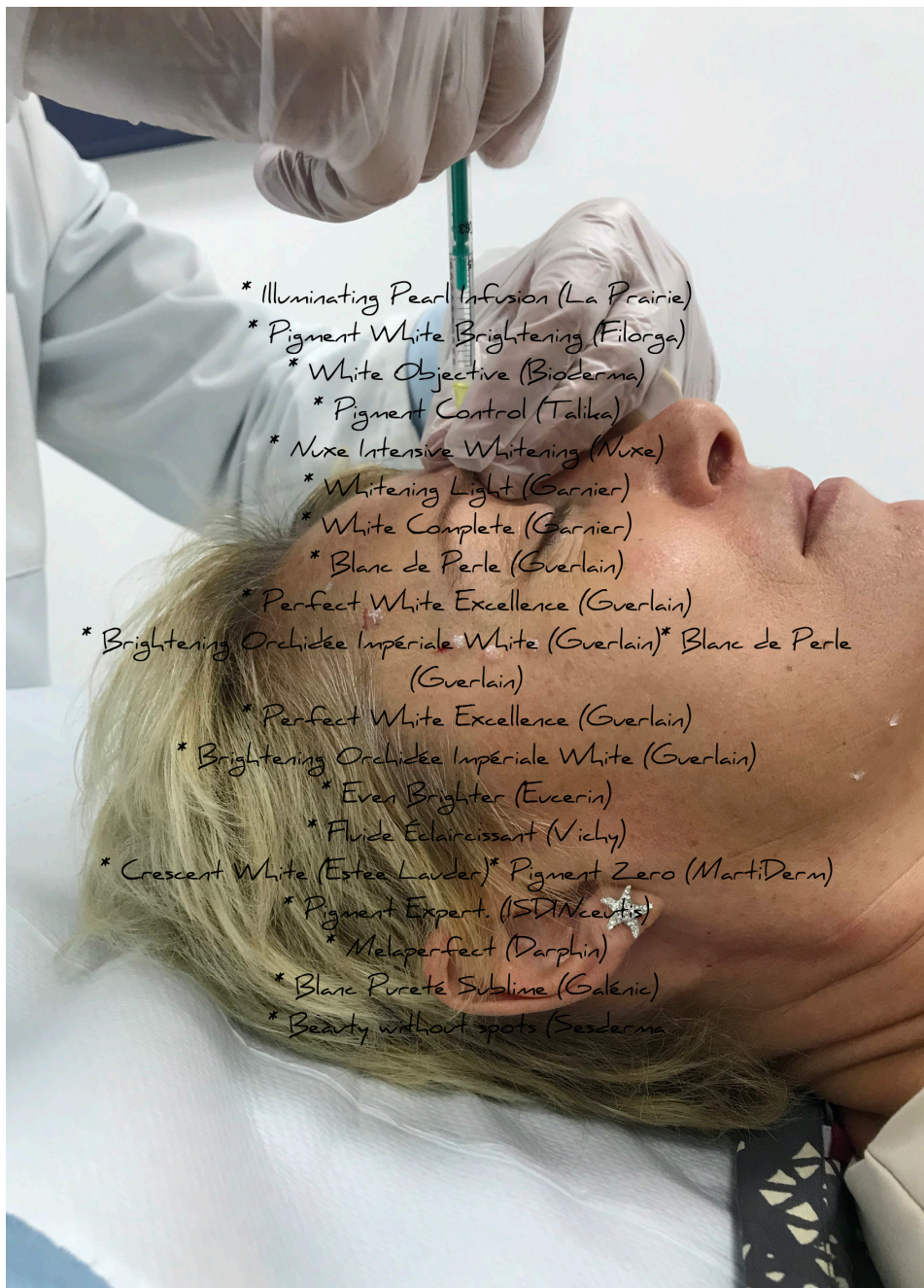


Figure 11 © Chiara Pussetti

Maria, a 65-year-old married university professor, agreed:

“Mentally, I still feel young and full of life. Aesthetically, it's not so easy, not least because I don't feel so confident anymore... I've never had any problems with my body. I like to use my body. But there is a contradiction. I notice that something has changed and now I want less and less light in my room...”

Luísa, a 68-year-old divorced woman in a new romantic relationship, persisted:

“I've never liked old people. Imagine what it's like to look at myself in the mirror and start to look like an old woman. I don't want to give in to the easy acceptance of old age. Accepting old age means growing old. To

grow old lazily. Like those who always talk about illness. I can't stand it. If there's one subject that's completely unsexy, it's talking about illness. I don't want to associate with people who are completely lazy and relaxed with themselves. And I'm not like that. It's a question of aesthetics, but it's also a question of coherence with who I am."

As much as my interviewees expressed their own internalised ageism, emphasising the value of undergoing procedures to look younger, they also spoke of old age as a privilege. Luisa always maintained:

"I don't want to be just an old lady. At the same time, we are lucky to live long enough to get wrinkles. Some people don't". Recalling a complicated operation she underwent in her youth, she continued, "I almost didn't make it to 25, so every day is a bonus and I'm 68 this year! Just stay positive and continue to enjoy life!"

Botox and hyaluronic acid injections are almost painless procedures that carry some risks and the effects are not immediate. A few days after the injection of this miraculous poison, the face is no longer able to perform the movements that cause wrinkles for a period of up to six months. In urban Portugal, the use of Botox has spread enormously in the last five years and its cultural significance is widespread. While until a few years ago the use of Botox was almost exclusively the prerogative of actresses, models or, in any case, women whose professions required the maintenance of a youthful appearance, today the use of Botox is much more horizontal. Praised for its reliability, relative affordability and convenience, Botox promises youth administered in a syringe over a lunch break, without surgery or downtime. Almost all the women over forty I interviewed in Lisbon now have Botox, or are at least curious and open to the possibility of trying it. Botox is both an insurance policy against future facial wrinkles and a fountain of youth.

Using Botox is not just about appearing in the present in the same form as you appeared in the past; it is also about ensuring that your future appearance is reminiscent of the present. However, the feeling of cheating time is temporary. The effect quickly disappears and everything returns to the way it was before. This is why my interviewees talk about addiction. The result is there and you can see it and like it. But it disappears quickly. A Botox user wants to get it again and possibly for longer. So, she asks for more of the toxin to be injected or for it to be combined with other molecules, such as hyaluronic acid, to try to improve the final result. Botox essentially turns the inevitability of ageing into a quantifiable, technical, predictable and reversible process; quarterly injections to top up the toxin.

In my experience, the first changes appear within a fortnight. I observed the small changes in my face, hardly noticeable, except for the blockage of the corrugator and procerus muscles between the eyebrows (in the glabella). After a week, I felt more rested and relaxed, with a more open and smooth appearance. I wasn't younger, but I was more beautiful and radiant, so much so that I reduced the amount of make-up I used, as I do when I'm on holiday. With a few injections, I had achieved the same effect I was trying to achieve by altering my digital photos with skin enhancing filters to reduce wrinkles and dark circles. The only problem is that the effect is fleeting and temporary, and after four or five months everything returns to its original state.

There is then an immediate desire to re-inject the products in order to restore the tightened aspect of the injection results. I had often heard about addiction and compulsive use of fillers and Botox, and suddenly I realised how difficult it would be for me to stop. I was already in the process of becoming addicted. The "shelf life" of my Botox expired during the period of confinement due to the Covid-19 pandemic. As soon as the deconfinement was announced, I rang my dermatologist to arrange my next treatment. I was told that I could

be put on a waiting list as the number of requests had increased exponentially and the clinic's phone was ringing off the hook. Cosmetics, aesthetic medicine, hairdressing and beauty salons reopened on 4 May 2020, a fortnight before all other services. Everyone I spoke to was eager to get some kind of aesthetic service as the first stage of their return to social life. I immediately confirmed my Botox and filler sessions, the beautician and the hairdresser. Aesthetic medicine had already been incorporated into the normal routines of my beauty regime, such as hair care, waxing, manicures and pedicures. The only question was: would I talk about it publicly or not? Would I admit it, write about it? Would I assume that I have a chemical as well as a digital body, that I embody liquid biotechnologies, along with the models of beauty they represent, underpinned by the aesthetics industry and the multiple power relations involved?

The anthropologist in the mirror

We have a narrow and elusive standard of beauty that marginalizes and excludes older women, and women are shamed when their ageing bodies and faces no longer display qualities of youthfulness and normative sexual attractiveness. Maintaining a capital of beauty associated with the attributes of youth is both an obligation and a necessity for many women, especially my interlocutors. However, they must not be vain or superficial, they must not admit to investing time and money in beauty treatments and cosmetic products, or at least they must find plausible excuses to justify the investment. According to my interviews, women who did not invest in maintaining their youth felt judged: they were labelled 'irresponsible', 'careless', 'unattractive', 'lazy' and 'unfeminine'. Women who fought against time were judged as 'superficial', 'vain', 'unintelligent', 'unfeminist', complicit and slaves to the beauty models of patriarchal society.

Most of the women interviewed hid their use of aesthetic medicine, claiming - even in the face of evidence - that they had never done anything and that perfect skin depends on a balanced diet and a healthy lifestyle. It takes time for them to feel confident enough to confess their sin: the financial investment in maintaining youth and beauty. The reasons for the reluctance to confess to aesthetic procedures are many: from the attempt to create the illusion of total 'naturalness' to the shame of having spent money on 'vanity'; from the embarrassment of revealing one's real age to the stigma that this quest for beauty can create in more critical or militant feminist contexts. Even the few women who spoke calmly about the aesthetic procedures they had undergone always gave 'morally acceptable' reasons to justify this choice: personal and family issues (separation, divorce, illness, the psychological need to take care of oneself, low self-esteem, or even relationships with younger partners); professional issues (the importance of image at work, public relations, media exposure); even clinical reasons (Botox to reduce migraines, laser for sun damage, vaginal rejuvenation to increase sexual pleasure, blepharoplasty to improve eyesight, rhinoplasty to breathe better).

Rather than being ashamed of my perceptions of my own ageing body and my experience of anti-ageing procedures, I found it more analytically productive to use my subjective experience as a resource. I made myself visible and reflexively engaged in the research process and in this text. My decision to reveal the aesthetic manipulations of my face to my research informants obviously had an impact on the fieldwork. Sharing the experience immediately created a greater ease in telling stories and confiding desires, cultivating an atmosphere of community and trust. There were even suggestions and invitations from friends and colleagues to accompany them for various rejuvenation treatments.

The research process, which involved exposing my face and body to the close and judgmental gaze of aesthetic doctors and beauty clinic patients, and subjecting my face to torturous treatments, drew my attention to my wrinkles. My face and body were defined as flawed by the medical scrutiny of beauty

'experts'. As the research progressed, I grew closer to the perspective of my subjects and began to see my body through their lens. Over time, I came to understand the emotions of the very women I had initially set out to study as a detached observer. However, as a social scientist aware of sexist and ageist social norms, I felt both foolish and guilty for succumbing to the temptation to conform to a doubly discriminatory norm by reproducing in my body the gestures dictated by the consumer culture I was criticising.

Within a week of the procedure, I was satisfied with the results. I feel refreshed, more beautiful and a little younger. I felt both secretly pleased and guilty about my decision. After four months, I began to see the effects of the toxin wearing off and the fine lines on my face reappearing. I found myself at a moral crossroads: on the one hand, my critical feminist ethics, which led me to refuse to become what my interviewees called a 'Botox addict'; on the other, the pleasure of seeing myself younger and more beautiful. In the first case, I would have failed the social prescriptions of femininity. In the second case, I would have failed feminism.

I was aware that Botox produces frozen female bodies, linking body and technology in the construction of an unreal ideal. I was aware that women's appearance can be both a source of their power and a source of their shame, and that ageing is a crucial threat to the embodied cultural capital of beauty. I was aware that I was reproducing a white and upper-middle-class female body associated with a (hetero)normative ideal of femininity and a specific class status marked by the economic possibility of self-production and self-transformation. I was aware that my aesthetic choice was reinforcing the same white middle-class beauty norm that I was critiquing. I was critically analysing the ideals and discourses of a society that defines women's subjectivities, identities and sense of self through their bodies and appearances. At the same time, I could not deny my desire to remain beautiful and young.

Photos 13 to 16 represent my reflections on this process of participant immersion in the field and conscious infiltration of the biotechnology I was studying, deep inside my body. I decided to photograph myself covered by a mask to represent my constant effort to correspond to social expectations, related to the different roles I occupy: mother, wife, lover, friend, intellectual, lecturer and the list could go on. I was interested in showing that we all wear masks, and the time comes when we cannot remove them without removing some of our own skin.

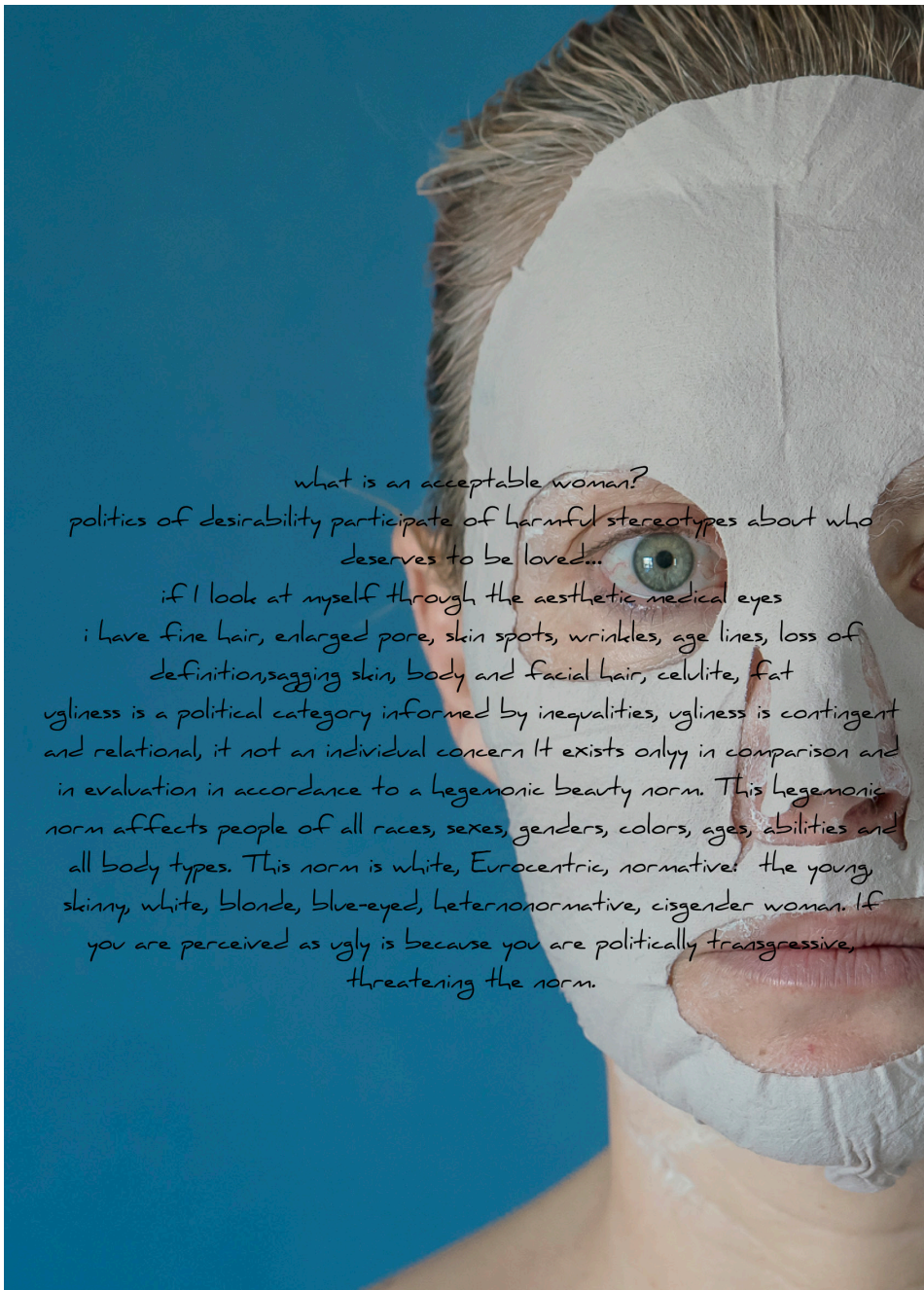


Figure 13 © Chiara Pussetti

Appearances and social masks allow us to survive in society: we are to be both simple and complex; we can reveal a part of who we are or impersonate someone richer, more attractive, more serious, more eccentric or more conventional. Self-making and self-promotion have never been stronger and desired than our current moment. Ideas of conformity or pressures to fit into the right mould, style or body shape are very present: we are constantly enacting a renovation of ourselves in a process of 'ameliorating' or 'bettering'. Everyone dreams of appearing at their best, may that be: excellent, stronger, leaner, younger, more fashionable, more beautiful or more powerful, or otherwise 'better'.

Driven by fears of becoming invisible and irrelevant as I aged and motivated by a desire to preserve my privilege of beauty, I resorted to Botox. I am an anthropologist and a feminist, as well as a woman with her insecurities and fragilities. I have experienced the allure and benefits of Botox as well as the



Social masks are a wound and a burden, a force and a weapon.
Appearances and social masks allow us to survive in society: we are to be
both simple and complex; we can reveal a part of what we are or
impersonate someone richer, more attractive, more serious, more
eccentric or more conventional

The labour of decolonizing beauty norms is structural and involves addressing
discourses of desirability, love, codes of social value assigned to certain bodies

Figure 14 © Chiara Pussetti

shame of using it, the conflict of knowing that I am vulnerable if I succumb to the very pressures I critique, and the complicity with beauty norms that compete not only with a powerful industry that profits from women's quest for physical perfection, but also with a post-feminist narrative that emphasizes beautification practices as a source of empowerment. This text then represents not only other women's experiences of their ageing bodies in the mirror, but also my own.

Do not regret growing older. It is a privilege denied to many. Always remember that.



Figure 15 © Chiara Pussetti

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The Neglected Reflections of Vulvar Pain.

An anthropological research-action through Art and Science

Visual Ethnography

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Abstract

Italian society does not acknowledge vulvar pain sufferers as patients affected by legitimate pain: the condition is not supported by the national healthcare system, besides being medically unexplored and socially invisibilized. Patients do not see themselves as deserving care until sexual intercourse is compromised. Vulva health gains awareness when feminine sexual performance deviates from heteronormative models and coital imperatives.

In a feminist gendered perspective, this paper presents the artistic and scientific exhibition “Vulvar Pain”, based on anthropological research to explore vulvar pain experiences through qualitative participatory methods. Research partners co-produced symbolic handicrafts revealing the difficulties of being seen as bodies deserving care. This effort aims to present scientific results through a public engagement event, including arts, workshops, and roundtables with health professionals and patient associations.

The exhibition “Vulvar Pain” advocates considering genital pain beyond the cultural taboo of sexuality, privileging visual narratives to facilitate dialogue between biomedical discourse, social sciences, and the embodied knowledge of sufferers. Considering the multiple lens of this case study, the paper presents collaborations between ethnographers, artists and designers, engaging in the co-construction of new forms of knowledge that can be seen, touched, smelled, sat upon, and circulated to unfold vulvar taboos.

Keywords

Vulvodynia; Pain; Sexuality; Health discrimination; Art

The author

Federica Manfredi completed her PhD degree in Medical Anthropology at the Institute of Social Sciences - University of Lisbon (2022), working on extreme body modifications and experimental qualitative methodologies. Member of the project *Excel-The Pursuit of Excellence*, she provided outreaching activities with the workshop series *The Hacked Barbie*, and she co-organized the art exhibition “Be F**King Perfect” (Lisbon, 2022). Today she is researcher at the University of Torino exploring the stigma of vulvar pain conditions and developing multi-sensory approaches for the restitution of scientific data to the public.

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Introduction: vulvas fighting for their mirror's image

The mirror is a surface designed to reflect an image. Often, we internalize the reflection as reality, representing the way we appear to others and, consequently, how we perceive ourselves. The mirror plays a role in constructing our self-awareness and, in this sense, supports reflections – meaning the cognitive processes we might develop about ourselves.

This paper aims to present a case study of an artistic and scientific exhibition dedicated to vulvar pain that took place in Italy in early 2024, and it was based on an anthropological research that explored vulvar pain meanings with Italian women. The discussion seeks to explore the different shades of visibility, understood in terms of self-awareness, that corporeality might have, especially concerning feminine genitals. The exhibition, titled “Vulvar Pain. Art. Science. Resistance” is based on post-doctoral research on the medicalization of women's sexuality, and ethnographic data indicate that the understanding of vulvar pain is an experience delegitimized culturally and medically unexplored, hindering women's access to sexual health. Sufferers often do not perceive vulvar pain as an alarm signal or a condition deserving medical attention; they normalize painful sexual intercourses, postponing medical consultations. When the pain becomes unbearable, and sufferers seek gynecological advice, their suffering is usually disqualified by practitioners. Clinical practice reproduces cultural biases that construct vulvar pain as an illegitimate suffering, devaluing the illness experience and denying social recognition (Buonaguidi, Perin 2023; Shallcross et al. 2019).

Looking at ourselves in a mirror is an everyday action we perform automatically, often without paying it much attention. While it may seem obvious, individuals need to be educated to recognize the reflected image. In other words, they need to have the cultural sensitivity to ‘see’ what they are looking at. In this sense, the act of looking in a mirror is not merely mechanical but a matter of interpretation. The image reflected by the mirror is shaped by how individuals have been socialized and how they interpret the experience of being in the world (Csorda 1990; Merleau-Ponty 1945). The expression ‘in the eye of the beholder’ is usually associated with the recognition of beauty, illustrating how the perception of an image is molded by the adopted perspective. Therefore, the observer influences the mirror's work, especially concerning the cultural values and meanings associated with the act of observing our own image. However, the individual is not the sole actor in this process. The looking-glass self theory (Cooley 2009) posits that human behaviors are shaped based on the anticipation of how others will perceive us, suggesting that self-image is profoundly connected to social interactions rather than a concept developed in solitude. Applying this theory to the ethnographical case underscores that the meanings of vulvar pain (and the patients' perception of pain) result from a collective process of cultural signification, including sufferers' partners, the family entourage, friends, peers and health specialists. The silence around the vulvar pain and vulvar health perpetuates unequal access to genital health for individuals with vulvas. This silence is socially co-enacted by the members of the society, in different measures, as an accepted behavior.

In the title of this paper, *The Neglected Reflection of Vulvar Pain*, the term ‘neglected’ serves as a linguistic play, inviting a dual interpretation. Firstly, it highlights the unfortunate reality that the reflection or consideration of vulvar pain has been overlooked, ignored, or not granted the attention it deserves within broader societal discussions. Secondly, the term subtly alludes to the metaphorical concept of a mirror that does not reflect, emphasizing the hidden nature of vulvar pain, its invisibility, and the need to bring this concealed issue to light. This dual sense sets the stage for our exploration, utilizing an artistic and scientific exhibition as an anthropological case study to unveil and understand the nuances surrounding the meanings of vulvar diseases.

Peeling back the veil in vulvas

I've had pain down there for years now. Three or four, I don't remember exactly. It's very difficult to manage my daily life. I can't go out with my friends whenever I want, I can't ride a bicycle or go to the beach... And then, my relationship with my partner is hard; I don't have a normal sexual life anymore. And I'm just 26 years old! Of course, my partner has certain needs. I try to avoid it [penetrative sex] as much as possible, but sometimes I know I have to do it. My partner is understanding and doesn't pressure me, but I know it's hard for him because he's a man. When we do have it, I hope it will be quick. We use a lot of lubricant, but it burns every time. I know that later it will continue to burn, and I'll be in pain for a few days, but what can I do? (interview with Sara, 26 years old).

In this paper, I argue that the invisibilization of vulvar pain is linked to the social construction of its meanings, which devalue women's experiences of pain, particularly regarding sexuality and the anatomical knowledge of the genital apparatus. Using the metaphor of looking in a mirror, the anthropological case study reveals that vulva health lacks social consideration beyond the context of penetration. Adopting an intersectional approach and considering the coital heteronormative imperative, data indicate that feminine genital pain garners attention only when the penetration of a penis in a vagina (PIV) becomes impracticable. At that juncture, vulvas metaphorically claim their image in front of the mirror, becoming the focal points of patients' narratives that demand care and cure. Suffering becomes the price to pay for visibility. The possibility of being seen and heard initiates reflection, nurturing the demand for social visibility for a pain that has long been dismissed.

The Italian national health care system (SSN) does not recognize vulvar painful conditions such as vulvodynia or pudendal neuropathy. This means that social care does not provide economic support for medical consultations, exams, pharmacological therapies, and the disease is not part of educational training in medical schools. Only in July 2021 did patient associations initiate the legal process to include these diseases in the SSN, following a previous unsuccessful attempt in 2014 (Ferritti 2023). The institutional silence around vulvar pain is associated with the moralized meanings of Western society regarding genitals, a body part that is highly controversial in its socialization. It is considered the epitome of a private body part, whose nudity in social places is problematic (Górnicka 2016), and is even forbidden by Italian law as 'obscene act'.

Genitals also attract a creative array of epithets and periphrasis just to name them, and anatomical terminology is far from being used with a sense of neutrality. The exhibition's original name was planned to be "Vulve in Mostra" [Showing the Vulvas], a title referring both to the artistic exhibition and the feminization of 'mostro' [monster] to connect with the cultural taboo surrounding this part. However, the proposal was discouraged by medical partners because it was deemed 'disrespectful for women' and 'too pornographic' (fieldwork notes, October 2023). This ethnographic episode effectively illustrates the taboo surrounding female genitals to the extent that the anatomical term provokes discomfort and concerns of immoral intentions even among those trained to cure human bodies. In common language, the term 'vulva' is almost completely removed, as Liv Strömquist noted in high school science books and advertisement of products for 'intimate itching' (Strömquist 2044: 40-41). This intuition was confirmed during the fieldwork, that the next paragraphs will present along with the artistic exhibition of its results. During interviews, only political activists and some clinicians used anatomical terms for genitals. In the interview except opening this paragraph, Sara is the anonymized name of a patient: she is a university student in health studies and she is familiar with anatomical terms. Nevertheless, she refers to her genitals with the expression

“down there”, creating room to wonder how linguistic choices contribute to the invisibilization of vulvas and their experiences.

From a constructivist approach to cultures and languages, the absence of a name for a concept or an emotion indicates a lack of cultural richness, similar to what has been observed regarding the transformation of certain behavioral codes to deal with death (Manfredi 2022) or the lack of a law to identify abuses, as with obstetric violence (Quattrocchi 2019). The absence of genitals from the social scene, which entails the lack of open discussions, questions, and observations regarding them, is, I believe, connected with a cultural thinness that contributes to the normalization of feminine genital pain in solitude. Individuals internalize social norms that forbid discussing this part of the body and, consequently, everything related to it, including the pain, do not have space on public narratives. Vulvar suffering is privatized, becoming unsharable with others, until it is completely invisibilized from a social perspective.

Nevertheless, the possibility to experience genitals in private is problematic too, as recent research on sexual behaviors among pre-adolescents and young adults indicates concerning the moral stigmatization of self-erotic practices (Scarcelli 2020, Foust et al. 2022). Given that contemporary Western culture lacks a rich cultural discourse about genitals (and sex) beyond a moralized approach, the absence of scientific knowledge and preventive protocols to monitor genitals is unsurprising, as they are culturally influenced. In this sense, while efforts for preventive and educational campaigns have been realized in the last decades concerning the importance of periodical self-exams to prevent breast cancer, very few efforts have been dedicated to gynecological tumors, which are often diagnosed late (AAVV, 2022).

Specifically, vulvar cancer occurs in the outer surface area of feminine genitals, a body part that could be easily inspected by the person with a mirror. However, this is a source of self-body knowledge that nobody met in the fieldwork have been educated to perform. Even though vulvar inspections were a well-known practice, especially in the feminist self-help movement (Murphy 2004), today girls are not systematically educated to look and inspect their vulvas. This is unsurprising, since they do not even mention genitals directly. As ironically titled in an article *When did the vulva become obscene?* (Schwentzel 2019), feminine genitals are often missing from the social scene because they are perceived as taboo. The geography of the body parts suggests a hierarchy in their socialization, encompassing different levels of appropriateness in their social exposure (Kirmayer 1992; Le Hénaff et al. 2007). However, how can individuals with vulvas construct anatomical knowledge about their genitals and gain the confidence to initiate medical consultations when societal norms discourage open discussions?

The exhibition “Vulvar Pain. Art. Science. Resistance” adopts a visual language to contribute to the cultural raise of awareness concerning the lack of recognition of vulvar health and to facilitate a re-signification of the genital pain experience as a legitimate form of suffering. Vulvar pain can result in chronic pain, worsened by the delay of diagnosis and the absence of medical treatment protocols, highlighting the urgency of prevention programs, research to improve scientific knowledge, and cultural awareness. In a research-action perspective of applied anthropology, the exhibition project involved four different artistic installations that this paper is going to present, discussing the multiplicity of forms of knowledge co-produced by the ethnographer in collaboration with the designer Sofia Rampanelli, the artist Lucia Bessone, and 17 research participants who joined a creative laboratory to explore vulvar pain experiences by manipulating pieces of cloth to symbolically express silenced aspects of the pain.

An exhibition merging art and science

The exhibition “Vulvar Pain. Art. Science. Resistance” emerged as a convergence of artistic and scientific elements, featuring multiple contributions.

Inaugurated on a winter Friday in February 2024, I curated the exhibition that took place in the main hall of the Luigi Einaudi University Campus in Torino, Italy (Fig. 1). Housed within Norman Foster's futuristic design along the banks of the Dora River, the campus provided an urban space characterized by undulated lines, from high glass façades to hillside gardens.



Figure 1 © The exhibition Vulvar Pain at the Campus Einaudi, Torino 2024. Photo by Francesco Dragone, 2024.

This exhibition, an extension of the medical anthropological research titled “The Cloth of Pain”, that I developed as post-doctoral research from March 2023 to February 2024, sought to amplify the voices of those affected by vulvar pain. Its goal was to act as a dynamic catalyst for cultural transformation, reshaping how society perceives and signifies vulvar pain.

Conditions such as vulvodynia, endometriosis, pelvic contractions, and other pelvic-vulvar pathologies significantly impact the quality of life for individuals assigned female at birth (AFAB), transgender individuals, and those with fluid identities. Similar to other forms of chronic pain (Moretti 2013), vulvar diseases often exist in the shadows, with sufferers hesitating to recognize symptoms as warranting medical attention due to limited biomedical knowledge. Consequently, a society is shaped where many, including health specialists, patients, and their social circles, fail to acknowledge vulvar pain as a legitimate medical condition or *disease* (Kleinman 1985). However, the repercussions of vulvar diseases are substantial, leading to social isolation and affecting economic, professional, relational, and sexual aspects of sufferers’ lives.

“Vulvar Pain. Art. Science. Resistance” emerged as a response to ethnography, serving as an act of militant public engagement targeting citizens, clinicians, patients, their family members, friends, co-workers, and all individuals with vulva or without it. Its purpose was to dismantle stigmas and taboos that hinder the care, treatment, and discussion of vulvar pain.

The research process and exhibition project were carried out under the scientific supervision of Raffaella Ferrero Camoletto, who pioneered male studies in Italy, particularly concerning the medicalization of sexuality for erectile dysfunction (Ferrero Camoletto, Bertone, 2016). A group of fourteen BA and MA students eager to support the exhibition’s organization from November 2023.

We activated an educational program tailored to their requests, forming the organizing committee, self-dubbed “The Vulva-Team”. The committee also benefited from the engagement of two talented researchers from the University of Torino: Alessia Toldo, a social geographer with interests in the socialization of pain and the geography of the body, and Angela Zottola, a socio-linguist and gender studies researcher exploring the medicalization of controversial bodies (Zottola et al. 2023).

The exhibition project received funding as a public engagement initiative from the Department of Cultures, Politics and Society at the University of Torino and the exhibition was strategically located on the university campus to prioritize student access, recognizing that individuals aged 20-40 face a higher risk of developing chronic pain related to undiagnosed vulvar diseases. While designed with students in mind, the event was open to the public, extending its reach beyond the university community.

Inaugurated on February 23, 2024, the exhibition occupied the main hall of the campus for a duration of two weeks, offering the option to book guided tours. To extend the exhibition’s life beyond the confines of university spaces, an online platform, www.dolorevulvare.a.s.r.blogspot.com, was created by the students involved. The online space not only hosted visual content but also featured audio records that verbalized the exhibition panels. This addition aimed to facilitate access for individuals with visual disabilities and those unable to physically attend the campus. The opening ceremony was enriched by scientific activities, including roundtable discussions with health professionals, researchers, and patient associations. It featured the screening of the documentary *Our Body Burns* by Angela Tullio Cataldo (2022) and a series of participative laboratories. These labs sought to challenge perceptions of vulva anatomy and explore the role of cultural taboos in shaping our relationship with genitals. Participation in these activities was limited, and virtual booking options were offered. Additionally, provisions were made for Italian sign language translation for interested participants.

The exhibition, encapsulated in the captivating imagery of the publicly announced flyer (Fig. 2), embarked on a nuanced journey that seamlessly blended artistic expression and scientific inquiry.



Figure 2 © Exhibition flyer, Photo by Federica Manfredi and Sofia Rampanelli, 2024.

Within this immersive experience, four distinctive contributions unfolded, each offering a unique perspective on the intricate tapestry of vulvar pain.

- a. *La Stoffa del Dolore* [The Cloth of Pain]: This narrative exploration stems from a year-long ethnographic endeavor that I realized, commencing in March 2023 and concluding in February 2024. Its purpose was to disseminate anthropological insights into the profound meanings woven into the fabric of vulvar pain experiences.
- b. *Sediamoci con la Vulvodinia* [Sitting with Vulvodinia]: A visionary project in exhibition design, conceived by Sofia Rampanelli, became the driving force behind the entire “Vulvar Pain” initiative. It transcended mere aesthetics, aiming to create an environment that intimately engaged visitors with the complexities of vulvodinia.
- c. *Mostro Oro, Silenzio Spine* [Showing Gold, Silence Thorns]: In a poignant artistic gesture, Lucia Bessone contributed a ceramic piece. Crafted during the ethnographic journey, it visually encapsulated the silent struggle and invisibility surrounding vulvar pain, bearing the title “Showing Gold, Silence Thorns.”
- d. *Oggetti del Dolore, Oggetti della Resistenza* [Objects of Pain, Objects of Resistance]: Collaboratively envisioned by Sofia Rampanelli and myself, a designer and ethnographer, this installation sought to transform the perspective on everyday objects. It delved into the dual role these objects played, either as triggers for pain attacks or as sources of support for individuals navigating the complexities of vulvar pain.

Beyond the tangible contributions, Sofia Rampanelli and I intricately crafted the graphics used for event promotion, including the evocative imagery featured in Fig.2. Together, these elements formed a cohesive narrative, inviting visitors to explore and contemplate the multifaceted dimensions of vulvar pain through the lens of art and science.

This paper seeks to delve into the nuanced and multi-sensory essence of the artistic and scientific exhibition. It contemplates the diverse insights offered by the event, with a particular emphasis on the visual and artistic components. From ceramic sculptures to cloths, graphics, seats, and everyday objects like jeans, swimsuits, chairs, bottles of water, and coffee boxes, the range of materials reflects the myriad roles I embraced during the fieldwork and in the dissemination. These roles spanned from being an ethnographer, interviewer, and facilitator of creative-based workshops during the research phase to taking on the positions of curator, co-designer of installations, students’ educator, and artist’s partner in the ethnography-based art project during the multi-modal restitution.

This contemplation extends beyond the mere examination of materials and roles; it delves into the intricate relationships established in the research process. These relationships vary from those with patients to professional artists, each contributing unique languages to enrich the communicative experience. Anchored in the relational foundation of every ethnographic interaction (Estalella, Sánchez Criado 2023), the exhibition serves as a compelling case study, showcasing how artistic handicrafts have the potential to multiply perspectives, findings, engagements, and applications of anthropological knowledge. This, in turn, contributes to the empowerment of participants and facilitates enhanced access to knowledge by a wider audience.

Intertwining art and anthropology: the Cloth of Pain

In recent years, the intersection of art and social research has become a focus for anthropologists, exploring artistic practices in engagements with participants, curators, and performers. Recognizing the value of multi-sensory languages in ethnography, this integration has opened new avenues for

understanding social phenomena (Foster 1995; Schneider 2008; Leavy 2009; Schneider & Wright 2010). In projects such as Excel-The Pursuit of Excellence, collaboration with professional artists, like photographers Evija Laivinia and Jessica Ledwich, has provided insights into practices of human enhancement, dissecting normative beauty standards as indicators of individual success (Pussetti et al. 2022; Manfredi 2023).

Art and anthropology can intersect not only in research but also in data presentation. For instance, Susana de Noronha utilized drawing as a complementary technique to interview and report on endometrial cancer (Noronha 2019). De Noronha's approach democratized science by incorporating creative scientific illustrations, offering accessible support for the public to engage with the research.

Considering creative practices as both epistemic and ethnographic data (Pussetti 2018), particularly for methodological experimentation (Estalella, Sánchez Criado 2018), I employed creative methods to expand my ethnographic approach, especially in exploring experiences resistant to verbalization, such as voluntary pain (Manfredi 2024). These practices enabled a transcending of my own preconceptions, empowering research participants during the fieldwork and fostering an intimate connection.

The Torino exhibition was grounded in the anthropological project The Cloth of Pain, stemming from a post-doctoral research initiative on the medicalization of feminine sexuality at the University of Torino. The project uncovered that sufferers of feminine genital pain are often disregarded, both in medical settings and social environments, resulting in an invisible condition forcing silence upon those affected. This ignorance increases the risk of chronic pain and self-administration of painkillers, straining patient-health specialist relationships. The qualitative approach involved semi-structured interviews exploring vulvar pain experiences with 28 Italian heterosexual and cisgender women.

Seventeen participants, ranging in age from 19 to 61 years, collaborated in a series of creative workshops creating cloth pieces. These artworks served as metaphorical expressions, delving into unspoken aspects of the genital pain. Ethnographic sessions included participant observation in Italian Facebook patient-groups dedicated to vulvar diseases, medical congresses, and meetings with activists and patient associations from March 2023 to February 2024. Interviewees have been recruited during ethnographic sessions, through calls shared in Facebook groups and the newsletter and social profiles of three patient associations (*Cistite.Info*, *La voce di una è la voce di tutte*, and *Comitato Vulvodinia e Neuropatia del Pudendo*). Interviews have been voice recorded and personally transcribed, anonymizing the names of informants according to their preference. Informed consent was presented to each of them before starting the interviews, offering the possibility to indicate a pseudonym and informing them about the use of data for academic presentations or future publications. Additionally, interviewees were informed at the beginning of the meeting that the recorder could be stopped at any moment during the interview, and they were free to withdraw from the study at any stage of the research.

I used interviews to both explore illness experiences and recruit participants for the creative laboratory. The recruitment process was slow and challenging because many participants felt incapable of expressing themselves and their pain experiences through artistic methods, especially due to pain attacks that eroded their time. The invitation to explore creative practices was motivated by difficulties in oral communication declared by interviewees, as I had already experienced in other fieldwork about pain (Manfredi 2024). Pain deconstructs our relation with the world and with language (Scarry 1985), rendering verbal communication an unfit strategy of expression. This frustration led interlocutors incapable of fully expressing themselves, prompting the need for a methodological adaptation. As I had done in other contexts (Manfredi

2021), creative practices and arts-based methods have been elected to address the challenge of the incommunicability. I proposed using pieces of cloth, and this decision gave the name to the entire research: “The Cloth of Pain”.

The creative workshops, conducted both in group and individual sessions, allowed participants to symbolically express memories related to vulvar pain experiences. The subsequent presentations of their cloth pieces in focus groups, led to discussions highlighting shared experiences, creating an emotional atmosphere of solidarity: finally workshops’ attendees found a legitimate social space to share about vulvar pain experiences. The online format facilitated attendance for working mothers and those with health conditions hindering travel, enhancing accessibility.

The ongoing analysis reveals that vulvar pain shapes participants’ daily lives, limiting activities and influencing career choices. The pain becomes a private matter, structuring life perspectives and causing participants to adopt preventive measures, such as not crossing their legs when sitting or dressing selection according to cloth’s materials. Guilt arises from an inability to engage in penetrative intercourse, impacting gender identity, sexual life, and relationships with partners. Cloth-handicrafts serve as communicative tools, documenting the multi-faceted impact of vulvar pain on women’s lives.

My objective was to disseminate scientific knowledge beyond academia and engage in an extensive restitution process with the epistemic partners and with public. Adopting a militant position of applied anthropology, I sought to utilize the findings in service of the wider population, promoting visibility for stigmatized conditions and structural fragilities affecting the quality of life, specifically in terms of access to sexual health and a pain-free existence.

A new vocabulary of pain

Walking through the exhibition, visitors encountered fourteen out of seventeen hand-modified cloths created during the Spring and Summer of 2023. Some participants expressed a desire to remain connected to their handicrafts, while others severed contact with the ethnographer after the creative experience. Each cloth in the fieldwork collection, displayed in Torino, featured a QR code linked to an online audio file. Research participants were asked to record voice messages describing what their cloth represented and explaining the meanings behind the symbols they used: a transcription of it was provided in the website of the exhibition, along with images of the cloth. This choice was driven by an ethical stance that refrains from having the ethnographer speak for the participants, aiming to restore their voices in the dissemination process. In instances of more anonymity, a couple of participants provided a written text, and a member of the vulva-team recorded the audio.

The selection of cloths was not curated by the ethnographer; all submitted cloths were displayed, creating a rich portrayal mirroring the anthropological analysis. The diverse group of meaningful elements illustrated aspects merged from qualitative interviews and online ethnography.

One cloth, crafted by Clara, a 27-year-old psychologist, revealed a sense of guilt and inadequacy prompted by vulvodynia (from online focus group 22nd June 2023). This condition, characterized by a challenging diagnostic process due to its unknown etiology (Harlow, Stewart 2003), led her to express a profound sense of guilt and inadequacy. Starting with a bidet-towel that was frayed and featured holes, Clara aimed to symbolize the overuse of this essential tool. During peak episodes of vulvar pain, the act of cleaning her genitals with fresh water provided relief, becoming a crucial coping mechanism. However, this necessity came with significant sacrifices. Clara had to relinquish numerous life projects, including her dream of traveling the world with her life partner. According to Clara, the couple had built their relationship around a shared passion for camping, where intimate care became a challenging task. Gradually reducing her involvement in this activity, Clara found herself reevaluating her identity and feeling burdened by a body deemed insufficient. The



Figure 3 © The handcraft of Clara. Photo by Federica Manfredi, 2024.

The materials chosen for the cloth creation played a crucial role in enhancing communication between Clara and the ethnographer. Through multi-sensory strategies involving color selection, dyeing, and operational decisions, Clara's handicraft allowed for a nuanced portrayal of her illness experience. The worn-out towel emphasized the repetitive nature of self-help practices, exacerbating the challenges in daily life. The color choices, particularly the red letters, served as more than a reference to menstrual blood; they embodied Clara's resilience, representing her ongoing quest for solutions and a future free from pain, where she could rebuild the fragments of her life.

Another participant in the workshop, Lucia, approached vulvar pain from a different perspective, focusing on the positive aspects it brought to her life. As a blind employee in the North of Italy, she began experiencing vulvar pain, specifically around the entrance of the vagina (medically called vestibule), almost a decade ago, which became a challenge, especially during her initial sexual experiences. During the interview at the age of 36, Lucia shared that she had never experienced orgasms or pleasure during penetrative sex, stating, "the pain was never too strong to force me to stop" (interview 19.4.2023). This question about why she continued to engage in sexual activity despite the pain marked a crucial moment in several ethnographic meetings. The data revealed a crucial aspect of being a vulvar pain sufferer – the difficulty, and sometimes impossibility, of engaging in penetrative intercourse. This condition led to anxiety, discomfort, and elaborate strategies to shorten sexual encounters, such as fake orgasms or interrupting with excuses.

Despite the pain, interviewees did not consider it a sufficient condition to stop or avoid penetrative sex, at least not explicitly addressing the topic with their partners. Only one research participant shared her vulvar health troubles with her partner, emphasizing the importance of respect for genital pain as a prerequisite for their relationship and sexual encounters. Alice, a 24-year-old woman with a master's degree in gender studies, found herself in a position "to conquer a feminist literacy on sex and sexuality" through this experience.

In addition to Alice's case, research participants (cisgender women with heterosexual orientations) expressed concern that refusing sex could jeopard-

ize their relationships with their partners. They felt a moral obligation to sexually perform, providing a penetrable vagina despite the absence of pleasure and, more importantly, the presence of pain. In some cases, the pain extended beyond penetration, lasting for days with irritations and sensations of burning, itching, and stabbing. In serious cases, pain persisted for an extended period, becoming chronic, forcing patients to increase the type and dose of medications and painkillers, with considerable side effects.

As reported by feminist scholars who have worked on neglected diseases (Kaler 2006, Labuski 2015), female patients unable to participate in penetrative sex understand the disability as a failure of their womanhood – an imperfect performance of their gender role.

Of course it [penetrative sex] hurts, but it's normal, right? For everybody, it is painful. All of us [women] feel pain during penetration. We know that it is the way it is, and there is nothing that we can do. Sometimes it can be pleasurable; actually, it was very pleasurable when I was younger, but then vulvodynia arrived, and now it's very different... But it depends on the moment... Usually, it hurts, but I am careful not to show it to my partner; otherwise, he feels guilty, and it takes even longer. Oh no [laughing]! (Francesca, 46 years old).

Even if it hurts, I can't stop having sex, or my partner will leave me. It's normal; he's a man, and he has his needs. I don't want him to find satisfaction with other girls. Of course, we don't have to do it every day, but I can't always say no either. So I try to do my best; I want to be a decent partner for him because I love him, and he loves me. (Rebecca, 33 years old).

Women feel the responsibility to perform in penetrative sex even in case of pain because this is interpreted as emotional commitment in the romantic relationship. Vulvar pain is normalized as a general condition of suffering (by Francesca), while masculinity is understood as being shaped by natural and legitimate sexual needs (Rebecca) that a proper partner should satisfy. Otherwise, the male partner will be justified in looking for sexual satisfaction elsewhere, regardless of the emotional bond. Only after years of normalization of pain, when the penetrative sex becomes unbearable due to the vulvar pain, provoking burning symptoms during urination and lasting for hours (or days) after intercourse, does a sign of alarm switch on.

Lucia's realization that feeling pain during intercourse was not "normal" came from a podcast in which a sexologist shared her personal experience of pain during penetrative sex. This encouraged the public to investigate with health specialists in case someone experienced similar symptoms. For Lucia, this revelation marked a turning point in her patient journey toward the diagnosis of localized vulvodynia. Giving a name to her pathology corresponded with the socio-medical recognition of her subjective illness experience as a disease (Kleinman 2020). In a medical anthropological approach, the formulation of the diagnosis is a crucial social moment, recognizing the pain experience of the sufferer as a real event and providing a sanctioned vocabulary of suffering. Lucia received a name for her pain in 2022, after eight years of gynecological visits during which her vulvar pain was disqualified as not deserving medical attention. As she shared during the workshop, she was used to hearing sentences like, "It will be okay, it's a normal pain. Don't worry, it will disappear on its own." These dismissive responses nourished the idea that her pain experience was nonsense and temporary, but that turned out not to be the case.

After the diagnosis, with the guidance of a physiotherapist specializing in pelvic floor rehabilitation, Lucia began to witness improvements and could engage in penetrative sex without experiencing pain. Lucia discovered that the healing process, especially the daily self-massages assigned as part of her

physiotherapy routine, transformed into acts of self-care. She described this as a dedicated time: “I take my time when I have to do my exercises of manipulation, lowering the lights and playing relaxing music. It’s a moment just for me that I’ve learned to appreciate,” she reported.

Lucia’s handicraft (Fig. 4 - 5) beautifully reflects this positive aspect of her illness experience, as she shared during an individual interview and later during an online focus group in May 2023. She ingeniously assembled four sponges to create a pocket that is intentionally unpleasant to touch, symbolizing the essence of pain itself. The internal darkness of the pocket represents the obscure side of pain, something negative that made us scarred, something unpredictable. Lucia chose to emphasize the sense of touch to metaphorically express her pain, utilizing four abrasive sponges typically used for removing stubborn stains from pots to materialize the pain experience. Within the sponge-pocket, she carefully placed four pieces of exceptionally smooth cloths—silk, pile, organza, and velvet—filling the pain-container (Fig. 5). These materials represent the positive side of the illness, signifying the time she dedicated to herself for recovery. They are not opposite to pain, but included in the experience. The colored cloths are smooth, and touching them brings unexpected pleasure. In essence, these materials metaphorically convey that the time spent on healing became a time of care, specifically self-care. Lucia’s perception of the pain shifted, recognizing that she deserved to be better. However, the soft pieces of cloth remain hidden inside the pocket, underscoring that self-care is an unexpected aspect of her pain experience.



Figure 4 © The handicraft of Lucia (front perspective). Photo by Francesco Dragone, 2024.

These ethnographic handicrafts affirm that every experience of discrimination, encompassing issues related to sexual health and the acknowledgment of vulvar pain as a legitimate form of suffering deserving medical atten-



Figure 5 © Lucia's cloths from above. Photo by Francesco Dragone, 2024

tion and social recognition, can be scrutinized through the intersectional paradigm (Crenshaw 1991). Lucia's disability and Clara's long-established romantic relationship exemplify conditions shaping access to health and sexual rights, yielding specific instances of pain invisibilization. These experiences are intricately woven with various factors, such as gender identity, sexual orientation, marital status, parenting projects, skin color, age, economic power, residency condition, educational level, social capital, etc.

Rather than merely acknowledging the variability of aspects influencing the delegitimization of vulvar pain, I adopted a broad perspective to explore the invisibilization of pain. I considered each of these variables from a queer perspective, recognizing their interdependence. Among these variables, heterosexuality emerges as a factor assuming that penetrable vaginas must be consistently available as part of a sanctioned gender performance (Goffman 1976). This assumption implies a fallocentric view of intercourse, which is expected to cater to the pleasure of the penetrative component (a penis), rather than the container of penetration (the vagina).

Sexual performance is often reduced to the penetrative act, focusing on one party's pleasure, disqualifying alternative forms of sexuality as 'fake' or 'less important' compared to penis-in-vagina (PIV) penetration. This vision of PIV as a natural and healthy form of sexual behavior, legitimized on procreative grounds, corresponds to symbolic meanings and cultural expectations internalized by individuals—an aspect known as the 'coital imperative' (Jackson 1984). It implies that other forms of sexual behavior are not equally legitimate or meaningful compared to PIV.

As Serena, a 22-year-old research participant, expressed during an interview, "I try to make preliminaries, but then we both know that we are waiting for [PIV], and that sex means this, not oral jokes or hand stimulations." This underscores the expectation that PIV intercourse is the anticipated performance needed to achieve *real* sex and provide an appropriate gender performance (Kaler 2006). Consequently, pain becomes a hindrance to a perceived proper womanhood performance in



Figure 6 © Visitor at the exhibition. Photo by Francesco Dragone, 2024.

Ethnographic data reveal that research participants have, for years, silenced their pain, denying themselves the consideration that their genitals deserve compassion and care to safeguard their gender identity.

In conclusion, the cloths crafted by Clara and Lucia prompt reflection on the process they underwent to recognize the necessity for biomedical support for their health conditions. Clara grappled with guilt because vulvar pain is not equated with a stomachache or a migraine. Some dolor are culturally constructed as deserving less attention compared to others. The bidet-cloth expresses the tragedy of feeling inadequate for an unattained goal of success, particularly in terms of gender performance. In a neoliberal society where individuals are held responsible for their happiness and social success, even a disease can be construed as an indicator of a moral failing in self-promotion. The challenge of accepting that vulvar pain is not a normal female condition is also evident in Lucia's cloth. She began to reject the notion that her pain during PIV was normal, thanks to an activist podcast. However, relying on chance is not a solution. Cultural change is imperative to transform the societal perception of vulvar pain from a state of women's meaningless suffering to a legitimate condition deserving care and cure.

Handcrafts like those created by Lucia and Clara were exhibited in the main hall of the campus to sensitize visitors about the legitimate clinical consideration that vulvar pain deserves. The aim was to raise awareness on the urgency of not silencing the voices of sufferers, and many students who visited the exhibition left positive comments on an online created to collect feedbacks from visitors. During a guided tour that I led in early March 2024, just a week after the opening, I was deeply moved by a member of the small group I had accompanied through the six scaffolds of cloths, objects, and stories. Carla, an elegant woman over 60, identified herself as a vulvodynia sufferer and expressed appreciation for the exhibition, particularly its educational impact on future generation. "This is the exhibition that I needed to see 40 years ago, because vulvar pain has profoundly shaped my life and it caught me completely off guard", she commented.

A different perspective was shared by a university student who stumbled upon the exhibition without prior intention: she took her time to express to a member of the Vulva Team her belief in the inadequacy of the proposal, as it was not located in the Medicine Faculty. She found the public display of personal stories of medical history inappropriate and suggested removing

them to protect the informants. However, upon being informed that research participants had agreed to share their information, she shifted her approach, attempting to understand why such private experiences of pain would benefit from public exposure.

The reactions of visitors, as those mentioned here, indicate that the exhibition had a powerful impact: the installations provoked thoughts and strong emotions, leading to tears and debates that were sometimes shared with the organizers. The rare dissident perspectives collected reinforce the mainstream interpretation of vulvar pain as a private matter that does not deserve social space. However, the exhibition also invited discussion and challenged such perspectives, fostering dialogues and raising awareness about the right to access vulvar health care.

Collaborating with artists

Some of the workshop participants do not consider themselves as artists because they attended an ethnographical process based with creative methods. At the opposite, some people that participated in the research process, self-define as creators, artisans or artists, and this paragraph is dedicated to their contribution.

Throughout the ethnography, I found myself deeply moved by the illness experiences I was documenting, perhaps because they offered a glimpse into a realm of life experiences unknown to me. Personally, I had never encountered severe vulvar pain attacks or other genital diseases, nor did I have discussed with other people facing similar conditions before starting this research. The pervasive culture of silence surrounding vulvar pain may have contributed to its status as an illegitimate topic of conversation in my own life experience. The ethnographical distance nourished my emotional reaction to the research topic, and I began sharing my research hypothesis with close friends and family, including Lucia Bessone, a talented artist specializing in handmade ceramic crafts and coincidentally, my mother.

Despite the conventional practice among anthropologists to downplay the influence of personal life in academic papers (Günel et al. 2020), I choose to challenge this norm and I break the traditional silence surrounding personal life of ethnographer in academic work. I shared with my mum the drama of guilt and feelings of inadequacy reveled through interviews and cloth manipulation. She was profoundly moved by the ethnographic data on the invisibilization of vulvar pain, leading her to express herself through her art: ceramic modeling and painting.

We organized working meetings where we brainstormed and discussed the pressures of sexual capital and women's availability in PIV. We worked through interviews' data, participants' meanings and her aesthetic sense, resulting in the creation of a clay piece that she later painted and placed on a ceramic cloth. The art piece was subsequently chosen to graphically enhance manifests and flyers for the exhibition (Fig. 2).

The artwork, titled "Showing Gold, Silence Thorns", is a reproduction of a vulva adorned with nails in the vestibule to symbolize pain and gold details to emphasize sufferers' concerns about maintaining the role of good sexual partners despite their suffering (Fig. 7 - 8). At the base, the clay artifact rested on a white cloth tissue that Lucia engraved by pressing a laze on the mud. The choice of the white cloth was not only a nod to the cloths co-created during the ethnography but also a representation of the cultural silence surrounding the vulvar pain phenomenon, described by Lucia as "a white page without words."



Figure 7 © Showing Gold, Silence Thorns. Photo by Francesco Dragone, 2024.



Figure 8 © Ceramic art piece by Lucia Bessone. Photo by Francesco Dragone, 2024.

This art piece emerged as a complementary product of the ethnography, materializing some of the results that Lucia Bessone processed in a visual and tangible manner—what Chiara Pussetti might term *ethnography-based art* (Pussetti 2018). This expression refers to art pieces originating from ethnographic experiences, as opposed to *art-based ethnography*, which involves ethnographic research embedded with artistic practices, as the manipulation of cloths in the ethnographic laboratory that I developed. Lucia's work embodied epistemic data in a unique way, fostering a reflection on the connections between illness and societal expectations about womanhood through the materiality of the piece and its integration with selected symbolic elements, such as the cloth and the thorns.

The artist, who had never experienced vulvar pain herself, chose thorns to represent the pain symptoms reported in interviews. When I asked her why she adorned the limits of the vulva with gold color, she asserted, "Because it's

still beautiful, isn't it? It has to be. Even amidst pain, we do all we can to present ourselves at our very best" (fieldwork notes, December 2023).

Her contribution prompted me to connect the beauty work documented in the field—comprising therapies, exercises, depilation, and clothing choices—to the preservation of the gender capital. In neoliberal society, individuals are held responsible for who they are, and the body serves as an indicator of their commitment to social success. The beauty work can be a strategy to compensate the erotic capital that is menaced by the limits in sexual penetration.

As part of the ethnographic process, I invited Lucia to exhibit her work, confident that her visualization of vulvar pain would enhance the audience's understanding of the phenomenon, generating increased interest and insights for visitors (Fig. 9).



Figure 9 © Lucia Bessone's art piece photographed by a visitor of the exhibition. Photo by Francesco Dragone, 2024.

During the ethnography, I connected with women who were not only sufferers but also musicians, teachers, mothers, lovers, students, and so on. Some of them waited for years for a diagnosis, a recognized term to identify their illness experiences, going through mistakes and countless therapies, while others recovered. The latter was the case for the interior designer Sofia Rampanelli, who experienced vulvodynia during her academic studies. She got in touch with a patient association that inspired her to develop an exhibition project called "Sediamoci con la Vulvodinia" [Sitting with Vulvodynia], which artistically highlighted vulvodynia's symptoms, such as burning and irritation, and the difficulty for patients to sit for even a few minutes. She produced the exhibition design as her graduation project at the Nuova Accademia di Belle Arti (NABA) in Milan (Rampanelli 2022). Analyzing the role of arts and European installations aimed at sensitizing about chronic and invisible diseases, Sofia designed an exhibition path whose centerpiece consisted of six chairs with modified surfaces, using nails and other objects to create uncomfortable seats (Fig. 10).



Figure 10 © Layout of the exhibition from the project of Sofia Rampanelli (Rampanelli 2022: 140–141). Used with permission of the author.

Her project sparked many conversations and mutual sharing during the fieldwork, leading us to explore the possibility of transforming her work from paper to reality. In the springtime, the call for applications for the public engagement grant from the Department of Cultures, Politics and Society, where I was working, provided the opportunity we had been waiting for. We embarked on a rethinking of her design proposal, aiming to incorporate the textiles from the ethnography and the ceramic vulva. This involved negotiations regarding our aspirations, space constraints, time, and available funding.

The installation “Sitting with Vulvodynia” assumed a dedicated space in the exhibition, with six stools that invited visitors to physically accommodate on metal cylinders (for the feeling of pins), on metal strips (for the stabs feeling), on a red hot-water bottle (for the burning feeling), on a vibrator (for the feeling of electric shock), on a cup-cake backing tray (to reproduce a wavy surface for the feeling of discomfort), and on a metal salad bowl (for the feeling of a foreign body), as visible in Fig. 11.

The chairs’ aim is neither to replicate the illness experience, nor to limit its experience solely to the sitting action. The installation is a knowledge tool to facilitate the sensorial understanding of the pain that those who suffer from vulvar pain feel. Many of them co-live with chronic pain, and even sitting for more than 15 minutes can become impossible. The most common symptoms are burning and irritation (by contact or spontaneous) feeling of abrasion and electric shock. The sitting want to reproduce some of the symptoms both from a tactile and visual perspective, to facilitate a phenomenological experience for visitors. They support an embodied understanding of suffering doing a very daily activity, such as sitting in a university campus.

At the opening, visitors were hesitant to experience the seating area: some were concerned about damaging the installations, while others felt that the action might push them out of their comfort zone. Among those brave enough to try, a young male student reported that it would be impossible to actually follow an entire university class while sitting in a similar condition. Painful experiences were also reported when a visitor attempted to tie their laces, altering the balance on a smaller portion of the seating surface.



Figure 11 © Sitting with Vulvodynia, by Sofia Rampanelli. Photo by Federica Manfredi, 2024.

During the fieldwork, Sofia and I worked on the symptoms of vulvodynia that she experienced and those collected during the ethnographical work. The results brought us to add a final segment to the exhibition, merging a section of Sofia's thesis with the interview data. Working remotely, with Sofia in Paris and myself in Rome, we envisioned two groups of objects—one dedicated to narratives of pain and the other connected with strategies to cope with pain. In the first group, we selected objects that trigger pain and associated sentences from qualitative interviews referring to them. Examples include tight-fitting jeans, or food packages like chocolate, coffee, and wine that can have inflammatory consequences. Similarly, we created a second group to highlight the strategies interviewees implemented to cope with chronic pain, prevent attacks, or address their pathology. This group included empty drug boxes, train tickets for specialist consultations, a round pillow used for outings or during university classes, white cotton underwear (as dyed ones can cause itching due to coloring components), a bike saddle with a customized shape to

reduce pelvic pressure, and bottles of water that could be used for emergency bidets, such as at the beach.

In close collaboration, we selected six symbolic objects for each group, along with corresponding interview extracts, and decided to name them “Oggetti del Dolore, Oggetti della Resistenza” [Objects of Pain, Objects of Resistance] (fig. 12).

The co-designed installation mirrors the anthropological analysis and it aimed to offer a different perspective on everyday objects that restructure the horizon of possible actions that sufferers signify. The proposal invited visitors to touch the objects and read testimonies from interviews, providing an opportunity to compare how they approach a common object when it is not embedded in a chronic pain experience. This exercise can facilitate mutual understanding between visitors and sufferers, breaking down barriers of untold pain and silencing the everyday dramas experienced by those who cannot sit



Figure 12 © The Objects of Pain , installation by Federica Manfredi and Sofia Rampanelli. Photo by Federica Manfredi, 2024.

for more than fifteen minutes on a chair or plan a beach day without being sure that a bottle of water is available for an emergency shower. Artistic installations provided multi-sensory materials to rethink pain and vulvar health, offering the occasion to develop new forms of knowledge and understanding beyond a logocentric approach. They privileged touch, smell, body positions, and visual products to promote empathy, awareness and a cultural transformation.

Conclusions

This case study presented a dissemination experience centered around a medically invisibilized condition, employing multiple visual languages to facilitate social (re)actions. In contemporary Italian society, vulvas are not the subject of health education, and women are not educated to monitor or care their sexual health, leading to the normalization of pelvic and vulvar pain. The term ‘vulva’ can be controversially perceived with a vulgar, almost pornographic meaning, as highlighted by the ethnographic episode concerning the exhibition title.

Vulvar pain is not only a clinical condition. The cultural dimension shapes the experience of the pain. Cultural values associated with female reproductive function and genitals influence the ‘normalization’ and acceptance of female genital pain, suppressing the recognition of symptoms and the willingness to seek medical care. In this context, I propose the metaphor of a missing mirror reflection: the absence of social consideration for vulvar pain corresponds to the lack of cultural meanings concerning feminine genital consideration. The failure of the mirror work is revealed by the experience of pain, indicating that only when a vagina is impenetrable does her pain become a sign of alarm.

Dolore Vulvare. Arte. Scienza. Resistenza [Vulvar Pain. Art. Science. Resistance] stands not only as an exhibition but as a call to action—a poignant reminder that cultural narratives surrounding vulvar pain are both clinical and deeply embedded in societal values. The project transcends traditional ethnographical boundaries, engaging a diverse range of voices, from patients and artists to health specialists and beyond. Through the fusion of art and science, this exhibition challenges the prevailing silence and stigma surrounding vulvar pain, inviting individuals to rethink their understanding of this complex condition.

The exhibited artifacts, crafted through collaboration and creativity, mirror the often-overlooked struggles of those experiencing vulvar pain. By offering a multisensory experience, the project fosters empathy, understanding, and a shared commitment to cultural transformation. The term ‘resistance’ in the exhibition’s subtitle signifies not only defiance against the invisibilization of vulvar pain but also a collective endeavor to reshape societal perceptions. In 2024 the exhibition will travel in other locations of Torino, starting an itinerant phase to multiply audiences.

As the curtains fall on *Dolore Vulvare*, its impact reverberates beyond the gallery walls. It prompts society to recognize the intricate intersections of pain, power dynamics, and gender norms. The project, rooted in qualitative research and visual methodologies, demonstrates that human experiences, particularly those associated with pain, require nuanced approaches for comprehension.

By fostering dialogue and dismantling cultural taboos, *Dolore Vulvare* emerges as a catalyst for change, a catalyst urging us to create a society that mirrors and accommodates the diverse experiences of vulvar pain. In the face of silence, the exhibition invites individuals to become active agents in co-constructing a more empathetic, informed, and inclusive narrative surrounding vulvar health. In doing so, it paves the way for a future where vulvar pain is neither invisible nor stigmatized but embraced as an integral part of the broader spectrum of human experiences.

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The Chimera Manifesto. “The animalization of the female body”

An essay about aesthetic medicine

Visual Ethnography

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Abstract:

In Greek mythology, the Chimera is a monstrous creature composed of various animals. Etymologically related, “Chimeric” refers to something “fantastic or imaginary.” This visual essay is dedicated to (de)constructing the modern Chimera. This fantastical female being comprises parts from rabbits, crows, turkeys, and bats. It carries bananas on the back of its thighs and sports saddlebags.

Incorporating Donna Haraway’s Cyborg Manifesto, my focus extends beyond the cyborg—an amalgam of machine and biology existing in both real and fictional

domains—to her adept utilization of irony. Recognizing that irony is humor but also a serious game, it functions as a rhetorical strategy and a political method. More than just a method, it becomes a manifesto. Through years of feminist research on the construction, reinvention, commodification, and medicalization of the female body, I stumbled upon terms like ‘bunny lines’, ‘crow’s feet’, ‘banana rolls’, ‘turkey neck’, and ‘bat wings’, crafted to define unique conditions of the female body. In this provocative visual essay, using ethnographic data, social media research and AI-generated images, I intend to delve into how women’s bodies are reconfigured in the realm of plastic surgery, à-la-carte aesthetic procedures and the liberal market. The aim is to be, more than anything, as Haraway encourages, blasphemous.

Keywords

Visual essay; medicalization; animalization; aesthetic medicine; feminist research

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Introduction

This marks my third ballet class—a childhood dream I’ve only recently realized at the age of almost forty. Instead of a pink tutu, I’m wearing a black bodysuit that hugs my curves. My instructor, a former Bolshoi dancer, directs her commands across the room, but they feel personally aimed at me: “Light, light. Wave your arms, keep your shoulders still.” I strive to concentrate on immobilizing my shoulders while moving my arms gracefully. Yet, the image reflected at me from the mirrors that line the room tells a different story. My flabby arms quiver with self-doubt. I am not the graceful swan the Bolshoi instructor demands; instead, I feel like a bat desperately trying to escape the scrutiny of the mirrors that seem to observe me from all angles.

For years, I have delved into the realm of aesthetic transformations in women’s bodies. Through interviews with women undergoing these changes and with aesthetic medical practitioners who perform them, I have sought to understand the motivations and experiences behind these transformations. While interviews remain my preferred method, I also utilize social media as an endless wellspring of research. Some time ago, while casually browsing through Instagram, I stumbled upon an advertisement from a beauty clinic that I followed. It caught my attention as it was promoting a treatment for something called ‘bunny lines’. Intrigued, I paused and scrolled back to learn more. What exactly were bunny lines? As it turns out, ‘bunny lines’, also known as ‘bunny noses’, are subtle diagonal wrinkles that develop beside the nose, originating from the inner corner of the eye. These lines become more pronounced when individuals smile or speak, as the repetitive contraction of the nasal muscle leads to the formation of marks that, over time, deepen and become visible even without facial expression.

Initially, I dismissed the concept of bunny lines as a playful and harmless comparison to animal features. However, as my research progressed, I encountered numerous other terms that echoed this pattern. ‘Bunny lines’ (Image 1); ‘bat wings’ (Image 2); ‘crow’s feet’ (Image 3); ‘turkey neck’ (Image 4) - these descriptors are commonly employed by practitioners of aesthetic medicine to designate various parts of a woman’s body, drawing parallels to animals. It is noteworthy to observe the broader sociocultural impact of these expressions, as they transcend their original context within the medical sphere and infiltrate the vernacular of everyday discourse.

Maria, one of my research participants, consistently undergoes Botox injections to address her ‘crow’s feet’—the periorbital wrinkles that concern her. Throughout our conversations, she has consistently referred to them using this ‘medicalized’ term. Conversely, Sofia, another acquaintance, harbors disdain for her ‘turkey neck’, often opting to conceal it with turtlenecks and actively saving money for a laser treatment promising to rectify the perceived sagging of her neck. As for myself and my ‘bat wings’, the loose skin under my arms, I am opting to avoid surgery a brachioplasty—a surgical procedure known for its demanding nature and conspicuous scarring and instead focus actively on dedicated weightlifting at the gym.

One could argue that the use of animal characteristics as designations is somewhat simplistic, given that terms like ‘periorbital wrinkles’, ‘submental skin laxity’ (sagging skin), or ‘excess fat and skin from the upper arms’ are long and hard-to-say names. In contrast, the animal-inspired terms are visually striking and easily memorable. However, I contend that this phenomenon underscores the pervasive influence of aesthetic ideals and beauty standards, which not only shape medical terminology but also permeate popular culture and language. Such linguistic conventions serve as potent indicators of societal attitudes towards beauty, aging, and bodily aesthetics, reflecting and perpetuating existing norms and expectations surrounding femininity and the idealized female form.

Using “The Cyborg Manifest” (1985) from Donna Haraway as an inspiration, I aim to explore in this essay/manifesto how the language of medicine,

coupled with the animalization of the female body, positions it as a prime locus for various forms of intervention and governance. For my argument, I integrate the concepts of medicalization, biomedicalization, and, when concatenated within the current economic paradigm, I suggest that the animalization of certain aspects of the ageing female body within the realm of medical practice is far from innocuous.

As a visual essay, my aim is not to formulate an exhaustive statement but to contribute to the debate on the medicalization of beauty in the female body, or, as Haraway suggests, it is a “call to unity for change” (45). For the images accompanying this essay, I employed OpenAI. ChatGPT (GPT-3.5) under my instructions to produce illustrations aimed at capturing the readers’ full imagination.



Figure 1 © Women with ‘bunny lines’. Generated by OpenAI. ChatGPT (GPT-3.5), 2024.

From the medicalization of the female body to the biomedicalization of society

Briefly, let’s introduce the medicalization of the body. As a widely discussed topic (e.g. Foucault 2003; Scheper-Hugues 1986) it was first introduced by Irving Zola (1972), an American activist and writer in medical sociology and disability rights, to explain how medical practices expanded their authority and jurisdiction/control into various aspects of people’s lives. Initially, medicalization was observed when certain social issues (such as alcoholism, homosexuality, abortion or drug addiction) were deemed morally problematic and fell within the domain of medicine. The medical sociologist Catherine Riess-

man (1983: 47-48) further elaborates that medicalization involves two interconnected processes: first, assigning medical meanings to certain conditions and behaviors, defining them in terms of health and illness; and second, using medical practices to manage or control experiences considered problematic or deviating from social norms.

The triumph of medicalization has been attributed to various factors: some argue for “medical imperialism,” a concept of medico-legal expansion (Illich 1976), while others suggest that the increasing complexity of medical knowledge, facilitated by technological advancements, legitimizes this process (Zola 1972). In the same way, medicalization can occur at different levels, conceptually, when medical terminology defines a problem, and institutionally, when clinicians validate this issue (Conrad and Schneider 1980). It is the validation by healthcare practitioners that I am particularly interested in exploring further within the context of medicalization - while refraining from questioning the inherent problematic nature of sagging skin, given that pathologization predominantly occurs on an aesthetic plane, the evolution towards a moral dilemma within medical discourse emerges through the framing of this issue as one related to health.

In “Naissance de la clinique: Une Archéologie du regard médical,” originally published in 1962, Michel Foucault analyzes the emergence of the clinical gaze and how medical knowledge and language shape and regulate both individual bodies and society. Foucault argues that medical knowledge, terminology, and practices are not neutral but imbued with power relations that construct reality, exerting influence over individuals and shaping society’s norms and behaviors. As the biomedicine or modern medicine emerged towards the end of the 18th century, when medicine “...proposed a scientific discourse on the individual” (Foucault 2003: 10), this restructuring of knowledge is linked to two fundamental and inseparable foundations: a new perspective and a new medical language. The new language thus represents the transference of this new perspective into the expressible, and it is “the implicit work of language in the description that authorizes the transformation of the symptom into a sign, the transition from sickness to disease, and the individual’s access to the conceptual” (*ibid* 129). In essence, this conception suggests that a problem only gains recognition and legitimacy when it receives scientific validation, by someone authorized to that. Conversely, when an issue is identified by someone with the same authority, it is effectively brought into existence.

The medicalization of the body, although not exclusive to women, is quite insidious in the female body, especially when it comes to issues exclusive to the female body, such as menopause (e.g. Martin 1988), menstruation (e.g. Martin 1988), pregnancy, and childbirth (e.g. Nisha 202). As Donna Haraway (2016: 52) positions: women “are excruciatingly conscious of what it means to have a historically constituted body.”

However, in recent years, the nature of medicalization itself has undergone a transformation as techno-scientific innovations have begun to reshape medicine from the ‘inside out’ (Clark et al. 2010: 164). Within the context of the industrial revolution, ‘Big Science’ has evolved into ‘Big Technology’ within ‘biomedicalization’, a concept shaped to describe the increasingly intricate and multi-faceted processes of medicalization that are being reshaped by social practices emerging from an increasingly techno-scientific approach to medicine (Clark et al. 2010: 164). Advances in genetics, reproductive technologies, cell therapy, psychopharmacology, and other fields constitute a new health reality that intersects with the consumer market (Rabinow 1992; Rose 2007).

Since the publication of “The Biomedicalization of Aging: Dangers and Dilemmas” by Carroll L. Estes and Elizabeth A. Binney in 1989, the rapid advancements in biomedical sciences and geriatric medical care have continued to influence perceptions of the aging body and expectations regarding medical interventions in old age. This seminal article brought attention the portrayal of aging as a medical issue or ‘pathology’. Since then, we have observed

a substantial endeavor within the medical field to address, prevent, delay, conceal, and ultimately manage aging. Within this context, aesthetic medicine, as a discipline where the enhancement of appearance intersects with medical practices, has seen the introduction of various technologies aimed at mitigating the visible manifestations of the aging process on the body. As my friend Sofia explains, her dermatologist recommended undergoing a ‘laser’ treatment. By heating the deeper layers of the skin, which stimulates collagen production, the laser procedure aims to enhance skin density, firmness, and visibly tighten the skin, resulting in a more youthful appearance.

Let’s take a moment to contemplate the concept of the ‘laser’ and its scientific apparatus. LASER stands for “light amplification by stimulated emission of radiation” it operates through resonance effects, resulting in a coherent electromagnetic field (TechTarget n.d.). The term ‘laser’ encompasses various types, including those utilizing crystals, glass, semiconductors, gases, liquids, high-energy electron beams, and even gelatin doped with suitable materials to generate laser beams. Today, lasers find applications in diverse fields, ranging from drilling holes in hard materials and alignment in tunnel boring to long-distance measurement, compact disk readers, microsurgery, or permanent hair removal.

Laser technology serves as a prime example of how ‘big technology’ has become pervasive. Utilizing lasers for procedures like treating sagging skin or removing unwanted hair no longer evokes surprise or excitement; instead, it represents the trivialization of everyday consumption. Sofia is contemplating undergoing the treatment as soon as she can afford it. At no point does she question the safety of the technology or consider its long-term consequences. Instead, her primary concern is whether the treatment will prove effective enough to justify spending a portion of her savings. These technologies are increasingly integrated into various facets of daily life and the experience of health and illness, shaping new subjectivities, identities, and biosocialities—new social formations constructed around and through these identities (Rabinow 1992).

Another noteworthy aspect of biomedicalization is the extension of medical authority beyond health itself—beyond illness or unfavorable social conditions—and how its commodification intersects with moral and ethical responsibilities.

Maria, my other interlocutor, regularly undergoes Botox injections for her peri orbicular wrinkles—the infamous ‘crow’s feet’. Despite the significant expense, she views it not as a frivolous expenditure but as an investment. As a mother of two children and with a demanding job as a real estate agent, Maria feels the need to always look her best. She feels compelled not only to fulfill her role as a mother but also to present herself as a successful executive who can effectively balance family, work, social life, and self-care. She also cannot bear to witness her face aging, wrinkling, and “*succumbing to the passage of time*”. As she does not perceive herself as an old woman because she does not feel like one, Maria’s subjective construction is rooted not only in how she presents herself to others but in her self-perception, her body, and her image of herself.

As anthropologist David Le Breton (2006) emphasizes, the body is not only shaped by the social and cultural context in which individuals exist but also serves as the foundation for their relationship with the world. From the body, intricate and essential meanings emerge, guiding individuals through their collective experiences. By intertwining the concept of individuality with vision, Le Breton positions sight as the foremost sense, imbued with personality. Thus, appearance becomes the individual’s visual representation, perceived by others through sight.

It acquires a fundamental significance by fostering a distinction between the self and the other, delineating individual boundaries based on each person’s image and its associated attributes, qualities, and characteristics (Le

Breton 2006; 2016). Consequently, an individual's relationship with the world is imbued and influenced by their identity and corporeality, both integral components of their overall identity. For Maria, concealing wrinkles around her eyes signifies avoiding the outward manifestation of aging, both to herself and to others, to dissociate from this natural process. Only those who look old can be considered old?



Figure 2 © Women with 'bat wings'. Generated by OpenAI. ChatGPT (GPT-3.5), 2024.

The body under [moral] construction

The gaze of others holds considerable power in shaping perceptions of the self. Whether intentional or subconscious, the way others look at us carries implicit judgments and evaluations. This gaze can influence how individuals perceive themselves and how they navigate social interactions, as it underscores the importance of social context and interpersonal dynamics in shaping self-perception and identity formation. Sofia, however, looks at her neck in the opposite way to Maria. For Maria, removing wrinkles is a way of seeing - or not seeing - herself grow old, for Sofia, the presence of a sagging neck evokes feelings of shame. Concealing it with a scarf or turtleneck serves as a shield against external scrutiny, she explains her rationale: *"Others shouldn't witness my neck trembling with every word I speak. It's repugnant."* Sofia, a 49-year-old single woman without children also concerns about how her slightly sagging neck, a sign of decline of age, might affect her appeal to men. This association of her aging body with a perceived loss of femininity reflects a broader societal narrative where the female body's waning reproductive capacity is equated with diminished heterosexual attractiveness.

In her renowned work “The Beauty Myth” (1991), Naomi Wolf presents the concept of a modern form of discrimination against women, revolving around the pervasive influence of beauty standards. According to Wolf, female identity is increasingly expected to be centered on beauty, creating a societal framework where women feel compelled to conform to these standards. She argues that the concept of female beauty, historically constructed to uphold male and patriarchal dominance, has evolved into a powerful currency system akin to the “gold standard” (*ibid* 12). In a similar vein, Sandra Bartky (1988) claims that while individuals are born male or female, the attributes of masculinity and femininity are socially constructed rather than inherent traits. Bartky suggests that disciplinary techniques are employed to mold the body into a form that conforms to culturally defined standards of femininity. According to her, “gestures and appearances are carefully crafted to align with societal expectations of femininity” (*ibid* 132). At the same time, Susan Bordo, in her collection of essays titled “Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body” (1993), delves into ideologies surrounding the modern female body and its commodification. Bordo highlights the relentless cultural pressures for physical perfection, which result in the cultivation of compliant and self-disciplined bodies. These bodies, valued by society, are seen as commodities that women must attain to cater to the male gaze and gain societal acceptance.

Feminist thinkers like Wolf, Bartky, and Bordo, who draw from Foucauldian theory, offer perspectives on how society constructs, manipulates, and theorizes about the female body. However, it is crucial to comprehend these perspectives within the broader contemporary social context. Sociologists like Mike Featherstone (1991), Shilling (1993) and Giddens (1991) have shed light on the notion that the body is regarded as a project requiring ongoing refinement and transformation, serving as a fundamental component of self-identity and functioning as a medium for self-expression. The body, viewed as an ongoing project subject to continual human intervention and revision (Giddens, 1991:218), stands as a cornerstone of late modernity. Maria, reducing wrinkles on her face, Sofia hiding her neck, or myself lifting heavier weights at the gym, perceive ourselves as individuals tasked with caring for our bodies through both aesthetic techniques and deliberate choices. Within this framework, the modern conception of the body aligns with the notion that it should be actively shaped and cultivated rather than passively accepted (Grosz, 1994; Budgeon, 2003; Coleman, 2008, 2009; Colebrook, 2000).

In “Throwing Like a Girl” (1980), Iris Marion Young asserts that women are socialized to perceive and interact with their bodies in distinct ways from men. She argues that the difference in how men and women typically move and perceive their bodies is not biological but socially constructed. This socialization influences women’s self-image, limiting their perceptions of their own capabilities and reinforcing the dichotomy between body and mind, as the same time different socializations contributes to the perpetuation of gender inequalities and restricts women’s potential in various areas of life. While women are encouraged to favor delicacy and grace over strength and physical prowess, athletic abilities are often associated with masculinity. Indeed, terms like ‘crow’s feet’, ‘bat wings’, and ‘turkey neck’ are not exclusive to the female body, as evidenced by various references on plastic surgeons’ and aesthetic doctors’ websites. Nevertheless, as women’s appearances tend to be more meticulously scripted and scrutinized compared to men’s (Jackson 1992; Weitz 2001), and as an illustration of the neoliberal subject, women are urged to be mindful of their bodies and to conform them to the prevailing aesthetic norms of society.

The higher incidence of decaying physical features on the female body is often attributed to ‘hormonal issues’. Yet, this explanation reflects the uneven medicalization of gendered bodily experiences. Rather than solely focusing on the biological aspects of hormonal influences, it’s essential to examine how such explanations serve to naturalize and normalize gendered bodily changes.

The assertion that ‘women, due to hormonal changes, are more prone to sagging skin’ places the burden on women as individuals to address and resolve these issues, thereby perpetuating gendered expectations and inequalities.

The concept of moralization, which I briefly mentioned earlier, warrants further elaboration. While medicalization pertains to the legal and juridical decisions made by doctors regarding bodily processes, biomedicalization takes this a step further by emphasizing individual moral responsibilities related to health management. This includes actions such as accessing knowledge, self-surveillance, preventive measures, and risk assessment (Clark et al. 2010). Social theorist Nikolas Rose (2007) highlights the emergence of ‘somatic ethics’, where values surrounding life are centered on the body and interventions upon it. Continuous efforts to enhance the body’s functionality, longevity, and vitality provide individuals with greater autonomy to actively shape their lives through informed choices infused with hope. Within this framework, individuals become ‘somatic subjects’, whose self-perception and decision-making are influenced by biomedical discourse and practices.



Figure 3 © Women with ‘crow’s feet’ Generated by OpenAI. ChatGPT (GPT-3.5), 2024.

Considering the body functions not as simply a natural foundation or a passive surface upon which meanings are inscribed by systems of signification, not as object but an *event* (Budgeon 2003:36), this perspective invites us to consider the fluidity of the body and how the self is intimately intertwined with embodied experiences. In this context, the notion of self-reflexivity emerges, suggesting that the body can be intentionally shaped to convey narratives of self-awareness and introspection. Considering the question “only

those who look old can be considered old?” through this lens implies that the markers of aging, typically evident on the body, can be altered through increasingly sophisticated techniques. It is through these transformations—and perhaps more significantly, the willingness to undergo them—that individuals signal their refusal to be defined by age alone. Aging becomes not merely a biological process, but an attitude—one that embraces ongoing change and the perpetual state of becoming.

Sociologists such as Mike Featherstone and Hepworth (1991) have argued that the process of ageing in contemporary society encourages individuals to devise “flexible biographical” narratives. That means the “modernization of ageing”, a construction, a maintenance of a new identity that “evolves a distancing from deep old age – a distancing which is achieved through flexible adjustments to the gradually blurring boundaries of adult life” (1991:385). “Flexible” emerges as a pivotal term within the neoliberal discourse surrounding the body, reflecting the notion that contemporary societies are defined by their capacity for change and adaptability (Martin, 1994). This concept of “becoming” underscores the continuous process of self-performativity, wherein individuals actively construct and redefine their identities over time (Shilling 1993: 5). It suggests that individuals are engaged in a perpetual project of self-formation that extends beyond the physical body, encompassing various aspects of personal identity. Consumer culture (Slater, 1997) further reinforces the centrality of the body in self-expression, promoting the consumption of techniques and body disciplines as means of shaping and enhancing one’s physical appearance.

Beauty work is hard work

In her book “Skintight: An Anatomy of Cosmetic Surgery” (2008), Meredith Jones examines the phenomenon of “makeover culture” through the lens of cosmetic surgery. Jones explores how cosmetic surgery has become increasingly normalized and commodified within contemporary society, shaping notions of beauty, identity, and self-improvement. As she argues that makeover culture promotes ideals of physical perfection and consumerism, it also encourages individuals to seek surgical interventions in pursuit of an idealized appearance. So imbricated in the consumer culture, it configures the socio-cultural canon that values the “constant renewals of the self” (*ibid* 2).

‘Becoming’ entails a renegotiation of individual identities, characterized by both fluidity and a sense of permanence. Despite its mutable nature, ‘becoming’ is far from effortless. It demands significant investment in terms of time, money, personal energy, predisposition and taking risks. A considerable portion of this investment is directed towards shaping our outward appearance. Whether it’s for personal satisfaction, social acceptance, or adherence to prevailing aesthetic norms, attaining a desirable appearance takes on paramount importance within this context, determining one’s social acceptability.

Beauty practices and self-presentation play a significant role in shaping contemporary notions of femininity, especially within the context of market-driven ideologies that have reshaped notions of women’s empowerment. In today’s consumer culture, beauty is often commodified and marketed as a means of self-enhancement and empowerment, perpetuating certain ideals of femininity that align with market values (e.g. McRobbie 2008; Gill 2017; Banet-Weiser 2012). From cosmetics and skincare products to fashion and plastic surgery, there is a vast industry dedicated to promoting beauty ideals and products that promise to enhance one’s appearance. This commodification of beauty reinforces the idea that femininity is closely tied to physical attractiveness and appearance. Market-driven ideologies, particularly within neoliberal capitalism, emphasize individualism, self-improvement, and consumer choice, encouraging women to invest in beauty practices and products as a form of self-care and self-expression, with the promise of empowerment through personal transformation.

From the notion that physically attractive individuals are perceived as happier or more successful (Dion et al. 1972) to being associated with talent (Landy and Sigall 1974), attractiveness today is often viewed as a marker of status—social, economic, and moral. Studies have demonstrated that appearance plays a pivotal role in self-perception and achievement, particularly for women, whose bodies and appearance are intricately intertwined with their self-definition and self-esteem (e.g. Tiggemann 1994). The proliferation of aesthetic medicine parallels the overemphasis on physical appearance, evident in the increasing array of available procedures, the rising number of practitioners, and the growing financial accessibility to such treatments. The discourse promoting conformity to beauty standards is often rationalized through the medicalization of the body. Here, variations in physical appearance are appropriated by biomedical rationality, which not only lends a veneer of scientific legitimacy to the discourse but also suggests remedies—techniques exclusive to its practitioners—for correcting perceived flaws.

Eugenia Kaw (1993) pioneered the examination of the medicalization of racial features and cosmetic surgery, focusing on Asian-American women as her subjects of study. She posits that women opting for cosmetic surgery procedures such as eyelid reconstruction or nose bridge augmentation have internalized gender and racial ideologies that advocate for body modification. Through the legitimizing lens of scientific rationality, medical practitioners reinforce gender and racial stereotypes, contributing to the perpetuation of a consumer-driven culture. The use of terms like ‘small’ or ‘flat’ to describe facial features, coupled with the association of these features with negative behavioral characteristics such as ‘dullness’, ‘passivity’, or ‘lack of emotion’, reflects a perpetuation of racial and gender prejudice within the medical field. This phenomenon underscores the persistence of beauty standards that prescribe specific facial features as ideal, while simultaneously promoting the notion that beauty should be a universal goal for all women (Kaw 1993: 75). This perpetuation of narrow beauty ideals not only reinforces societal biases but also marginalizes individuals who do not conform to these standards, contributing to the perpetuation of systemic inequalities. Such biases can have detrimental effects on individuals’ self-esteem, mental health, and overall well-being. However, it is important to underline, as I note elsewhere (Pires, in press), both women and aesthetic doctors, albeit with different degrees of influence and outcomes, collectively contribute to the formulation and perpetuation of perceived physical distinctions that contribute to the naturalization of cultural aesthetic norms.

The medicalization of beauty underscores a complex interaction between medical practices, cultural norms, and the construction of individual identity. It is crucial to recognize that, as a dynamic process, what is deemed “normal” or “acceptable” within the context of aesthetic medicine does not necessarily imply conformity to what is most prevalent or typical in a population. Instead, it entails adherence to a specific predetermined standard of beauty that is shaped and influenced by cultural ideals, social factors, media representations, and commercial interests. As Foucault reminds us, power should be perceived not merely as a repressive force but also as a productive one, namely the capacity to produce bodies (Ahmed 2002).

Aesthetic interventions, such as cosmetic surgery or dermatological procedures, play a significant role in shaping beauty standards by offering individuals the means to modify their appearance to align with these predetermined ideals. Through these interventions, individuals seek to attain a body that conforms to the socially constructed norms of attractiveness and desirability. In this way, aesthetic medicine contributes to the normalization of certain physical traits or features that are deemed desirable within a particular cultural context. Images of surgically enhanced bodies, often portrayed as aspirational or ideal, become normalized through their frequent depiction in advertising, fashion magazines, and social media platforms. As a result, these images come to represent the standard of beauty against which individuals,

frequently women, measure themselves, further reinforcing the normalization of aesthetic interventions as a means of achieving beauty ideals. At the same way, the portrayal of bodies in the media serves not as unattainable ideals but as potentials for “becoming.” Bodies are negotiated in relation to exposure to these images, fostering a continuously open process that allows for “new experiences” (Budgeon 2003). The body represents a “dynamic and shifting boundary ... a threshold across which the subject’s lived experience of the world is realized” (McNay 1999: 98). The body as an object is inherently intertwined with the self as a subject: if embodied identity is culturally constructed, it is individually negotiated.

While I have previously examined the medicalization of beauty, it is essential to refocus this discussion on the transformative shift from describing female physical traits as ‘dull’ or ‘flat’ to likening them to animal characteristics and integrate this narrative in the contemporary biopolitics.

From medicalization to animalization

After my ballet class, on the way home, I found myself wondering why I linked my flabby arms specifically to those of a bat and not to another animal. Are bats the only creatures with floppy limbs? What about the delicate, airy feathers of a hummingbird, for instance? Why resort to using a bat, turkey, or crow in a derogatory manner to depict female body parts?

This issue arises from a broader discourse on female objectification. Academics Barbara Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts (1997), in their examination of social discourses surrounding the construction of the female body as objects for visual consumption, assert that Western societies treat women’s bodies differently from men’s bodies. Women are often regarded as bodies existing solely for the use or consumption of others, stripped of their individuality and personality. The authors argue that women’s bodies, perceived as inactive and primarily passive objects for the male gaze and societal consumption, give rise to a dual effect known as self-objectification, encompassing both external and internal objectification. Through their daily experiences, the constant objectification of women poses significant risks to well-being and mental health, as evidenced by studies linking it to issues such as eating disorders, depression, and sexual dysfunction (e.g. Calogero et al. 2005; Tiggemann, 2011).

As objectification pertains to reducing individuals to objects or commodities for consumption, it is intrinsically linked to mechanistic dehumanization. Dehumanization, on the other hand, involves the perception of others as less than fully human. In feminist literature, dehumanization is frequently discussed in the context of the representation of women in pornography (LeMoncheck 1985; MacKinnon 1987), aligning with Fredrickson and Roberts’ (1997) argument that the sexual objectification of women extends beyond specific instances to permeate broader cultural norms. Further, the American psychologist Herbert Kelmar (1976) examines the intersection of dehumanization with moral dimensions. By depriving individuals of their ‘identity’, defined as the capacity to be recognized as an “individual, autonomous being, distinguishable from others, capable of making choices” (*ibid* 301), individuals are reduced to a state of amorality, rendering them incapable of eliciting compassion or empathy. This form of dehumanization is commonly observed in attitudes towards immigrants or racial stereotypes, as depicted by psychologist Nick Haslam (2006), wherein individuals are attributed characteristics such as a lack of control, civility, or refinement. Although dehumanization is undoubtedly most often mentioned in relation to ethnicity or race (Haslam 2006), it represents a hierarchy created between humans: the other “barbarians who lack culture, self-control, moral sensitivity and cognitive capacity (*ibid* 252).

Further, Haslam (2006) has expanded on the concept of dehumanization, delineating between two distinct forms: animalistic dehumanization, which involves the denial of uniquely human attributes that distinguish humans from animals, such as civility and refinement, and mechanistic dehu-

manization, which entails the denial of fundamental aspects of human nature, such as emotionality, openness, and depth.

As mechanistic dehumanization involves denying essentially human attributes to individuals perceived as psychologically or socially distant, and often accompanied by indifference, a lack of empathy, or a stereotyped and abstract view of the other, the animalistic dehumanization entails singular concepts. This form of dehumanization occurs when individuals are stripped of uniquely human attributes and instead characterized as “unrefined, uncouth, and driven by instinctual motives” (Morris et al. 2018). Haslam et al. (2007) further emphasize that these two forms of dehumanization—animalistic and mechanistic—are not entirely distinct and may overlap.

The female body appears to be particularly susceptible to various forms of dehumanization. When women are sexualized, they are often denied uniquely human traits and instead associated with animalistic dehumanization (Morris et al. 2018; Vaes et al. 2011). On the other hand, appearance-focused objectification is theorized to involve dehumanization through associations with objects rather than animals (Morris et al. 2018). As sex and human animality share a reciprocal link (Gondenderg et al. 2002), the last hypothesis seems to encompass a contradiction. Morris and colleagues (2016) highlight that when a woman emphasizes her appearance, particularly beauty that is not primarily sexual in nature, she is not animalized but rather mechanistically dehumanized. In this context, she is treated as a decorative object valued for her beauty, existing primarily to be seen and enjoyed. However, the example drawn from the field of aesthetic medicine illustrates how the distinction between the two forms of dehumanization is frequently blurred (although the boundaries between beauty and sexuality are as unstable as their highly subjective criteria).

As animalistic dehumanization refers to the perception of the other as more ‘animal-like’ and less human, is not only derogatory but infers the moral inferiority and instrumentalization that they suffer. In essence, by likening certain parts of a woman’s body to those of an animal, it becomes apparent how she is positioned to be consumed, reflecting a dynamic similar of our treatment of most animals.

Beyond being merely an object, female beauty, whether sexualized or not, functions to be consumed and, through the realm of aesthetic medicine, crafted, altered, and enhanced. This, I stand, underscores the overarching objective of animalistic dehumanization.

Feminist theory, particularly ecofeminist theory, offers valuable insights into this discourse. Ecofeminism represents a theoretical and activist movement that delves into the intersection of feminism and environmentalism. By examining the interconnected oppressions faced by women and the natural world, ecofeminism contends that both are subjected to domination under patriarchal and capitalist systems. Notable ecofeminist intellectuals such as Carolyn Merchant, Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies, Greta Gaard and Val Plumwood emphasize the parallels between the subjugation of women and the exploitation of the environment. They argue that these phenomena stem from a shared worldview that prioritizes domination, control, and hierarchical power structures. These perspectives align with the notion that the dehumanization of women serves to perpetuate gender inequality through the propagation of hostile ideologies. Furthermore, ecofeminism underscores the conception of women, in contrast to men, as inherently connected to nature rather than being exclusively situated within cultural constructs (Ortner 1972).

It is through processes of dehumanization that women are relegated to a lower status than men, and in accordance with this, the belief that nature is fragile and in need of protection reinforces the association between nature and womanhood (Salmen & Dhont 2021). By parallel, the interconnectedness among patriarchal gender structures and systems of animal exploitation is also rooted in the belief that meat consumption symbolizes strength, masculinity, and ultimately, power (Adams 1990).

Therefore, when a part of a woman's body is likened to nature, therefore to an animal, it serves as an indicator that she must undergo mediation. In other words, she must be remodel or enhancement to meet the desired expectations in order to be consumed. Notably, it's not the woman as a "whole" who is compared to an animal, as that would be deemed offensive. Instead, by focusing on specific body parts—such as her arms, neck, or eyes—the same objective is achieved in a more insidious manner, that is, to provoke repulsion to prompt action. It's noteworthy that the animals used for comparison are not typically seen as seductive: bats, turkeys, or crows. Upon reflecting on this phenomenon, it becomes palpable that abjection is necessary. Abjection, as anticipated by Julia Kristeva (1982): the visceral reaction of horror, disgust, and repulsion that individuals experience when confronted with something that threatens the boundaries of the self or identity. After all, a turkey, bat, or crow are animals that instinctively repel us, both due to their physical appearance and the characteristics we attribute to them. It is this felling of abjection that compels the woman to feel horror toward that aspect of her body and motivates her to change it. "*It's repugnant*", remember Sofia's word towards her own neck, her dermatologist stated, 'turkey neck'.

As neoliberalism promotes individual responsibility, self-improvement, and market-driven solutions to social issues, plastic surgery and aesthetic medicine serve as tools of improvement but also to self-governance and regulation. As Maria, Sofia, and I are socialized to perceive enhancing our body's attractiveness to value ourselves, not for others but for our own sake. This is believed to elevate our self-esteem, satisfaction, and overall well-being. In this way, individuals are encouraged to govern themselves in accordance with norms of beauty and productivity, thereby internalizing and embodying forms of control over their bodies and lives. Anthropologist Carmen Alvaro Jarrín has usefully introduced the concept of "plastic governmentality" (2017), which offers a framework for comprehending how plastic surgery intersects with neoliberal governance, biopolitical control, and social inequality. While plastic surgery may present opportunities for self-enhancement and social advancement, it also perpetuates disparities and exclusions: access to cosmetic procedures is often restricted to those who can afford them, thus reinforcing existing hierarchies based on race, class, and gender.

It is also imperative to notice that female bodies are not animalized in the same way. As I am writing from my perspective, as a white, cisgender, middle-class heterosexual woman (the same as my friends Sofia and Maria), I am aware that what may seem brutalized to me is a daily reality for other women. Bodies of Black women, bodies of Indigenous women, bodies of Asian women, queer bodies, non-conforming bodies, bodies with disabilities, and so on, are placed in animistic states. Although these bodies are often likened to animals such as gazelles, giraffes, or panthers (Pussetti 2020) it is important to recognize that this comparison serves to perpetuate stereotypical notions about their physical attributes and behaviors. This perpetuation of labels is not merely a coincidental occurrence but rather reflects a broader societal trend influenced by androcentric market forces. In this context, the portrayal of certain bodies as exotic or hypersexualized (as the black female bodies usually are) aligns with the prevailing preferences and desires within consumer markets that are predominantly shaped by patriarchal norms and values. Thus, while seemingly innocuous, these comparisons contribute to the objectification and marginalization of individuals whose bodies do not conform to narrow beauty standards.

Meanwhile, the female body is not exclusively depicted using animal metaphors. Alongside terms like 'bunny lines'; 'crow's feet'; 'bat wings', and 'turkey neck', there are also references to 'love handles'; 'banana rolls (a type of excess bum fat that accumulates just below the buttock area); 'saddle bags' (the accumulation of fat deposits on the outer thighs); 'marionette lines'. While the former may suggest endearing affection, reminiscent of the handles where

love might cling (referring to the sides of the hips), the latter are perhaps more disconcerting, as no one would willingly identify with being compared to a puppet, stripped of life, agency, and autonomy.



Figure 4 © Women with 'turkey neck'. Generated by OpenAI. ChatGPT (GPT-3.5), 2024.

Chimeric Thoughts

Like Haraway's Cyborg, where the animal/human frontier is blurred, I propose to think the Chimera, as a mythological being, embodying parts of animals - such as a lion's head, a goat's body, and a serpent's - to encompass not only physical characteristics but also the social, cultural, and technological dimensions that today contribute to the construction of femininity. As it can be linked to the notion of and the reshaping of the human experience in the contemporary era, in the context of contemporary aesthetics, it endorses the representation of the diverse and fluid aspects of 'uncanny' female identity.

Abjection, closely intertwined with the Freudian notion of the uncanny, denotes something that is simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar, eliciting feelings of discomfort or unease. The "Uncanny Aesthetics," as proposed by Carmen Alvaro Jarrín and Chiara Pussetti (2021), contemplate the ways in which we are reshaping the human experience in the contemporary era. As they invite us to explore the myriad ways in which these changes manifest in our cultural productions, artistic expressions, and everyday experiences - from the rise of humanoid robots to the manipulation of digital identities, from the emergence of bioart to the commodification of genetic modification, our encounters with the uncanny in contemporary aesthetics compel us to reconsider traditional understandings of humanity, identity, and existence.

I propose to embrace the Chimera, in a way to reconsider traditional understandings of femininity and to embrace the complexities and contradictions inherent in contemporary representations of women. This instigates us to engage with the uncanny aspects of female identity and to navigate the ever-evolving landscape of gender and technology with curiosity but also with critical reflection.

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Photo-essays

Barbara, the pink superheroine.

Reflections on a Self-Portrait Study

Visual Ethnography

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Abstract

Barbara is a reflection. Barbara is a superheroine who defies norms, rules and measures by occupying the space she claims in the world. Barbara is a social critique and at the same time a healing, a way of processing trauma. Barbara is the double of the artist, the anthropologist, and potentially every other woman in the mirror. The artist's gaze and the anthropologist's pen give rise to an exchange of experiences and lived experiences, celebrating an anti-Barbie in a paroxysm of pink.

Keywords

Gender; Beauty norms; Femininity; Anthropology of body; Art-based ethnography.

The author

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The author

Evija Laivina (1978) was born in Latvia. Laivina studied Contemporary Art and Contextualised Practice at the University of Highlands and Islands and graduated in 2019 with BA Hons first class degree. Her photography has been recognized by LensCulture 2018 Portrait Award for her project Beauty Warriors and was nominated for Henri Nannen Award in Germany in 2019. Laivina is a photographer and visual artist. Her practice focuses on identity, mental health, beauty, body image, and social media. She lives in Inverness and works at her studio at Inverness Creative Academy.

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An anthropologist and an artist meet, recognise and confront each other, create a friendship and a collaboration around the theme of the female body. The hegemonic standards of beauty; the treatments women are willing to undergo to achieve unattainable ideals; the desire for acceptance; the fear of difference; the discrimination against non-normative bodies; the violence of aesthetic standards that reflect structures of inequality and differentiation. Since 2021, the award-winning Latvian photographer Evija Laivina (www.evilaivina.com) and I have been moving forward at the same time: her images tell and inspire my work in a visual language; my ethnographic research nourishes and complements her artistic expression: we are dancing to the same rhythm, going in the same direction, with the same theoretical concerns. Evija Laivina is a Latvian-born photographer known for her conceptual and surreal self-portrait photography. She studied Contemporary Art Practice at the University of the Highlands and Islands in Scotland. Her work often explores themes of identity, self-perception, beauty standards, non-traditional beauty routines, and societal expectations, and she frequently incorporates elements of fantasy and whimsy into her images. Through her distinctive visual style and thought-provoking concepts, Evija Laivina has established herself as a notable figure in the realm of conceptual photography. Her work has been exhibited internationally and has garnered recognition for its creativity and social commentary.

Evija Laivina had worked with me on the realisation of the exhibition *Be Fu**ing Perfect*, which took place in Lisbon in September 2022, and a high level of trust had already been established prior to the project. Evija was invited to work with me as a co-author and was involved in the results of the anthropological research. With her photographs, Evija made a significant contribution to changing the way we think about and experience our physicality and our being in the world in the age of perfection. In the process of preparing the *Be Fu**ing Perfect* exhibition that I organised, we began a very close collaboration and discovered that we were constantly mirroring issues, questions and personal experiences. When I was developing my ethnography on minimally invasive aesthetic treatments that can reshape the body into normative shapes and volumes, the photographer who has been working with me in recent years produced the *Beauty Warriors* series, in which she humorously critiques contemporary beauty standards by depicting herself undergoing unconventional beauty treatments using everyday objects. The series challenges viewers to reconsider their notions of beauty and the lengths to which individuals may go to conform to societal ideals. When I started working on fatphobia, the artist on whom I mirrored my research as a visual double of my work produced the *Fat Series*. When I moved on to the subject of ageing, she started the *Silver Series*.

This special issue dedicated to reflections on reflections, with the mirror as the central metaphor and allegory, could only end with a photo essay presenting some images from the new Barbara series by Evija Laivina. Evija and I have decided to work together again, mirroring each other in a female dialogue, in the presentation of the photo essay dedicated to Barbara. Barbara was born from Evija's imagination as her artistic double, at the same time as I started working with *Hacked Barbies*. In my eyes, Barbara is an anti-Barbie: she is a superheroine, a powerful, strong, uninhibited woman. Who is Barbara? Barbara is Evija's alter ego character she has been working with since January 2021, when she returned in her studio after first Covid-19 lockdown. She was not allowed any visitors in studios, so she couldn't work with the model, and she decided to try self portrait photography. Evija tried several different characters until she fell in love with the blond lady who she called Barbara. Evija started with some studio shots, she used studio lights if she worked at night and natural daylight whenever she worked during the day. With some time, she built her confidence and took Barbara out on locations and sometimes she worked with an assistant who helped her to overcome anxiety to work in public.

In the series of photographs, the author tried to understand who Barbara is and what issues she can talk about through this character. Sometimes Evija plans shoots very carefully, controlling how she appears in front of the camera, sometimes she just intuitively works without planning. The photographer puts her camera on a tripod with 50 mm or 17-40 mm lens and she uses a remote controller or phone linked to the camera. The artistic process is very multidimensional in terms of the author's own personal feelings and connection to Barbara. Every photograph carries a narrative, ranging from direct to abstract, often stemming from the author's unconscious mind and shaped by her memories, traumas, or visions of her future self. Some photographs serve as a raw expression of her feelings toward the world and her body as a whole. Describing these experiences in words is challenging; hence, Evija turns to photography and painting as mediums to articulate herself more effectively. Visual expression resonates more strongly with her than verbal communication. Evija often gets questions who her inspiration is. Usually, people mention Cindy Sherman, but she never had close connection to her work. The first self-portrait artists who she was fascinated with was Francesca Woodman. Evija thinks at the moment her favourite artist is Iu Susiraja, her photographs have spoken to her on all levels. But she tries not to study their work too much, fearing from the strong influence. She wants to discover her own visual language.

Barbara represents both the author and someone distinct from her. Evija says to me that human identity can possess multiple dimensions and is not limited to a singular persona. We have the capacity to embody more than one identity simultaneously. For instance, Evija can exist as Evija- her memories and experiences, past, present and future, Evija Laivina the artist who creates her own world, and Evija the mother, wife, daughter, friend. Evija Laivina encompasses both an abstract concept of who she is and a tangible physical presence. Barbara is a part of the artist, yet she exists as a separate entity that Evija can observe from her own perspective rather than hers. There may be terminology or a specific formulation to describe this concept. Evija is describing her lived experience rather than presenting a theoretical framework.

A significant part of the artist's story revolves around dealing with events from her past that have possibly influenced all her relationships and decision-making processes, as well as how she develops trust. Like many women, she too has experienced sexual assault. It feels imperative to address this topic, despite her apprehension about confronting shame and the emotional turmoil it may stir. Even now, recalling these memories evokes physical pain, along with feelings of regret, anger, guilt, and shame, although she understands that none of it was her fault. She has always harboured negative perceptions of her body—feeling like it was dirty, fat, with rough skin, and never truly loving herself despite being a healthy weight with flawless skin and perfect in all ways. She yearned for love, yet struggled to maintain relationships, often placing too much trust in others and not understanding how to stand up for herself. She felt worthless. Art, the act of creation, has played a crucial role in her healing journey. Through Barbara, Evija can translate her emotions into visual form rather than articulating them verbally. She learns to look at herself from a different perspective.

Through photography Evija learns to love her body again. "I must admit - she said - it's not easy sometimes, as I can see ageing process and inevitable body changes. But I can tell I feel much happier now than I was twenty years ago, when I had no confidence and made poor decisions". The process of creating makes her stronger and builds her self-confidence. Speaking out also helps also in recognising her trauma response better and she can take conscious actions and be in control of her emotions. As I have discussed extensively in other works (Pussetti 2013, 2016, 2018), artistic practices can be profoundly therapeutic for individuals who have experienced trauma, including sexual abuse. Engaging in artistic expression empowers survivors by allowing them to externalize their feelings, and to reclaim agency over their experiences and can

aid in the healing journey, offering a safe, metaphorical and non-verbal outlet for expressing complex emotions that may be difficult to articulate verbally. In creating art, individuals can assert control over their narratives, transforming feelings of helplessness into feelings of empowerment and self-determination. As trauma often results in a disconnection from the body, artistic practices that involve body representation or movement can help survivors reconnect with their bodies in a safe and supportive environment, fostering a sense of embodiment and self-awareness. In this particular case, the character of Barbara - created by the artist's imagination - creates new insights, strengths, and resources for coping with the trauma and more empowering narrative of resilience, transformation, overcoming, and hope. Through this photographic exercise, Evija embarked on an intense journey of self-recognition, self-exploration and introspection, inviting the audience to explore their identities, values, and beliefs in relation to their experiences of trauma. By creating art that symbolizes her journey from victimhood to superhero, the artist can visually represent her inner resilience and capacity for growth.

For the anthropologist, observing the work from the audience's point of view, Barbara is a process. An artistic journey and a journey of healing, an act of identity assertion and courage. Barbara is a collective icon that speaks of Evija but also of and to all women. Barbara is a beautiful woman in her forties. She is alive and strong, with her passions, secrets, dreams and insecurities. Barbara is a reflection, she is an avatar, she is a challenge, she is a superheroine. Her surreal world draws the author and the audience in, and sometimes unexplainable things happen. Over the months, Barbara has grown and changed: sometimes Barbara is a self-portrait and sometimes she is another person, and these dynamics can change simultaneously. She is a product of uncertainty, constant questioning and analysis. Looking through Barbara as if in a mirror, Evija perceives things about herself. At the same time, the audience discovers new meanings and possible interpretations. For me, Barbara is a revenge. A revenge like the one we took in the workshops we called Hacked Barbie, which were a useful research tool during the project dedicated to hegemonic ideals of beauty and the violence of the norm. For us, as for many girls in the Euro-American world, the iconic Barbie, with her smooth, slender plastic body, big blue eyes and long blonde hair, was a benchmark of feminine perfection in childhood play: a perfect emblem of hegemonic Euro-centric standards. Slim, toned, long-legged, eternally young, white, blonde, heterosexual, cisgender, hairless, unmarked, slim waisted, high-breasted and statuesque, always wearing make-up, sexy but anatomically incomplete due to her lack of genitals, Barbie has over the years become for many women an emblem of the violence of the normative body and consumer society.

Full of contradictions, she has nevertheless remained present in our imagination as an object of fascination, conflict and resentment. It is certainly this complex relationship with Barbie and the ideal of perfection she represents that gave rise to the series of Barbie Hacked workshops that I conducted with Isabel Pires and Federica Manfredi, inviting more than one hundred and fifty women of different ages, backgrounds and social classes to "hack" or transform a Barbie doll in order to reproduce in the doll's plastic body their own somatic biography, their marks, wounds and histories in the real world. The hacked Barbies have stretch marks, cellulite, wrinkles, birthmarks, spots, hair, scars, fat, tattoos, scars, weak or grey hair, limpness, vitiligo, genitalia, trousers, sanitary towels, a caesarean scar, but they may not have a breast or a leg, for example. We collect Barbies that are transgender, transvestite, elderly, disabled, crying, tired, betrayed, humiliated and scarred by domestic violence. By altering the doll's perfect figure, real women have spoken out about motherhood, depression, social inequalities, labour market inequalities, discrimination, fatphobia, sexual abuse and the racialisation of the body.

The superheroine Barbara that Evija proposes to us overcomes this conflict with Barbie perfection. Barbara emerges from Evija's subconscious, her

intuition, her play. Several layers of meaning are condensed in each shot. Barbara melting with desire for the forbidden fruit; hungry Barbara longing for the denied food; lascivious Barbara using hunger as a metaphor for sexual desire. Barbara is free, with her bright pink clothes, like a superhero costume. . Barbara talks about sensuality, sin, temptation. Barbara shows herself; she reflects herself in several mirror fragments; she hides herself. Barbara moves fluidly between genres, plays with crossing boundaries, appears, disappears and then shows her true nature of fiction, illusion, avatar. Barbara is the anti-norm that proudly defends itself as such. Barbara is herself, but she is also Evija, who gave birth to her, and all the women who recognise themselves in her and follow her, and who, in this process of sharing experiences, continually bring into play their senses, their imagination, their emotions, their collective imaginings and unconscious expectations.

We are constantly bombarded with messages that reinforce the need to 'discipline' and 'tame' the female body - its shapes, weight, smell, fluids, appetites, contours, protrusions, the skin that covers it - in order to bring it closer to an 'ideal' of beauty and femininity that in reality few women fit into. Femininity is a *mise-en-scène* that can only be achieved through disciplinary practices that control the size, shape, surface and movements of the body and display it as an ornamental element. There is a strong normative pressure on women to engage in what we define as 'beauty work', an activity in which one is expected to invest considerable amounts of time and money in order to meet very restrictive standards of beauty which, at least in the European context, value an elegant, pleasing, discreet, delicate figure that occupies a tiny space and does not disturb too much. Few things are still as frightening as a woman who takes up too much space, who eats excessively, who follows her impulses and satisfies her desires, who transgresses the norms, who exceeds the space allotted to her, who does not control her bodily excrescences, who follows the pleasure principle, who has voracious appetites, who goes beyond the rigid limits imposed on her by society.

Barbara occupies the space in the world that she decides to occupy, without confining herself to the narrow space that society reserves for women. Barbara nurtures the hope that, in the near future, we will be able to make our ideals of beauty more complete, more varied and more inclusive, so that everyone can be as they are, in their specificity, feeling beautiful and sensual, loving their own image in the mirror, occupying the space they want in the world with freedom.



Figure 1 Mirror



Figure 2 Mirror and Masks



Figure 3 Reflections



Figure 4 Protection



Figure 5 Silenced



Figure 6 Plastic doll



Figure 7 Good Girl



Figure 8 Identity Crisis



Figure 9 Shadows, reflexions and doubles



Figure 10 Hiding behind curtains



Figure 11 Revealing secrets (drawing the curtains)



Figure 12 The Feast (but not participating in the pleasure)



Figure 13 The Cake (but not participating in the pleasure)



Figure 14 The Apple (the sin, the witch, the temptation)



Figure 15 Ripe cherries (eating them with pleasure)



Figure 16 The costume (release)



Figure 17 Building Barbara



Figure 18 Being Barbara



Figure 19 Mirroring Barbara



Figure 20 The Pink Dream

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video-essays

Be Fu**ing Perfect:

An archive of enhancement practices in Portugal

Visual Ethnography

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Synopsis

this documentary is a short compendium of a vast investigation conducted in the Lisbon Grand Area during the years of Covid about body modification practices, enhancement of beauty and construction of aesthetics in modern Western society. The author likes to think of it as a canva opened by a cut by Lucio Fontana: a wild unexpected gush of red lipstick on a pristine white washed sheet of paper which opens the door to another dimension which has been silenced and now wants to scream its opinion to the top of its lungs. Personal trainers, poets, professors, tattoo and make-up artists are just a few of the voices which will open the pandora box on how heinous the social pressure about «being perfect» has been built and is perpetrated nowadays.

The author

Francesco was lucky enough to be introduced to the arts at a very young age. Around the same time he discovered how harsh life can be. He therefore decided to navigate it despite being mostly lost in the fog with a few clear lighthouses sparking their lights in the distance. Sincerity, curiosity and determination guided his route thus far. He then continues to travel the world while trying to faithfully portray whom-ever entrusts him with his story. He holds a Post Graduation in Visual and Digital Cultures from ISCTE-IUL (2011) and a M.A. in Visual and Media Anthropology from Freie Universität Berlin (2013). He has a very peculiar style which respects the academic background which forged his critical thinking, while also embracing a more intuitive and direct approach. It seems like people keep wanting to work with him because of those characteristics and his unique way of doing documentaries.

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Methodology: In the mind of the author it was very difficult to synthesize a few years of research in a short documentary commissioned to him just a handful of months before the years-long process was coming to an end. He ended up choosing a work of subtraction where the main topics were given by the researchers and then he delved into it while asking questions to the participants who agreed to be interviewed. The kaleidoscopic portrait that came out of it is a sincere portrayal of the artists, scholars and research informants who shared the varied layered and multifaceted world of body modification that the project aimed to investigate.

(HD, 30' 18" Portugal and Italy, 2022).
<https://vimeo.com/804598652>



When I was contacted by Prof. Chiara Pussetti to create “visual clues” to disseminate the EXCEL project I felt humble and scared: was I the right person? Would I be able to do so in a faithful way towards her research’s informants? I decided I would accept the challenge - as I did with past projects - convinced that my contribution could at least spark more interest about the project and elicit a fruitful conversation. I ended up learning a lot, getting to know interesting people and creating a documentary that exceed my expectations in terms of depth and density.

This documentary opened the doors to the more curious and attentive audience of both the academic and the artistic world that investigate the use of the body, for those who put to the test the meaning of hegemonic beauty and question what to age means. The publication you are reading helps to rethink what “perfection” means and brings back to the center the importance of inner happiness and peace first, highlighting how all this crosses our bodily experience first and foremost.

Out of topic

Articles

How does a students' neighborhood look?

Visibility and heritage in Casal Bertone (Rome, Italy)

Visual Ethnography

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Abstract

This article adopts a mixed ethnographic and architectural urban regeneration perspective to explore how the heritage and visibility of different social groups in Casal Bertone, a neighborhood in Rome, influence power dynamics and the urban configuration. The study describes how the elderly group's visibility is achieved through an assemblage of symbols, practices, and material elements, such as civic activism, local memories, urban paths, heritage constructions, and architectural styles, creating a meaningful urban environment focused on the legendary railway worker figure. However, preserving this heritage risks rendering university students and their needs invisible. The research indicates that Casal Bertone has undervalued the presence of students by not incorporating distinct architectural features that recognize their importance, relegating them and their public structures to mere logistical consideration. The case of Casal Bertone underscores the necessity to architecturally and rhetorically acknowledge students, fostering their active participation in daily neighborhood life and heritage management. This engagement is crucial for enhancing their visibility, a cornerstone for the political agencies of any social group.

Keywords

Visibility; Public space; Urban Studies; University Students; Heritage.

The authors

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Mahtab Seyedabadi: Architect, urban designer, and translator with international experience gained from working in both Iran and Italy. Currently, educating at the University of Sapienza, Rome, in the field of urban regeneration. Specialized in urban regeneration and human behaviors in public spaces.

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Introduction

Urban regeneration is an integrated vision and intervention aimed at resolving issues and sustainably improving the multifaceted conditions of an urban context. A key aspect of urban regeneration practices is their inclination toward social, cultural, economic, architectural, and environmental changes (Scarpelli and Romano 2011; Leary and McCarthy 2013; Roberts et al. 2017). In specific contexts such changes may face resistance, often justified by negative experiences with top-down projects neglected or driven by vested interests. Local communities may perceive these projects as threats to delicately balanced conditions. To mitigate these issues and avoid significant resource wastage, urban regeneration, renowned for its multidisciplinary approach, increasingly incorporates quantitative and qualitative socio-cultural analysis tools, ensuring thorough stakeholder engagement. While effective, this methodology can suffer from weaknesses linked to stakeholder selection.

What happens when certain stakeholders deliberately remain invisible and silent, while another group dominates public spaces and controls the narrative of a locality's self-representation? Why do some groups choose to remain invisible, and what are the detrimental effects of such behavior? How do urban spaces and their diverse narratives influence these processes?

Based on field research conducted in the mid-eastern Casal Bertone neighborhood of Rome, employing ethnography, anonymous surveys, mapping, and stylistic-architectural study, we present a case study that addresses these issues and seeks to answer related questions. Firstly, we will challenge the naturalized visual perceptions of the residents. Secondly, we will offer anthropological reflections on the socio-cultural, political, and environmental implications of pronounced visibility (pertaining to the elderly group) and profound invisibility (pertaining to university students).

Compared to research on other groups (Cancellieri and Ostanel 2015; Scandurra 2017; Ostanel 2020), there has been relatively little exploration of the relationship between invisibility and the engagement of middle social groups (Currid-Halkett 2017) — individuals who do not fit into the categories of the marginalized or the wealthy (which include university students in Italy). Focusing ethnographically on the everyday living practices of both Italian and international university students in Casal Bertone, our aim is to highlight their latent potential to shape the community and their challenges in voicing and advocating for changes that reflect their perspectives and needs. To achieve this descriptive objective, our initial approach involved investigating the perceptions and dynamics of visibility among different social groups in the neighborhood.

Drawing upon the ideas of Hannah Arendt (1958), Michel Foucault (1963, 1975), and Jürgen Habermas (1989), scholars across disciplines argue that visibility and co-visibility in public spaces hold significant political implications (Calhoun 1993; Brighenti 2010). This visibility, or inter-visibility, is integral to the concept of “publicness”, involving the freedom to express and make visible one's opinions through bodily presence in an inclusive public sphere. This discussion addresses the intersection of the politics of recognition and social justice with the embodied experience in public spaces, asserting a secure space for existence, self-determination, and political action (Fraser and Honneth 2004).

The visibility conceived by these interpretations goes beyond the “raw” sensorial sphere, intersecting with the complex domains of materiality, cultural values, aesthetics, economies, and politics. As shown by many scholars (Gibson 1979; Goodwin 1996; Ingold 2005; Pink 2021), there is no such thing as merely visible, but cultural ways of perceiving that (re)construct a given subject visible (or invisible) according to the features of the environment (Lynch 1960, Bateson 1988; Classen 1993; Ingold 2000; Kohn 2013). Following the works of Brighenti (2007, 2010c, 2022), the relationship between visibility, publicness, and a politics of recognition is far from being a simple positive association. As

shown by Foucault's *oeuvre*, visibility constantly oscillates between an empowering pole (visibility as recognition) and a disempowering pole (visibility as control). "Thresholds of visibility come into play here" and "there is a minimum and a maximum of what we may call 'fair visibility' – regardless of the fairness criteria we want to adopt" (Brighenti 2007: 329-330). All these observations characterize the management of visibility as a complex socio-material and localized undertaking, constantly giving rise to new spatial arrangements and contextual politics of visibility (Arab 2013).

In the context of Casal Bertone, situated in the 4th Municipality of Rome near the Tiburtina Railroad Station (2 km) and Sapienza University of Rome's main campus (4 km), the neighborhood provides an ideal setting to explore the politics of visibility due to its distinctive identity and characteristics. Unlike neighboring areas like San Lorenzo and Pigneto, known for their identities associated with "university student" and "movida-driven" (Semi 2015; Cozza 2022), Casal Bertone is internally and externally narrated as a "peaceful island" or a family-friendly reality with a "vintage Roman style" (D'Andreta 1995; Fabrizi 2019). The neighborhood withstands the "threats" posed by the youthful and nocturnal lifestyle associated with the aforementioned areas, along with the changes brought about by a globalized capital, by embracing the self-image of a "village within the city" (Thomassen and Clough Marinaro 2014), where individuals prioritize slowness (Figure 1), interpersonal connections, and a nurturing approach towards neighborhood spaces (Figure 2).



Figure 1 Sign "Do not run" placed on Giovanni Pittaluga Street, Casal Bertone, Rome. Photo by Mahtab Seyedabadi, 2023.



Figure 2 Sign: “Respect this small flower bed; it is a drop of beauty that is good for all of us”, placed on a tree in Cesare Ricotti Street, the location of the daily street market of Casal Bertone, Rome. Photo by Mahtab Seyedabadi, 2024.

Despite this narrative, our field research paints a different and more complex picture. Well-connected to Sapienza University City and hosting a public student residence with 475 beds, along with a relatively small neighborhood size and affordable rental costs, Casal Bertone is far from being uninhabited by young university students (both Italian and foreign). They are simply “out of sight”, or in other words, remain invisible compared to other groups in Casal Bertone, such as the elderly, who are the most visible and, thanks to a particular cultural and architectural heritage that we will describe, the most active in the neighborhood’s public spaces.

Even when characterized by good intentions, as we will show in the case of Casal Bertone, in a globalized world where interfacing with proximate and distant otherness is a daily affair, the existence of a social group that legitimizes the preservation of a neighborhood identity through a cultural and architectural heritage can negatively impact the experience of other inhabitants (Harrison et al. 2020). This is particularly true because this “traditionalist” concept of conservation perceives homogeneity of class, race, and age as a natural strength to be defended against the threats of otherness and change, whether the change affects the material sphere, the symbolic framework, or both. From this perspective, the de-essentializing work of the anthropologist goes hand in hand with the pro-change mission of the urban regeneration designer. The former describes and critiques the endless human reconstruction of identities, memories, and heritages, while the latter maps, interprets, and promotes inclusive and sustainable socio-spatial arrangements. Since both disciplines share the common ground of the urban environment, in addressing these issues, we will endeavor to overcome the dichotomy between symbols and materiality (Bateson 1988; Ingold 2000; Latour 2007, 2010; Kohn 2013), placing specific attention on the assemblage that reveals the “permanent tension between, on one hand, procedures of stabilization, order, consensus, hegemony, pre-assignment and, on the other, the irreducible plurality of each territory, necessarily mirrored in every territorial constitution and regime” (Brighenti 2010b: 53).

A mixed methodology for an (in) visible neighborhood

As illustrated by various ethnographies of the senses, in modern Western ontology and contemporary common usage, vision is often conceptualized as a detached, rational, and objective process, hierarchically positioned as the

most reliable among sensory forms of knowledge (Howes 1991; 2003; Classen 1993). From this “naturalistic” perspective, vision is considered detached because it is assumed not to interfere with the observed object, rational because it is governed by the free will of a subject depicted as self-aware, and efficient because it is perceived as providing objective and clear data. Moving beyond these stereotypical views on vision necessitates exploring an ecological phenomenology of the visible, where vision is culturally and materially influenced, and where “vision is not only vision of something but through something” (Brighenti 2010b: 13; Goodwin 1996; Ingold 2005; Pink 2021). The visibility of a social group must therefore be understood as the result of an assemblage of factors. In the case of Casal Bertone, it is important to observe how the urban layout, architectural style, and rhetoric strongly impact the perception of what is visible and what is invisible (Latour and Yaneva 2008; Stender et al. 2021).

Starting from an ethnographic focus on the everyday interstitial dimension, we initiated a research project aimed at denaturalizing the taken-for-granted and examining its effects on visual perception. (Bourdieu 1965, 1977), seeking to capture the viewpoints of those observing the communal spaces of a Roman neighborhood and its inhabitants (Scarpelli 2020). In exploring the intricate dynamics of urban spaces, it is essential to consider the works of Erving Goffman (1963, 1963b), particularly concerning stigma and behavior in public settings. Goffman, renowned for his studies on the theatrical performances of daily life structured akin to a paradigm of actors and spectators, illustrates how the “normal appearance” of a social setting paradoxically corresponds to its invisibility. While the normal remains unnoticed, the anomalous – bearing visible signs of its otherness – inevitably “catches the eye” and disrupts the invisibility and anonymity of urban subjectivity described by numerous scholars of city life (Jacobs 1961, Hannerz 1980). Inspired by these profound insights, our exploration goes beyond mere visibility for some groups and invisibility for others. Through the denaturalization of visibility mentioned earlier, we delve into the underlying reasons for these distinctions, critically reflecting on the diverse perspectives voiced by the neighborhood’s residents. Given that recognition of others in urban spaces often hinges on categories, stereotypes, and social typifications (Lofland 1998; Link and Jo 2001; Simonicca 2018), and recognizing that the environment shapes a place’s identity in non-neutral ways (Lynch 1960, Ingold 2000; Kohn 2013; Low 2017), we examine how the dynamics of visibility and invisibility reverberate within the architectural framework of Casal Bertone (Latour and Yaneva 2008; Stender et al. 2021).

As underscored by our emphasis on both cultural and architectural dimensions, this article emerges from a collaborative investigation spanning two years, initiated in January 2022 by Fulvio Cozza and Mahtab Seyedabadi. Integrating ethnography with practices in urban regeneration and architectural design, our primary focus has been on exploring the use of common spaces by young individuals and young adults, with a specific focus on the university population surrounding Sapienza University City (Europe’s largest university by enrollment, as stated on its website, with 122,000 students). The decision to conduct primary fieldwork in Casal Bertone and our methodological approach stemmed from a blend of serendipitous opportunities and epistemological reflections.

Like any urban fieldwork, these observations inevitably cannot encompass the entirety of lived experiences within a city (Simonicca 2018). Rather, they are specifically aimed at gathering the experiences of the student community in a setting distinct from the moral panic rhetoric surrounding various locations of Roman youth nightlife (Semi 2015; Cozza 2022). Indeed, by positioning ourselves just outside the areas considered part of the “*movida romana*”, such as San Lorenzo, Pigneto, and Piazza Bologna, we realized that working in Casal Bertone would allow us to explore the student experience and how students are perceived by other neighborhood residents without succumbing to mainstream sensationalism. Moreover, the presence of a large

public student residence in this neighborhood, notably housing students from non-European countries such as Azerbaijan, Iran, India, Turkey, and Kazakhstan, provided an opportunity to explore university students' practices from diverse socio-cultural perspectives and their unique views on Rome, Italy, and the broader Western context.

Since January 2022, Mahtab Seyedabadi has resided in Casal Bertone, sharing a rental house with other young roommates (both Italian and foreign). Her firsthand experience of the student reality in the area, including the public student residence and dining hall – particularly significant for the sizable Iranian community – has greatly facilitated her understanding. This experience has also allowed her to personally confront the challenges faced by foreign university students in Rome, originating from Iran, and to establish trusting and open relationships with various participants in our research. Pursuing an architectural perspective on urban regeneration for her master's thesis at Sapienza University of Rome, Seyedabadi has been compiling a visual archive of Casal Bertone since 2022, comprising images, photo journals, videos, maps, and design projects (Figure 3).



Figure 3 Urban regeneration proposal for Via Domenico De Dominicis in Casal Bertone. The project aims to make the area around the public student residence more functional, green, livable, and distinctive, currently used as a parking area. The installation of a tram line, in addition to aligning with the neighborhood's heritage, aims to alleviate the systematic congestion on the transportation routes between Tiburtina Railroad Station, Pigneto, and Largo Preneste. Photo and design by Mahtab Seyedabadi, 2024.

Her study aims to revitalize neglected areas and buildings in Casal Bertone by designing public green spaces that foster community integration and connection among university students. Initially, this work highlighted the severe shortage of shared spaces in the neighborhood, concentrating all social activities in Santa Maria Consolatrice Square and the Casal Bertone shopping center. Secondly, during her observations, she noted residents' reluctance to envision or embrace urban changes. Alongside widespread skepticism toward initiatives expanding communal green spaces and community areas, Seyedabadi observed university students often portraying Casal Bertone as an oasis amid perceived threatening and unreliable areas like San Lorenzo and Pigneto.

Having lived in the neighboring area of Casal Bruciato for over twenty years, Fulvio Cozza's immersion into the fieldwork of Casal Bertone has also been facilitated by some pre-existing friendly connections at the outset of this research, as well as by the knowledge of privileged interlocutors from a previous ethnography of archaeological practices that allowed him to explore the issues faced by university students in Rome (Cozza 2022; 2023). Specifically, he explored how new generations connect with cultural heritage and construct belonging through the identification of Rome's monumental landmarks and past.

The methodology employed can be summarized as a framework combining the collection of place narratives with direct observations and the exploration of the dissonance between local emic and etic perspectives, as well as group visibilities. The primary objective was to deconstruct and critique the prevailing invisibility characterizing the narrative about university students among Casal Bertone's residents. In seeking to "visualize" student practices in common spaces and beyond, our research proceeded through several stages. Initially, we both, engaged in ethnographic fieldwork within the neighborhood's common spaces, documenting activities and events through ethnographic journals, photography, videography, and mapping, spanning both weekdays and weekends, day and night. Secondly, focusing on issues highlighted by neighborhood residents during fieldwork, we designed and administered an online anonymous questionnaire circulated among selected WhatsApp, Facebook, and Telegram groups by key informants¹.

Building upon this collection of "viewpoints" (Figure 4), strengthened by subsequent interviews, personal communications, focus groups, and participant observation, we conducted path and route surveys in Casal Bertone. This involved photographing identical itineraries at different times and days, compiling visual diaries (Faeta 2003; Conord and Cuny 2014; Pink 2021; Meloni 2023). We documented who utilized specific paths and for what purposes, identifying discrepancies between rhetoric and actual practices to unveil insights overlooked in our interlocutors' narratives. The first example, university students were present throughout the neighborhood but visibly congregated only in certain spots due to limited interaction with other groups. Second, the elderly's protective role toward children flourished in the neighborhood's sole motor-free areas. Lastly, despite residents' perception of Casal Bertone as predominantly white, visual evidence did not substantiate this claim. This approach allowed us to identify neighborhood landmarks and explore how their materiality, coupled with compelling narratives, shaped distinct cultural heritage. We also mapped out how this cultural heritage influenced the behaviors of diverse inhabitants.

¹ The questionnaire, comprising 38 questions on the neighborhood's identity, its relationship with surrounding areas, spatial characteristics, and perceptions of visibility among different social groups (teenagers, university students, families with children, the elderly, and foreigners), garnered responses from 42 anonymous volunteers: 12 university students (28.5%) and 10 individuals over fifty (24%). Naturally, given its distribution through key informants' social networks, the questionnaire offers a partial view of Casal Bertone. Nevertheless, the sociometric data obtained and the voluntary nature of responses reflect a sample of residents accustomed to expressing their views, demonstrating a vested interest in the neighborhood's future, identity, and current configuration. While the questionnaire may not encompass all perspectives on Casal Bertone, it served as a valuable tool enriching our ethnographic understanding of visibility and related perceptions.

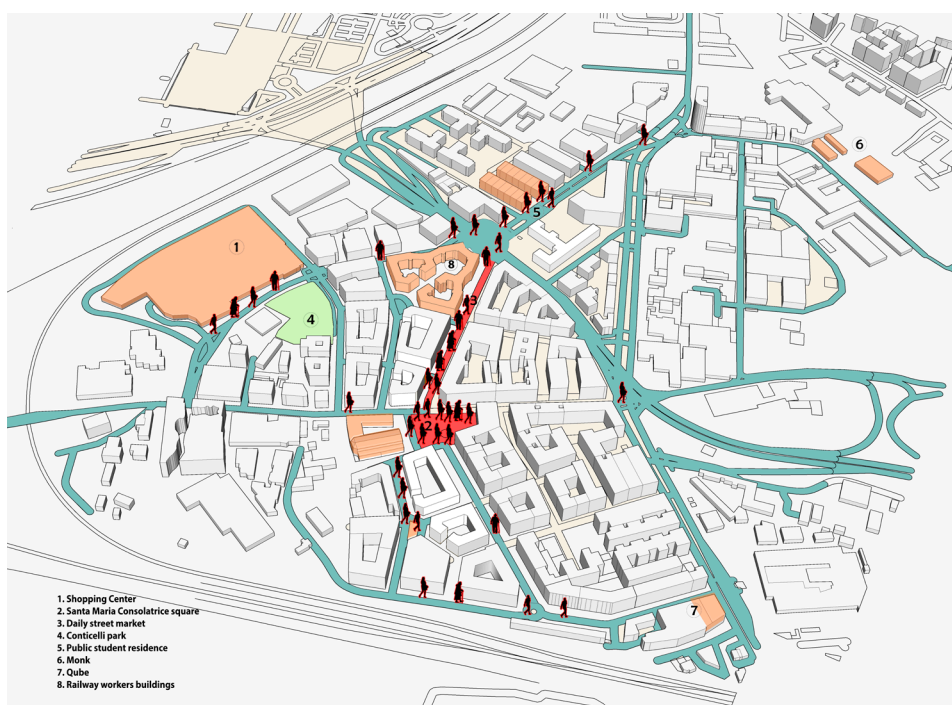


Figure 4 Average distribution in the space of the 42 participants of the anonymous questionnaire. Map by Mahtab Seyedabadi, 2023.

On the one hand, this methodology gave us the possibility of “materializing” the presence of students in areas where they seemed to be invisible. On the other hand, the mapping tasks revealed that the places typically frequented by students were “hard to read” (Lynch 1960; de Koning 2009, 2015; Sletto 2009), and through the ethnographic lens, we sought to reflect on the fact that, in some cases, invisibility seemed to result from the students’ intentional actions, facilitated by the local social and spatial framework. The motivations implied by these practices will be described and analyzed in the next section, following a description of the Casal Bertone neighborhood identity and materiality: an assemblage hegemonized by the elders.

The neighborhood of the railway worker

To deeply contextualize Casal Bertone, encompassing its dynamics of visibility, identities, materialities, movements, and architectural “styles”, we initiate with a map detailing the neighborhood’s landmarks and pathways (Figure 5). Rather than presenting a “de-historicized history” of Casal Bertone extracted from established literature (D’Andreta 1995; Kim et al. 2012; Capoferri 2017; Fabrizi 2019), our approach is to highlight the inherently non-neutral interplay between spatial usage, identities, memories, and distinct the reproduction of a characteristic modern Roman heritage. Our goal is to illuminate the community’s subjective selection of significant local memories, interpreting their current significance, spatial arrangement, and impacts on visibility (Low 2017; Scarpelli 2020).

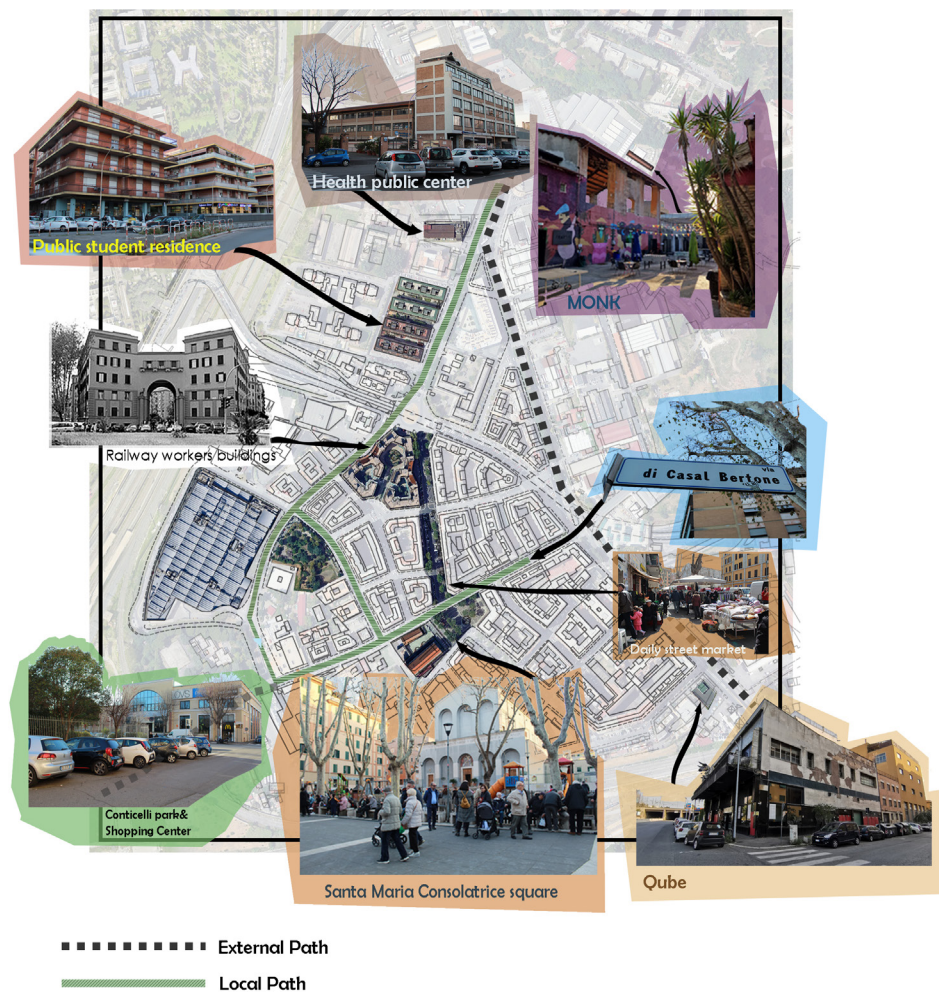


Figure 5 Landmarks and paths of Casal Bertone, Rome. Map by Mahtab Seyedabadi, 2024.

In a somewhat unexpected twist, and as evidence that even seemingly self-contained places are intricately linked to their surroundings and outward pathways, our exploration of Casal Bertone naturally begins from a location perceived by its residents as beyond the neighborhood – specifically, the Tiburtina railway station. As a crucial railway hub since the era of the fascist dictatorship, the neighborhood of Casal Bertone has been profoundly influenced by its proximity to Tiburtina station. This influence unfolds on three fronts: first, it facilitates the movement of residents through local, national, and international transportation lines, making Casal Bertone a suitable base for living in Rome, especially for foreign students. Second, the extensive railway network encircles three-quarters of the neighborhood, creating a distinctive sense of “train-relatedness” together with an experience of isolation (not necessarily perceived as negative). Third, the architectural characteristics of the buildings erected to house railway and tramway workers, reflecting the style of the 1920s and 1950s, contribute to shaping an identity for the neighborhood that nostalgically echoes the “authenticity” of the once-popular Rome (*“la Roma de na vorta, la vera Roma”*, male, 65, Personal communication, 18/05/2023). Among these structures, the “Deers Building” (Palazzo dei Cervi), also known as “the Railway Workers Building” (Palazzo dei Ferrovieri), stands out as an exemplary manifestation of popular Roman-ness, a topic we will explore shortly. Its significance is further elevated by its cinematic prominence in Pier Paolo Pasolini’s film *“Mamma Roma”* (1962), where the legendary Roman actress Anna Magnani portrays a sex worker seeking a change of life (Figure 6). The place holds such an iconic charm that one day we even witnessed a scene where two employees moved a restaurant table right onto the roundabout facing the Railway Workers’ building. When we approached one of the men to inquire about this curious setup, he shared with us: “It is the most beautiful thing you can do here, eating in front of this beauty” (27/01/2024).



Figure 6 The Railway Workers’ Building in Casal Bertone in a frame from the movie *Mamma Roma* by Pier Paolo Pasolini (1962).

Serving as an arched gateway to Casal Bertone for those arriving from Tiburtina station, the Railway Workers’ building stands as the inaugural piece in a series of historical structures that collectively form what we term “the symbolic and material backbone of the neighborhood”. Significantly, the arch is a recurring architectural motif found in several local landmarks, including the public school, the church, and the shopping center. Notably absent from this stylistic trend is the public student residence, which appears so uncharacterized that several long-time inhabitants of Casal Bertone were unaware of its location or misinterpreted it as an office for immigrant people (Figure 7).



Figure 7 The arch is the stylistic element that unifies the most important places in Casal Bertone: the Shopping Center, the Railway Workers' Building, the Elementary School, and the Church of Santa Maria Consolatrice. Underneath are the public student residence buildings lacking this distinctive element. Photos and composition by Mahtab Seyedabadi, 2023.

The “hegemonic path” of Casal Bertone culminates with a notable cinematic reference to Enrico Cosenz Square, featured in the masterpiece “*I soliti ignoti*” (Big Deal on Madonna Street) by Mario Monicelli (1958) (Figure 8). This path begins at Via Cesare Ricotti, home to the daily street market, and converges at Santa Maria Consolatrice Square – the neighborhood’s sole common space. Casal Bertone’s enduring presence in films from the golden age of post-war Italian cinema contributes to increasing the “old-style” importance of the buildings constructed along the hegemonic path. In our interviews and surveys, residents frequently mentioned these films. During a survey with a camera, a man in his sixties approached us mistaking us for tourists. After explaining our research, he proudly recounted his childhood memory of greeting Totò during the filming of “*I soliti ignoti*” in Enrico Cosenz Square (Figure 9) and highlighted the cinematic heritage that shapes the neighborhood backbone identity (“l’ossatura del quartiere”, personal communication, 17/03/2024).



Figure 8 A frame from the movie *I Soliti Ignoti* (Big Deal on Madonna Street), filmed on the rooftop of a building in Casal Bertone. Behind Totò, the railway yard along Prenestina Street. The scene’s audio captures the whistle of a locomotive. Mario Monicelli (1958).



Figure 9 Another frame from the movie *I Soliti Ignoti*. The shot shows the crowd gathered in Enrico Cosenz Square to see Totò. Mario Monicelli (1958).

Clearly, the hegemonic path does not encompass all of Casal Bertone's landmarks identified by our interlocutors, nor is it the sole pathway within the neighborhood. Nevertheless, both newcomers and long-term residents – students and non-students alike – recognize and frequent it as the most significant and typical route. In addition to the previously mentioned landmarks like the shopping center (which, in a way, pays homage to the hegemonic path with the architectural style of its facade), other notable locations such as the health public center (ASL), the public student residence (*Casa dello Studente*), the Cube Disco Club, and the Monk Disco Club exist beyond this path and exhibit different architectural styles. Even though Renato Conticelli Park is located in a transitional area and lacks distinctive architectural features, its management by a group of elderly volunteers who have witnessed the recent history of Casal Bertone imbues the park with the neighborhood's memory and heritage. This is evident even when the events “narrated” by the elders – such as the “railway worker epic” – took place at least a generation before theirs. It is significant that during a focus group conducted with a group of elderly residents of Casal Bertone – five males, all born at the end of World War II – many of them recount the construction of the buildings and the events of the Allied bombing, linguistically positioning themselves as the witnessing protagonists of those events: “we endured the bombing” (*abbiamo subito il bombardamento*), “here, we were all railway workers, tram drivers, and postal workers” (*qui eravamo tutti ferrovieri, tramvieri e postini*, Focus Group, 16/03/2024).

As illustrated by the latter example, the conceptualization of the hegemonic path is not merely a result of an appealing architectural style from the 20s and 60s. It is also not solely the result of everyday widespread use. Some sections of the hegemonic path, such as Enrico Cosenz Square, have low foot traffic and are primarily used for car parking. Conversely, highly frequented areas, like the vicinity of the public student residence, as we will explore in the next paragraph, do not receive particular attention nor are they characterized by specific material and symbolic connotations. Essentially, both areas function as parking lots for cars, but only the square of the hegemonic path is considered part of a shared identity.

For these reasons, we argue that what distinguishes the hegemonic path is a combination of material elements, narratives, and practices (Arab 2013) – a compelling narrative encapsulating a particular manifestation of Roman identity with its architectural style, legitimized by the aforementioned movies and rooted in what can be considered a cultural heritage in formation (Meskell 2015). Indeed, even apart from Italian institutional heritage recognition processes, which have primarily focused on rural traditions (Bravo and Tucci 2008; Dei 2018) or archaeological findings – and thus fail to adapt to the form of heritage expressed by the residents of Casal Bertone – if the concept of “heritage” includes everything – material or immaterial – that a community or group considers significant for its history and identity, and therefore worthy of being preserved and transmitted to future generations, without a doubt, the identity, memory, and buildings of Casal Bertone must be considered heritage. Why does this heritage of popular Roman-ness succeed? The reason is its unique poetics of class advancement, deeply rooted in the working-class history of the area, which resonates strongly with the elderly inhabitants of Casal Bertone. Their collective memory and identity are intertwined with this heritage, and their active involvement in the neighborhood’s public activities helps to sustain and reinforce it. The sense of belonging and pride associated with this shared heritage fosters community cohesion and ensures its persistence over time. This interpretation of the victorious “class of iron” (*classe di ferro*) becomes apparent in the recurrent nostalgic mentions of the “rocks battle” against the neighboring young boys of Casal Bruciato or the games played in the puddle (*marana*), as a testament to the ability to achieve the most from scarce resources: “We had nothing, not even pants and shoes... but we were happy!” (Male, 70 years old, Interview, 22/03/2023).



Figure 10 One of the historical buildings of Casal Bertone in Enrico Cosenz Square, Casal Bertone, Rome. Photo by Mahtab Seyedabadi, 2024.

In fact, following World War II, Casal Bertone thrived as a community of workers, squatters, and war refugees. Over the past 30 years, it has transformed into an upscale middle-class neighborhood. Narratives detailing this evolution center around the figure of the railway worker, symbolizing a distinctive “middle-ness” (Capoferri 2017; Currid-Halkett 2017). Depicted as a train manager, conductor, or station manager in the accounts we have gathered – when not referencing a specific individual – the railway worker is not your typical fac-

tory laborer or conventional employee. Rather, he emerges as a knowledgeable technician who traversed Italy, exploring various destinations and cities through the national railway company, returning home akin to a “modern Ulysses” (Male, 36yo, Personal communication, 10/12/2023). It’s worth noting that while embodying the spirit of Ulysses, this heroic figure does not fit the high-modern mold of contemporary globetrotters who rely on airplanes and explore global paths rather than just Italian routes.

The “typical” resident of Casal Bertone is not a wealthy bourgeois of today or a modern-day impoverished worker; rather, they embody a middle-class identity as it was conceived thirty years ago. This heritage of popular Roman-ness places Casal Bertone in a slower temporal dimension where the rapid changes of a globalized, complex, and unstable metropolis (Scarpelli 2020), along with the rushed use of the neighborhood’s spaces, must slow down amidst the narrow streets lined with elegant apartment buildings that evoke a nostalgic memory of a recent Rome (a Rome of yesterday rather than the day before yesterday) (Figure 10).

During a conversation with a resident who voiced opposition to the installation of public trash bins in front of the iconic entrance of the Railway Workers’ Building, a man approximately 70 years old emphasized Casal Bertone’s significance as a bastion of Roman-ness (*romanità*). He underscored the importance of preserving this heritage for the broader history of the city, stating, “The problem is they want to place the bins right here, disrespecting the memory of Pasolini and Anna Magnani... and by extension, disrespecting Rome itself” (Interview, 22/03/2023) (Figure 11).



Figure 11 A banner reading “no to the trash bins” placed at the entrance of the Railway Workers’ Building, and posters depicting a scene from Pasolini’s movie with the inscription “no to the trash bins in front of Mamma Roma’s building”. Photo by Mahtab Seyedabadi, 2023.

In summary, Casal Bertone confers a distinct readability to its entire neighborhood (Lynch 1960) by intertwining materiality with symbols, concrete with identity, and architectural styles of buildings with associated narratives, shaping a heritage that defines what aligns with the sense of place, what does not, or what is simply deemed unworthy of consideration (Goffman 1963; Link and Jo 2001; Fraser and Honneth 2004). This heritage of popular Roman-ness determines visibility and invisibility (Goffman 1963b).

One of the most visible aspects of Casal Bertone, as affirmed by data from our anonymous questionnaire, is the unequivocal recognition of the elderly as central figures in the neighborhood’s spaces. In Italy, where the proportion of elderly individuals is steadily increasing and statistics underscore their crucial role as social stabilizers (Livi Bacci 2008; Woodman and Bennett

2 Home to numerous sports and political activism initiatives since the 1990s, despite being an important place for the neighborhood's memory, the Palestra Popolare di Casal Bertone (Popular gym) was not spontaneously mentioned by most interviewees when asked about the landmarks of Casal Bertone. Except for two individuals interviewed as members of the neighborhood committee, the rest of the respondents did not bring up the Palestra Popolare. However, when subsequently questioned on the subject, many showed awareness of its existence and some even mentioned having participated in its activities. In summary, the Palestra Popolare has proven to be an invisible place within the framework of locations that distinguish Casal Bertone and its heritage.

2015; Colombo et al. 2018; Colombo and Rebughini 2019), this finding may not be surprising. However, due to the heritage of popular Roman-ness rooted in the railway workers' heritage, the presence of the elderly, often overlooked and taken for granted, becomes noticeable as a pivotal element of the community. The local significance attributed to what a man referred to as "*la generazione dei ferrovieri*" ("the railway workers' generation", approximately 40 years old, personal communication, 16/04/2023) is encapsulated in the narrative surrounding Conticelli Park – a contested space involving the municipal administration, construction company, and neighborhood committees, culminating in a legal battle eventually won by the citizens (Figure 12).



Figure 12 The interior of Conticelli Park in Casal Bertone, Rome. Photo by Mahtab Seyedabadi, 2024

Located in front of the Shopping Center and just a few meters from the Palestra Popolare di Casal Bertone – one of the few places in the neighborhood where, despite their presence, the elderly play a secondary role to the young² – Conticelli Park is widely regarded by many of our interviewees as the epitome of neighborhood activism, as also evidenced by the words used by this father of two kids:

"[Conticelli Park] It is truly a remarkable story and a beautiful park [...] managed by a group of volunteers. If you visit, you'll find it exceptionally clean and well-maintained. This is quite unusual for Rome, where many public parks are often littered with cigarette butts. There is a group of people, especially an older woman named Gina, who oversees the park. Often, even the children refer to it as Gina's Park." (Male, approximately 45 years old, Interview, 18/11/2023).

Embodying the aforementioned heritage of the pugnacious railway workers, who find new life in the stewardship of Parco Conticelli, this elderly generation appears pivotal in shielding the neighborhood against external threats, particularly from the so-called *palazzinari* (real estate speculators).

"In the beginning, that park was an abandoned area filled with garbage. So, this group of people began cleaning it up and using it as a park, but the owner took them to court. [...] They took the risk of being condemned, facing a hefty penalty, and the legal battle lasted for years, but ultimately, they emerged victorious" (Male, about 45 years old, Interview, 18/11/2023).

According to the narratives we have gathered, *palazzinari* appear intent on encroaching upon the already limited green spaces in the neighborhood, a matter of significant concern for residents, particularly for children, thus making the elderly the defenders.

The protective role of the elderly is evident in the unique layout of Conticelli Park. Indeed, the park exceeds the typical dimensions of a public park, evolving into an area that, as described by one resident, accommodates private plants “too large to maintain on personal balconies” (Personal communication, 07/05/2023). More importantly, it serves as a playground for children equipped with various kindergarten features. In addition to slides, swings, and private plants that replace the absence of their owners (Gell 1998), the park boasts dozens of tricycles, toy cars, and other games donated by families whose children, having grown up, no longer return to play in a space that seems excessively geared towards younger children (Figure 13).



Figure 13 The interior of Conticelli Park, with the arcades of the Casal Bertone Shopping Center in the background. Photo by Mahtab Seyedabadi, 2024

Precisely because the park has been the gathering place for the young generations of Casal Bertone for more than twenty-five years – containing the agency of all these generations – its existence contributes to perpetuating an idea of protection and security ensured by the older generations of the neighborhood, especially the “epical” generation of railway workers.

However, this defensive stance of the elderly residents, shaped by the securing of Parco Conticelli and a general distrust of local administrators, may lead to shortsighted conservatism (Harrison et al., 2020). This tendency is evident in their perception of the neighborhood as a “happy island” amidst the “threatening” areas of San Lorenzo and Pigneto, known for their youthful nightlife. This perspective often results in a strong resistance to regeneration proposals aimed at creating new common spaces, out of concern that these areas could attract young people. As articulated by a neighborhood resident in

his seventies: “there’s a risk the neighborhood will lose its essence and become like San Lorenzo, Pigneto, or even Piazza Bologna... with people hanging around on the streets” (Personal communication, 16/03/2024). Such apprehensions significantly influence the work of urban regenerator, particularly when elderly stakeholders in focus groups and discussions only endorse minor enhancements, such as improving the urban decor of Santa Maria Consolatrice Square or ensuring the safety of the children’s playground – small-scale improvements targeting an already well-maintained and frequented area. This skepticism towards urban interventions is exemplified by an eighty-year-old resident, revered as “the memory” of Casal Bertone. When questioned about regenerating a large green space less than 1 km from Santa Maria Consolatrice Square, along Via Ettore Fieramosca – the route leading towards the “hazardous” Pigneto neighborhood – he expressed strong skepticism about the success of the endeavor. He stated that the inhabitants of Casal Bertone embrace a “village mentality” and prefer to stay close to their familiar central square.

The student: a life out of sight

So far, we have seen that the visibility of the elderly group in Casal Bertone has increased thanks to the popular Roman-ness heritage. Consequently, this social group acquired a leadership role in the neighborhood’s affairs. This process significantly impacts the visibility of students, as both in-depth interviews and the anonymous questionnaire describe it as a phenomenon that is difficult to perceive. This invisibility is exacerbated by their exclusion from heritage sites and compounded by the lack of clear delineation of spaces designated for them (Lynch 1960) (Figure 7). Despite university students frequenting and identifying with the same spaces esteemed as important and secure by other social groups, their presence largely remains unnoticed in the eyes of others (Figure 14).



Figure 14 The first three landmarks around which the greatest visibility of the three social groups is perceived. Data processed from the anonymous questionnaire with a maximum of three responses. Map by Mahtab Seyedabadi, 2024.

This perspective was eloquently shared by a 45-year-old man during our ethnographic survey of Santa Maria Consolatrice Square. When asked about the possible presence of students in his building or the neighborhood, he conveyed:

“Casal Bertone is not really known for being a student hub; there are quite a few students, but it is more San Lorenzo and Pigneto where you do not expect to find them [...] Perhaps [they are out] at night since I occasionally see them when I take the dog out... but it is not like there is a noticeable abundance of university students here, although their presence is not exactly prominent. Maybe they head to Qube, who knows...” (Interview, 18/11/2023).

Conversely, the parts of Casal Bertone seldom frequented by university students were identified by other residents as the only places where local students might be glimpsed. Ironically, these spots are often perceived as unsafe by many of our student participants, reflecting the concerns voiced by older adults and families about the perceived risks associated with nightlife (Figure 15; Figure 16).



Figure 15 The primary landmarks frequented by the 12 students who participated in our anonymous questionnaire. Data processed from the questionnaire with a maximum of three responses. Map by Mahtab Seyedabadi, 2024.



Figure 16 The primary landmarks frequented by the 10 people older than fifty who participated in our anonymous questionnaire. Data processed from the questionnaire with a maximum of three responses. Map by Mahtab Seyedabadi, 2024.

However, rather paradoxically, the trend of students' invisibility in Casal Bertone does not seem to change significantly when focusing the ethnographic lens on the viewpoints of university students. Many of them – especially the foreigners we interviewed – admire this place because they consider it more authentically Roman or Italian. Here, the popular Roman-ness heritage of the neighborhood continues to play a crucial role, especially among new residents. This trend is exemplified by the lack of awareness regarding Turkish-language graffiti that we observed right in front of the public student residence, presumably created by foreign students experiencing romantic distress. When we asked our Turkish-speaking contacts to translate the mural messages located right in front of the entrance to their residence, we noticed that they had not seen these elements, just like the Italian residents who, in contrast, are well acquainted with the AS Roma fans' murals in the same areas (Figure 17).



Figure 17 Graffiti in Turkish read: “You are the best person to go to the kebab shop, but do not go”, right in front of the public student residence on Domenico De Dominicis Street, Casal Bertone, Rome. Photo by Mahtab Seyedabadi, 2023.

The issue of students’ invisibility is also well illustrated by the cases of Maria and Arghavan reported below. In both cases, the construction of their localized belonging requires them to give up their alternative way of being young-adult residents of Casal Bertone.

When we met Maria through some mutual friends, this 28-year-old archaeology student from Abruzzo explained to us that one of the reasons she likes Casal Bertone, aside from the fact that the neighborhood is very well-connected, is the massive presence of elderly “ladies sunbathing in the square” (Personal communication 30/03/2023) or going shopping with their characteristic shopping trolleys. Describing the “stately beauty” (*bellezza signorile*) of the residential courtyard where she had rented a room with other Italian students, Maria reports that this aspect, which constantly brought to her mind the situation in her hometown, along with the significant presence of young families with children, facilitated her integration into a large and modern city like Rome (Figure 18). Unlike the “*casino*” (chaos) of San Lorenzo and the related lifestyle threats of nightlife, the Casal Bertone neighborhood has provided Maria with the suitable context to “feel like family” (*sentirsi in famiglia*). Due to this pleasant sensation, Maria tells us that her parents have ultimately purchased an apartment in this neighborhood in anticipation of her younger brother’s enrollment at the university. She describes her parents’ reaction to the neighborhood as an immediate love affair, prompted by the peacefulness of the location, the beauty of the buildings, and the safety of the streets: “the people here are all well-mannered gentlemen.” (*qui sono tutti signori educati*).



Figure 18 Historical buildings on Antonio Baldissera Street, Casal Bertone, Rome. Photo by Mahtab Seyedabadi, 2024.

Arghavan, a 35-year-old Iranian architecture student, also lives in a rented house with 2 other young adult roommates from Italy and Cameroon. She, also, tells us how important it is for her – not just because of an age she no longer considers youthful – to live in a “safe”, “real neighborhood” with elderly people and families, “true local inhabitants of Rome”, with a “style” and “beauty” very similar to that depicted in her beloved classics of Italian cinema (personal communication, 5/12/2023). As evidenced by the multitude of images portraying Casal Bertone on her social channels, Arghavan shares her enjoyment of leisurely strolling through the neighborhood’s streets, immersing herself in various shops and public events, and relishing the continuous array of sights and sensory experiences.

Just like Maria, who describes the neighborhood characteristics with the proud tone of a local resident, Arghavan willingly showcases her specific insider knowledge of the neighborhood. It is noteworthy that both mention the pleasure of strolling through Cesare Ricotti street market and other “old-ish” places in the neighborhood. Additionally, these young women assert that they do not consider Casal Bertone a neighborhood frequented by students, despite the fact that both are students who either live here or have lived with other students.

Alongside the various small episodes of daily life that have unfolded in the various corners of Casal Bertone since her arrival, Arghavan tells us about the misadventure that happened to her when she inadvertently got locked inside Conticelli Park:

It was around May or June, during the first few months of my time in Rome. One day, around midday, I decided to take a stroll near my home. I walked for a while and then headed to this park because it was filled with trees and provided a pleasant shade. The park was nearly empty, so I spent more than half an hour there. When I decided to leave, I noticed that both of the gates were closed, and I found myself trapped. I sought help from people outside the park, and we attempted to call the municipality’s emergency number. However, since it was a Sunday, no one answered. Eventually, a group of people (around 10 or 12) gathered, and we tried to locate the lady responsible for the park, who lived nearby and was known to the locals. In the end, they found her, and she arrived

with the key in her comfortable clothes (as she was in the middle of a nap). She apologized multiple times, mentioning that she always checks the park carefully but somehow missed seeing me. [...] it's normal here that they close the park at noon in a warm weather because no one use it (Interview, 12/03/2024).

Like the rhetoric of Maria, Arghavan's account effectively encapsulates the invisibility of university students in Casal Bertone, as well as their docile disposition towards the hegemony of the elderly in managing neighborhood spaces and heritage. This is something we have found with few differences in several answers to our questionnaire and while shadowing some Italian university students from Casal Bertone.

In fact, while the students from Iran, Azerbaijan, and Russia who participated in the questionnaire identified a close resemblance between the appearance of this neighborhood and the city center of Rome (thereby conferring an aura of authentic Italianness to this location), Italian students have repeatedly emphasized that Casal Bertone is a neighborhood for elderly people, equipped with many places specifically tailored for them, such as bars, shops, and parks.

However, the students we spoke with did not appear particularly irritated or upset by this state of affairs. In fact, contrary to what we expected to hear, not only did they demonstrate acceptance of their marginal placement in the neighborhood's common spaces. But they also expressed a preference for this hidden mode of existence over others, that might be more engaging.

The interpretation of the "distributed agency" (Gell 1998) in a wall writing provides a valuable perspective on the experiences of foreign students in Casal Bertone, particularly those who speak Turkish languages (Figure 19). By posing the question "does your mother know?" the mural's agency replicates, perhaps in a humorous manner, a judgmental gaze on moral behavior within a context perceived as less restrictive than one's homeland. In other words, the agency of the graffiti aims to reveal someone who is effectively concealed within common space.



Figure 19 Graffiti in Azerbaijani language read: "does your mother know?", on a wall of the Railroad Workers' Palace on Alberto Pollio Street, Casal Bertone, Rome. Photo by Mahtab Seyedabadi, 2023.

It is a trend expressed by the voice of a 20-year-old male student from Kazakhstan we interviewed in the public student residence. He articulates a preference for neighborhoods like Casal Bertone or San Giovanni due to the

characteristic opportunity to “see elderly Italians on the street [...] I like it” (Interview, 18/11/2023).

A similar alignment with the elderly heritage is confirmed by the evening focus group held in Santa Maria Consolatrice Square with a group of university students (3 males and 4 females). In fact, when we asked these twenty-year-olds, born and raised in Casal Bertone, about the most important places in the neighborhood, all of them indicated the Deers Building – another name for the Railway Workers’ building – as the most historic place: “the important places in Casal Bertone are quite historical buildings (*i palazzi abbastanza storici*) like the Deers building and the Church”; “The Deers building is the most important one, it serves those who work in the railways but also soldiers... if I remember correctly” (Focus Group, 01/03/2024). Subsequently, when we asked what they think about the neighborhood’s elderly identity, one of the young men declared: “the young people of Casal Bertone move around... they go to Piazza Bologna or San Lorenzo. They leave Casal Bertone”. However, even with the desire to avoid scrutiny from their acquaintances, the act of moving away from their area does not seem to be experienced as a big sacrifice: “in the end, we have Piazza Bologna and San Lorenzo which offer many things... besides, Casal Bertone is well connected and is a safe neighborhood”. When asked about what Casal Bertone needs, one young man explains: “We would like a few more pubs, a few more places for the evening. Otherwise, Casal Bertone has everything”. A similar response came from a girl who, while explaining that she still prefers to hang out with friends in other neighborhoods, adds that: “in terms of community, Casal Bertone has everything, it just lacks something for the evenings... for young people” (Focus group, 01/03/2024).



Figure 20 Cesare Ricotti Street Market, Casal Bertone, Rome. Photo by Mahtab Seyedabadi, 2023.

Although the various voices we gathered from university students – regardless of whether they are Italian or foreign – reflect a common tendency towards accepting the prominence of adults with children and the elderly, in order to advance a general interpretation of these attitudes and related visibility policies, it seems important to underline some differences between the practices of students born and raised in Casal Bertone and those who have come here from other parts. To do this, we want to start by observing the different ways of being a neighborhood inhabitant (Figure 20).

In fact, if we observe and listen more closely to Maria and Arghavan's attitudes and rhetoric, we notice that their account of daily life in the neighborhood includes several detailed mentions of the location of the best pizzeria, the top ice cream shop, the unique atmosphere of a particular bar, their active participation in neighborhood celebrations, and more. Often, these places appear to hold significance for these two young women, who were born outside of Casal Bertone, as they have facilitated the development of strong localized relationships. Essentially, these locations are valued because they have enabled the acquisition of a Roman citizen identity, allowing them to be recognized in a public sphere of the Capital. An identity with its own glorious unique history intertwined with the legendary image of the railway workers' popular neighborhood. It is an achievement of which Arghavan seems particularly aware, as she explains, "they may seem like little things, but for me, after what I've been through to be here, having these people as my neighbors brings me joy" (personal communication, 05/12/2023).

Different – and in some ways opposite – is the case of students born and raised in Casal Bertone. In these cases, the tendency is to make the neighborhood one's safe refuge with a sense of familial intimacy, outside of which – towards less intimate neighborhoods like San Lorenzo or Piazza Bologna – one moves in search of alternative identities, free from the constraints and control imposed by long-standing acquaintances (Cozza 2022).

In the first scenario, "foreign" university students adopt the identity of the neighborhood's elderly residents to cultivate a satisfying sense of belonging, enabling them to distance themselves from both their native land and an identity they evidently perceive as abnormal (Goffman 1963). In the second scenario, it is precisely the assurance of being able to rely on a safe and long-established identity that favors the temporary foray into alternative places outside Casal Bertone, possibly in search of extraordinary situations. Both attitudes attempt to break away from a perceived "intimate controlling atmosphere", which solidifies the visual, political, and heritage hegemony of the elderly in this neighborhood. Seen from this perspective, the viewpoint of young university students is that of a stigmatized social group, namely a group that naturally perceives itself as abnormal and, by virtue of this perception, accepts to position itself in a zone of invisibility from which to emerge only in exceptional cases and – just like those stigmatized individuals described by Goffman – encountering the stereotypes that the "normal" people have produced about that specific group.

The stigmatized individual is asked to act so as to imply neither that his burden is heavy nor that bearing it has made him different from us; at the same time, he must keep himself at that remove from us which ensures our painlessly being able to confirm this belief about him. Put differently, he is advised to reciprocate naturally with an acceptance of himself and us, an acceptance of him that we have not quite extended him in the first place. A *phantom acceptance* is thus allowed to provide the base for a *phantom normalcy*. So deeply, then, must he be caught up in the attitude to the self that is defined as normal in our society, so thoroughly must he be a part of this definition, that he can perform this self in a faultless manner to an edgy audience that is half-watching him in terms of another show (Goffman 1963:122, italics by the author).

Naturally, the fact that university students in Casal Bertone – whether foreign or locally born and raised – prefer this experience of the neighborhood as "phantoms" reinforces the adherence to the heritage proposed by the elderly group and reflects the same resistance to change described in the previous paragraph. However, examining the profile of these students, the recurrence of such responses cannot be attributed to their laziness (as the vast majority are engaged in stressful, underpaid jobs) nor to their disinterest in social issues

(which they discuss passionately among themselves, at demonstrations, and on social media). Instead, it seems that what drives them to accept the heritage of Casal Bertone and their consequent invisibility is their perception of their student identity as unable to promote actions capable of changing the face of the neighborhood (Walther et al. 2019). Grown up in a context that views university education as strictly linked to the realm of individual skill formation, it is difficult for them to feel a sense of belonging to a social group capable of promoting and spreading ideas and values beneficial to society. From this perspective, the desire to leave the neighborhood unchanged or perhaps see more venues for young people, rather than advocating for better and more attractive public spaces for students, does not reflect a frivolous viewpoint. Instead, it highlights the awareness of those who prefer an identity with at least some capacity for choice and agencies (that of the young consumer) over an identity associated with low social legitimacy and power (that of the student).

According to this case study, it is not just about being more present in public space or simply obtaining a rhetoric in which students are represented as good and polite. What is more important for students – as well as for other social groups – is the possibility of being involved in a localized assemblage in which the material characterization of spaces goes hand in hand with connections to other social groups, their right to be passed to future generations, and their active participation in neighborhood activities.

In short, in order to make students' political actions more integrated with the local community and less tied to delocalized objectives, being visible in a given context is important. This condition involves having architectural recognition (materiality), rhetorical recognition (symbols), and practical integration into the daily life of a place and its various social groups.

Conclusion: steps to a university students' heritage

By adopting a mixed ethnographic and architectural urban regeneration perspective, this paper describes how the visibility of different social groups in the Casal Bertone neighborhood is a decisive factor for power dynamics and the preservation of the current urban configuration. The case study, on the one hand, demonstrates how the visibility of the elderly group has been achieved through an assemblage of symbols, practices, and materiality in which civic activism, local memories, urban paths, heritage constructions, and architectural styles have created the conditions for a meaningful urban environment centered around the legendary figure of the railway worker of the past. On the other hand, the case of Casal Bertone has shown the risks inherent in preserving this heritage. It contributes to making university students (and their needs) invisible. The research into the urban situation in Casal Bertone has revealed a portrait of a student neighborhood that has not valued this presence through a distinctive architectural mark but has instead treated the presence of students and public structures intended to host them as a purely logistical factor. The implicit vision expressed by these cultural, urbanistic, and stylistic choices – in line with a general European perspective – is that student life is a completely depoliticized phase concerned solely with the learning of professional skills. Students are not visible because they are not perceived as a group capable of impacting collective reality. Naturally, the architectural legitimization of students in Casal Bertone is not sufficient to guarantee their inclusion in the neighborhood community, but it can certainly be a first step. The cultural construction of the railway workers' heritage teaches us how architecture needs narrative support to become a decisive element of a community, and in this sense, there are ample opportunities. After all, if we think of the figure of the heroic railway worker as imagined in the heritage of Casal Bertone, nothing prevents us from reinterpreting this archetype through the lens of encounter, exchange, and peaceful coexistence with others: a contemporary experience that daily involves university students as well as all other city inhabitants.

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Políticas de la representación visual: para una (est)ética decolonial.

El caso de los braceros haitianos en los cañaverales dominicanos*

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Abstract

This article offers theoretical and methodological reflections on the representation of otherness through imagery, using the case study of Haitian braceros in Dominican sugarcane fields. The primary challenge is to develop a decolonial aesthetic that concurrently establishes an ethical framework for the production of anthropological knowledge. The paper delves into the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of visually representing subaltern communities, critiquing the persistence of a colonial gaze and advocating for a decolonial approach that fosters more equitable and ethical portrayals. Moreover, it posits that a decolonized visual representation opens avenues for engagement and collaboration between the depicted subjects and researchers, leading to performative outcomes that drive social change.

Keywords

Visual representation, Decolonial aesthetics, Photography, Otherness, Bateyes.

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Introducción

En el contexto de la antropología visual, la representación de la alteridad cultural ha sido y sigue siendo una cuestión profundamente debatida (Banks & Morphy 1997; MacDougall 1998; Grimshaw & Ravetz 2004; Schneider & Wright 2005, entre otros), especialmente en relación con sujetos o comunidades subalternos, marginados, racializados y explotados (Poole 1997; Hall 1997; Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod & Larkin 2002; Shohat & Stam 2014, entre otros).

Las prácticas antropológicas de representación visual no solo plantean problemas de carácter estético, sino que también involucran complejas cuestiones éticas. El acto de “capturar” y re-presentar visualmente a individuos y comunidades que históricamente han sido objeto de dominación y marginalización implica una serie de dilemas morales sobre la manera en que se construyen y reproducen las narrativas y las imágenes de la alteridad.

Más allá de la colonización como proceso histórico de conquista, subyugación y explotación, es fundamental reconocer la presencia extendida y generalizada de una cultura de la “colonialidad” (Quijano 2000) y de una “colonialidad del ver” (Barrientos 2011). La primera se refiere a la naturalización de las categorías eurocéntricas, las cuales establecen jerarquías y desigualdades, típicamente sobre bases raciales. La segunda se manifiesta en la imposición de una mirada que, aun presumiendo de neutralidad, perpetúa de igual manera profundas formas de discriminación mediante específicos imaginarios visuales. De aquí, la necesidad de plantear una ética de la estética, o una estética ética, que inevitablemente se configure en términos decoloniales, y producir imágenes que, más allá de ser estéticamente bellas, sean éticamente justas y antropológicamente buenas. Pero ¿qué es una imagen ‘bella’ en el contexto de la antropología visual? ¿Qué significa una imagen ‘buena’ en términos de representación para la práctica etnográfica? ¿Cómo se define una imagen ‘justa’ en la representación visual de sujetos o comunidades subalternos y marginados, y cuáles son los principios que deben orientar su creación para evitar perpetuar la mirada colonial? Estas y más preguntas guían las reflexiones de este artículo.

A partir de algunos planteamientos teóricos sobre el rol que el uso de imágenes, especialmente fotográficas, ha desempeñado en el contexto antropológico respecto a la otredad cultural, se pondrá de manifiesto cómo las representaciones visuales han sido herramientas fundamentales para la construcción y perpetuación de dicha otredad en términos coloniales, mediante la imposición de una estética hegemónica. De aquí se cuestionará cómo esto implica a la academia en cuanto lugar de producción de conocimiento y, especialmente, en cuanto institución, centro de poder y lugar de enunciación eurocéntrica. Finalmente, se abordará el desafío de determinar si existen condiciones viables para promover la defensa de los derechos de los demás sin incurrir paradójicamente en un proceso de apropiación violenta.

El siguiente párrafo introduce un estudio de caso sobre los *bateyes* dominicanos: comunidades rurales de herencia colonial donde, desde 2013, realizo estudios etnográficos en el terreno, investigando las condiciones de vida y trabajo de los migrantes haitianos y haitiano-descendientes empleados como braceros agrícolas en las plantaciones de caña de azúcar. Esto servirá para cuestionar concretamente las modalidades (est)éticas de representación visual de “sujetos subalternos” (Dube 2001), pertenecientes al llamado Sur global y expuestos a condiciones de extrema explotación y vulnerabilidad. Considerando algunas fotografías etnográficas realizadas con fines documentales, nos cuestionaremos nuevamente si y de qué manera pueden ser reconocidas como ‘bellas’, ‘buenas’ y ‘justas’. En particular, profundizaremos en las implicaciones éticas y estéticas del uso del blanco y negro como específica elección de representación, considerando tanto sus ventajas como sus riesgos.

Finalmente, en las conclusiones, retomaremos los planteamientos teóricos iniciales para presentar alguna propuesta sobre cómo realizar una estética “éticamente orientada hacia el otro” (Scheper-Hughes 1995: 418, traducción mía), es decir, una (est)ética decolonial, comprometida y performativa.

Planteamientos teóricos

El tema de la relación con la alteridad o la otredad cultural es un tema fundacional para la disciplina antropológica. Tiene que ver con “la construcción del objeto de estudio, la pertinencia del concepto de ‘otro’, la transferencia social del conocimiento científico y especialmente el sentido de la práctica antropológica (con y sin medios audiovisuales) en y desde el Sur” (Moya, Álvarez, Campano, Lanzeni & Torres 2006: 111). El concepto de “otredad”, en efecto, se ha definido históricamente a partir del saber occidental (Todorov 1987). Esto significa que todo lo que no es Occidente, en cuanto alteridad *exótica* (etimológicamente: “que está afuera”), siempre ha sido pensado, representado, y hasta luchado por Occidente mismo.

Por lo que se refiere al tema de la representación visual resulta entonces imprescindible considerar el papel que las imágenes han desempeñado en la producción y reproducción de esta otredad, especialmente desde que “la fotografía se convirtió en uno de los principales instrumentos de una nueva cultura visual” (Taborda 2023: 288). Según León (2012: 119), en efecto, los dispositivos de captura de la imagen, en el seno de la ideología positivista, habrían promovido un nuevo principio epistemológico de producción de verdad. A partir de aquí, “la diferencia cultural empieza a ser capturada, conocida y administrada a través de los vectores de luz de los regímenes escópicos que tramitan la significación, el deseo y el control de la otredad”. El medio fotográfico, de hecho, se convierte en un medio de imposición y disciplinamiento, especialmente considerando su aplicación antropométrica durante el siglo XIX, cuando la cámara es utilizada por Occidente como instrumento de documentación científica, capaz de producir pruebas objetivas de hechos que luego pueden ser analizados, organizados, comparados y clasificados de manera sistemática (Wright 2016: 212), “según un proyecto de ‘musealización’ de las culturas humanas” (Pennacini 2005: 49).

Bajo el paradigma positivista, el empleo de la cámara fotográfica con enfoque antropométrico ha sido fundamental para explicar las diferencias culturales desde una perspectiva evolucionista y jerárquica, produciendo de este modo la figura del otro como “primitivo” y “salvaje”, aún en “estado de naturaleza”. A este respecto, resulta increíblemente efectiva la metáfora elaborada por el antropólogo, botánico y fotógrafo –además de administrador colonial inglés– Everard im Thurn (1852 – 1932), según el cual “del mismo modo que las fotografías puramente fisiológicas de los antropometristas no son más que imágenes de cuerpos sin vida, las fotografías ordinarias de nativos inusualmente miserables parecen comparables a las fotografías que uno ve ocasionalmente de pájaros y animales mal disecados y deformes” (cit. en Pinney 2011: 36, traducción mía).

Según Taborda (2023: 290), el mismo Edward Tylor –considerado uno de los padres fundadores de la moderna antropología– había reconocido que las fotografías etnográficas tienden a falsear y caricaturizar a las sociedades indígenas. Margarita Alvarado y Peter Mason (2001: 243), en un artículo significativamente titulado *La desfiguración del otro. Sobre una estética y una técnica de producción del retrato etnográfico*, afirman que la fotografía etnográfica, supuestamente, se ha caracterizado históricamente por su tendencia a exotizar al otro, buscando producir una estética de la diferencia donde “la imagen de un sujeto humano se convertía en la imagen de un objeto miembro de otra ‘tribu’”. Lo que debe subrayarse, según los autores, es que –contrariamente a la célebre tesis de Susan Sontag (1981)– “no es exactamente la lente lo que convierte a los sujetos humanos en objetos, sino muy por el contrario, son los propios seres humanos los que convierten a otros seres humanos en objetos, y por sobre todo en objetos de representación”. En resumen, son una perspectiva y una mirada coloniales las que producen y perpetúan una estética colonial o, por decirlo con Jaquín Barrientos (2011: 14), una específica *colonialidad del ver*: esa “lógica etnocéntrica sobre la cual se ponen en marcha los procesos de inferiorización racial y epistémica que han caracterizado a los diferentes regímenes visuales de la modernidad”.

1 Para los teóricos decoloniales, modernidad y colonialidad son procesos inseparables que se originan en el encuentro con América (llamada provocadoramente “Nuevo Mundo” para denunciar la genealogía eurocéntrica de la idea del descubrimiento [Barrientos 2011: 21]): “1492, según nuestra tesis central, es la fecha del ‘nacimiento’ de la Modernidad [...]. Nació cuando Europa pudo confrontarse con ‘el Otro’ y controlarlo, vencerlo, violentarlo; cuando pudo definirse como un ‘ego’ descubridor, conquistador, colonizador de la Alteridad constitutiva de la misma Modernidad” (Dussel 1994: 8)

2 Escribe Mignolo (2010, p. 14): “si *aesthesis* es un fenómeno común a todos los organismos vivos con sistema nervioso, la *estética* es una versión o teoría particular de tales sensaciones relacionadas con la belleza [...]. El problema es que la experiencia singular del corazón de Europa traslada a una teoría que “descubrió” la verdad de la *aesthesis* para una comunidad particular (por ejemplo, la etnoclase que hoy conocemos con el nombre de burguesía), que no es universalizable [...]. Así, la mutación de la *aesthesis* en *estética* sentó las bases para la construcción de su propia historia, y para la devaluación de toda experiencia *aesthética* que no hubiera sido conceptualizada en los términos en los que Europa conceptualizó su propia y regional experiencia sensorial”.

3 En cuanto a la cuestión de la representación etnográfica, véase el debate surgido a partir del seminario de Santa Fe (California) de 1984, cuyas actas fueron publicadas en el libro “Writing Culture. The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography” (Clifford & Marcus: 1986), y la “respuesta” de Abu-Lughod (1991).

4 A este respecto, el mismo Mignolo (ibidem) recuerda

Según Barrientos, en efecto, la *colonialidad del ver* se origina con la ‘invención’ del Nuevo Mundo¹, la cual conlleva la creación de las figuras del caníbal y del salvaje como monstruos. A partir de ahí, se implementa un modelo de dominación y una economía visual etnocéntrica destinada a mantener jerarquías que siguen vivas en las formas contemporáneas de la representación, a menudo estereotipadas y caricaturales, por más que se disfrazen de diversidad cultural (lo que el autor define “efecto Benetton” [ibidem]). De hecho, el concepto de *colonialidad del ver* expresa una doble estrategia visual: “el hacer aparecer al objeto salvaje [...] y, al mismo tiempo, el hacerse desaparecer como sujeto de la observación” (ivi: 21). Esta desaparición, en particular, al ocultar el lugar de enunciación y la violencia epistémica de su fundación, es la que genera la ilusión de una mirada neutral, es decir, de una estética universal.

Según el semiólogo argentino Walter Mignolo (2010), en efecto, la mirada etnocéntrica o, mejor dicho, eurocéntrica, habría sido responsable de una colonización de las diferentes formas de *aesthesis* –o sea de las diferentes formas culturales de percibir la realidad– por parte de la Estética en cuanto categoría conceptualizada por Occidente²; una categoría a través de la cual se sigue mirando a la alteridad, es decir, como parámetro de juicio universal. Como señala León (2012: 112), “en disciplinas y ramas vinculadas al arte y la imagen existe una amplia genealogía construida sobre la base de los desarrollos del mundo greco-latino, la tradición judeo-cristiana, el pensamiento ilustrado y la crítica posmoderna. Esta tradición, transmitida a partir de la historia universal del arte, la estética y las teorías disciplinarias del arte, permanece hasta la actualidad incuestionada y sigue siendo el centro de organización de los programas de las carreras de Bellas Artes y Artes Visuales”. Asumirla como término exclusivo de comparación “significa, de alguna manera, negar la posibilidad de autonomía de los países periféricos para construir sus propias epistemologías y saberes” (Moya, Álvarez, Campano, Lanzeni & Torres 2006: 114), ejerciendo y perpetuando asimetrías de poder que invisibilizan estéticas y visualidades otras.

¿Cómo involucra la academia todo esto? Evidentemente, la academia es un lugar de producción de conocimiento y, en cuanto institución, es también un lugar de poder. El tema, entonces, es cómo realizar una descolonización del saber occidental y académico, es decir, cómo realizar un pensamiento no-hegemónico decolonial. Estas preguntas implican dilemas y desafíos epistemológicos fuertes, sobre todo en relación con la cuestión de la representación, ya sea visual o etnográfica³ en general, ya que desde los primeros contactos con la alteridad se han producido *complejos de visualidad* (Mirzoeff 2011) hegemónicos que han colonizado la imagen del otro y su misma mirada, en varias ocasiones justificando, legitimando o promoviendo además una dominación política.

Dejando a un lado los procesos históricos explícitamente coloniales –finalizados a la dominación material y la hegemonía política– el hecho sigue siendo problemático hoy en día, porque, aunque animados por las mejores intenciones, todos los procesos de representación implican inevitablemente alguna forma de apropiación, ya sea cultural o, en el caso del uso de medios visuales, de imagen. Esto no significa que no existan estéticas y visualidades otras, producidas por sujetos subalternos pertenecientes a las periferias del Sur global, sino que “tienen un paradójico estatus de existencia a través de cual su inscripción histórica y discursiva tiene que remitirse a un lugar epistémico de enunciación expropiado” (León 2012: 112). De aquí, pensar, representar y luchar por los derechos de otros corre el riesgo de traducirse en pensar, representar y luchar *en lugar* de otros⁴, ejerciendo una violencia epistémica⁵ (Spivak 1985) y simbólica⁶ (Bourdieu 1977), ya que produce una apropiación de esas luchas; luchas que, además, en varias ocasiones cabe recordar que encuentran cierto reconocimiento y legitimación oficial justamente cuando y porque ‘representadas’ por la academia y el saber occidental, o sea por centros de poder hegemónicos.

En términos visuales, cuando nos enfrentamos a representaciones mediáticas de imágenes de la alteridad, podríamos decir que lo que se está produ-

ciendo es una forma de violencia estética; una violencia que, al mismo tiempo –debido a todo lo argumentado hasta ahora– no puede no ser ética, ya que, además, cuestiona la legitimidad del uso de la imagen del otro, su dignidad y el respeto a su persona, entre otras cosas.

Sigue aquí en toda su actualidad la pregunta de la filósofa Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1985: 282) sobre si pueden hablar los subalternos –los “otros”–, es decir, si pueden hablar sin mediaciones ni representaciones, con su propia voz, con su propio cuerpo:

Para el “verdadero” grupo subalterno, cuya identidad es su diferencia, no hay sujeto subalterno irrepresentable que pueda conocer y hablar por sí mismo; la solución del intelectual no es abstenerse de la representación. El problema es que el itinerario del sujeto no ha sido trazado como para ofrecer un objeto de seducción al intelectual representante. En el levemente arcaico lenguaje del grupo indio, la cuestión se torna, ¿cómo podemos tocar la conciencia del pueblo, aun si investigamos su política? ¿Con qué voz la conciencia puede hablar el subalterno?

El caso de los *bateyes* dominicanos: entre denuncia y sensacionalismo mediático

Personalmente, he llegado a estas preguntas a partir de experiencias etnográficas empezadas en 2013 –y que siguen hasta el día de hoy– investigando las condiciones de explotación laboral sufridas por los migrantes haitianos y sus descendientes en las plantaciones de caña de azúcar de la República Dominicana; un contexto –el de los *bateyes*, específicamente– sobre el cual no me voy a detener, remitiendo a cuanto de mi parte ya se ha publicado en materia (Zecca Castel 2015, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2023a).

A este respecto, solo cabe recordar que se trata de una realidad muy dura, de herencia colonial, que arraiga en el sistema de plantaciones esclavista, y que todavía hoy en día involucra posiblemente cerca de 250.000 personas (entre hombres, mujeres y niños) en condiciones de vida deplorables, sin acceso a servicios básicos ni derechos fundamentales, debido también a la falta de ciudadanía de la mayoría de las personas; condición que ha sido producida por específicas políticas gubernamentales y que expone estas personas a innumerables abusos.

La realidad de los *bateyes* y las condiciones laborales y de vida de sus moradores han sido objeto de atención tanto académica como de varias organizaciones internacionales por lo menos desde la década de los 80 de 1900. A lo largo de estos últimos 40 años se han publicado informes, libros, artículos, ensayos y todo tipo de materiales informativos denunciando la explotación de la mano de obra haitiana en el contexto de las plantaciones dominicanas (ASS 1979; Lemoine 1981; Plant 1987; HRW 1989; Gavigan 1996; CIDH 1999, entre otros). Aún a riesgo de generalizar, cabe decir que estas publicaciones, mayormente, no han determinado cambios realmente significativos. Por el contrario, si algo se está moviendo en estos últimos tiempos se debe sobre todo a producciones mediáticas internacionales de carácter visual y audiovisual divulgativo que han popularizado en todo el mundo imágenes (sean fotografías o videos) generalmente muy impactantes sobre esta realidad.

Solo para mencionar algunas de estas producciones, pienso en el reportaje fotográfico “Esclaves au paradis”, realizado entre 2004 y 2006 por la periodista francesa Celine Anaya Gautier; el documental “Inferno di zucchero”, realizado por mi padre Adriano Zecca en 2006; el documental “The Price of sugar”, realizado por el estadounidense Bill Haney en 2007; y el documental “The sugar babies”, realizado por la cubana Amy Serrano también en 2007. Pero igualmente puedo mencionar mi documental “Come schiavi in libertà” (Fig. 1), realizado en 2013 y transmitido por la *Radiotelevisione Svizzera Italiana* (RSI), así como varias otras producciones audiovisuales que siguen apareciendo sobre el tema en los medios internacionales.

que “representación significa tanto ‘estar en lugar de’ (yo represento a Pedro en esta reunión) como ‘fingir que soy’ (en esta representación teatral yo finjo que soy Pedro). En este sentido, la representación pertenece al universo de la ficción y del fingimiento”.

5 Spivak define este tipo de violencia como la misma producción colonial de la Otreddad; una Otreddad que queda silenciada dentro de la representación occidental.

6 Bourdieu (1977: 41) define este tipo de violencia como “todo poder que logra imponer significados e imponerlos como legítimos disimulando las relaciones de fuerza en que se funda su propia fuerza”.

7 Otras imágenes aparecen en el *photo-essay* publicado en el Vol.11, n°2 de esta misma revista (Zecca Castel, 2023a).

8 The Dominican Republic-Central America-United States Free Trade Agreement, art. 16.2.1.: https://ustr.gov/archive/Trade_Agreements/Regional/CAFTA/CAFTA-DR_Final_Texts/Section_Index.html

9 [https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/national-media-release/cbp-issues-withhold-release-order-central-romana-corporation#:~:text=WASHINGTON%20—%20Effective%20November%2023%2C%202022,Corporation%20Limited%20\(Central%20Romana\).](https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/national-media-release/cbp-issues-withhold-release-order-central-romana-corporation#:~:text=WASHINGTON%20—%20Effective%20November%2023%2C%202022,Corporation%20Limited%20(Central%20Romana).)



RAÚL ZECCA CASTEL COME SCHIAVI IN LIBERTÀ

un documentario-inchiesta sui braccianti haitiani nella Repubblica Dominicana



Figure 1 Portada del documental “Come schiavi in libertà” (Zecca Castel, 2013).

Entre los materiales producidos también quiero mencionar varias fotografías documentales que yo mismo realicé a lo largo de mis estadias etnográficas en los *bateyes* dominicanos (Fig. 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8)⁷ y que fueron evaluadas por el *Departamento de Trabajo de Estados Unidos* (USDOL) para comprobar las denuncias planteadas en tema de violaciones de derechos laborales en el marco del contrato de libre comercio entre Estados Unidos y los países centroamericanos (CAFTA-DR)⁸. De hecho, esas fotografías, junto a mucho más material, contribuyeron a que, en enero de 2023, Estados Unidos decidiera rechazar en sus aduanas azúcar procedente de la República Dominicana producido por la mayor empresa azucarera, la *Central Romana Corporation*, justamente por considerar ese producto fruto de trabajo forzoso⁹.

El hecho que cabe destacar es que esas fotografías, como la mayor parte de los materiales audiovisuales producidos internacionalmente, presentan –o representan, mejor dicho– una imagen de los trabajadores, así como de sus

viviendas y de sus familias, incluyendo a sus hijos, que remite directa o indirectamente a condiciones esclavistas.



Figure 2 Joven cortador de caña en una plantación azucarera sin dispositivos de seguridad personal. Las empresas azucareras no otorgan el material de protección necesario a sus trabajadores (fotografía del autor, República Dominicana, 2013).



Figure 3 Otro bracero retratado en el trabajo con el rostro perlado de sudor. Las jornadas laborales pueden durar hasta 12 horas (fotografía del autor, República Dominicana, 2013).

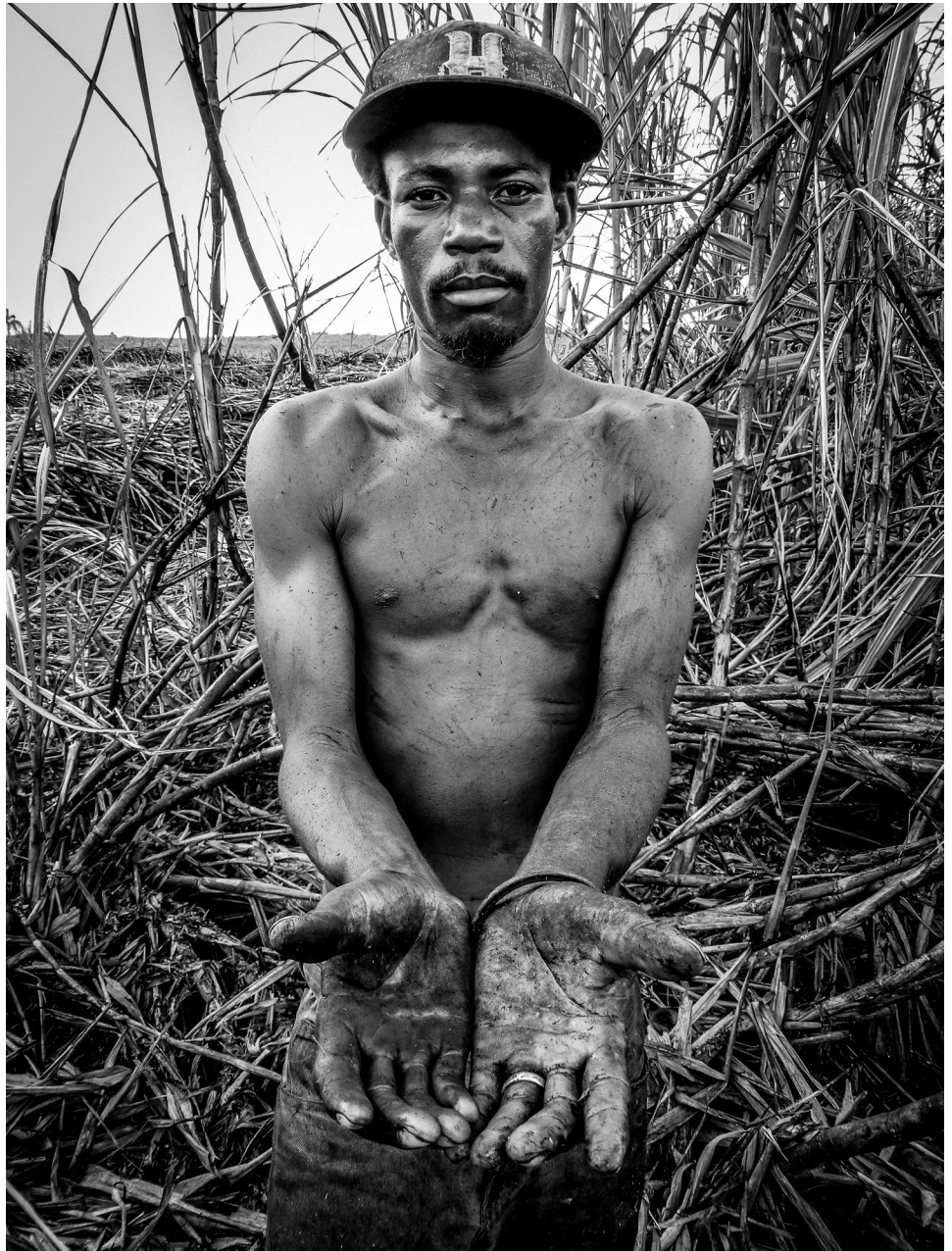


Figure 4 Un joven bracero muestra sus manos marcadas por el trabajo en la plantación. Su cuerpo también lleva múltiples señas de cortes y cicatrices, fruto de accidentes laborales (fotografía del autor, República Dominicana, 2013).



Figure 5 Exterior de una barraca construida con madera y chapa, destinada al alojamiento de los trabajadores y sus familias, como evidencia de las precarias condiciones habitacionales (fotografía del autor, República Dominicana, 2013).



Figure 5 Interior de una habitación que alberga a cuatro trabajadores. Como se puede apreciar, faltan camas, muebles y baño (fotografía del autor, República Dominicana, 2013).



Figure 7 Un anciano bracero desanimado muestra el recibo de su salario quincenal (fotografía del autor, República Dominicana, 2013).



Figure 7 La esposa de un bracero junto a sus cuatro hijos mal vestidos y sin zapatos, como evidencia de las malas condiciones de vida que afectan enteras familias y generaciones (República Dominicana, 2013).

10 Resulta interesante observar cómo el mismo Mirzoeff (2016; 34) identifica el sistema de plantación caribeño como el primer complejo de visualidad de la historia: “Los primeros escenarios de la visualidad podemos encontrarlos en las plantaciones de esclavos, controladas por la vigilancia de los capataces en tanto que encarnación del poder del soberano. Esta vigilancia visual contaba con el refuerzo del castigo violento y se situó en la base de un tipo moderno de división del trabajo [...]. Posteriormente, la visualidad separa a los grupos una vez clasificados de cara a establecer modos de organización social, encargándose de segregar a los visualizados para impedir que se organicen como sujetos políticos, trabajadores, pueblo o nación descolonizada. Por último, dicha clasificación separada obtiene carta de naturaleza y legitimación estética”.

Hasta en los titulares de estas diferentes publicaciones, a menudo se explicita la palabra esclavitud, ya sea declinada en moderna, contemporánea, nueva, cuasi, etc... De la misma manera, en muchos casos, se utiliza el blanco y negro como modalidad para evocar un tiempo pasado y dramatizar todavía más las escenas representadas.

Queda claro cómo el énfasis mediático relacionado al ámbito de la esclavitud favorece un fuerte agarre emocional, aunque al mismo tiempo también corre el riesgo de caer en sensacionalismos. Todo esto, entonces, plantea nuevamente cuestiones estéticas y éticas por lo que se refiere a la representación de la alteridad y, específicamente, de la alteridad subalterna, como es el caso de los braceros haitianos empleados en los cañaverales dominicanos¹⁰. El riesgo al que nos enfrentamos, en efecto, es la producción de una victimización adicional, al no tener en cuenta la dignidad de los sujetos como personas, como personas vivas ahora, relegándolas a una condición de pasividad y carente de agentividad.

¿Imágenes ‘bellas’, ‘buenas’ o ‘justas’?

*What uses having a great depth of field,
if there is not an adequate depth of feeling?
(William Eugene Smith)*

En relación con estos asuntos teóricos, es pertinente reflexionar sobre la pregunta de qué constituye una “buena” fotografía en y para la práctica antropológica. Esto porque, según el antropólogo y fotógrafo colombiano Camilo Leon-Quijano (2022), el adjetivo “bueno” no remite únicamente al campo semántico de la estética. En la producción visual antropológica, si bien es necesario considerar elementos técnicos como la composición pictórica y las elecciones artísticas –en el respeto de las convenciones fotográficas–, en definitiva, una “buena” imagen no es necesariamente una “bella” imagen. De hecho, su bondad depende de un más amplio trabajo antropológico de contextualización: “el valor de una fotografía no se limita exclusivamente a sus características estéticas, sino que también radica en su capacidad para proporcionar una *experiencia social*” (ivi: 574, traducción mía). Sin llegar a posiciones extremas y paradójicas –aunque legítimas y compartibles–, según las cuales una buena fotografía es en ocasiones aquella que no se ha tomado (ivi: 581), lo que la hace “justa”, tal vez más que “buena”, es su capacidad para expresar un significado compartido a nivel experiencial, tanto por el/la fotógrafo/a-antropólogo/a como, especialmente, por los sujetos fotografiados. Sintetizando, se podría decir que una buena fotografía implica y expresa al mismo tiempo un diálogo (no necesariamente explícito) basado en la calidad y en la autenticidad de la relación etnográfica entre las dos figuras.

En mi caso, con respecto a las fotografías de los jornaleros haitianos empleados en las plantaciones de caña de azúcar de la República Dominicana, cabe señalar que, en un primer momento, algunas de estas fotografías me fueron encomendadas específicamente para ser transmitidas como material documental al *Departamento de Trabajo de los Estados Unidos* (USDOL), el cual, en 2013, había emprendido una auditoría oficial para comprobar el cumplimiento del tratado de libre comercio vigente con la República Dominicana (CAFTA-DR), especialmente en lo relativo a las condiciones laborales de los jornaleros agrícolas empleados en la producción de azúcar destinado principalmente al país norteamericano. La petición oficial al USDOL había sido solicitada por el misionero anglo-español Christopher Hartley, quien, después de diez años de servicio en la República Dominicana, había sido expulsado del país bajo presión de las empresas azucareras y, desde 2006, ya no había podido regresar. De ahí la invitación a tomar fotografías que pudieran documentar las condiciones de vida y de trabajo actuales en los *bateyes* dominicanos, donde estaba realizando mi investigación doctoral.

Las intenciones con las que me acerqué al medio fotográfico, por lo tanto, no se basaban en ambiciones estéticas. El valor de las imágenes no aspiraba a un estatus artístico, sino que residía en su función propiamente documental. Paradójicamente, el supuesto teórico que consideraba la imagen fotográfica como prueba objetiva e irrefutable de la realidad, si bien por un lado expresaba un legado positivista colonial, por otro actuaba en función decolonial, para documentar y denunciar las violaciones de los derechos humanos y laborales por parte de empresas multinacionales en el marco del capitalismo extractivista global.

Si bien es cierto que durante mi trabajo de campo nunca me confronté explícitamente con los sujetos de mis fotografías respecto a las modalidades de su puesta en escena y representación visual, también es cierto que solo la calidad y autenticidad de la relación etnográfica establecida con el tiempo hicieron posible la confianza necesaria para una colaboración basada en la transparencia de las intenciones. Una vez compartidas las razones de mi presencia en el terreno –explicadas en referencia a motivos de investigación,

pero respaldadas por una declarada voluntad de apoyo–, en muchos casos, fueron los propios jornaleros quienes me pidieron que tomara fotografías que demostraran lo que ya me habían referido varias veces de palabra durante entrevistas o conversaciones informales. Eran ellos quienes me mostraban las manos marcadas por el duro trabajo, exhibían los recibos de pago y me conducían a sus casas para que pudiera fotografiar las precarias condiciones habitativas a las que estaban obligados, en algunos casos asumiendo poses increíblemente escenográficas. No puedo saber si y cuánto estas poses eran la expresión de una incorporación estética destinada a satisfacer determinados imaginarios y expectativas que con el tiempo podrían haberse sedimentado e interiorizado, pero lo cierto es que expresaban, en todos los aspectos, la reivindicación silenciosa de un *ethos* compartido, entendido batesonianamente como “esas actividades codificadas que los miembros de una sociedad llevan a cabo de forma espontánea [...], determinadas por las reglas culturales que rigen el comportamiento público y privado” (Meloni 2023: 32).

Retomando la propuesta del crítico de arte John Berger (2013), según la cual el contenido de una fotografía no tiene que ver con la forma, sino con el tiempo, León-Quijano (2022: 574) agrega que “el *tiempo* es lo que permite contextualizar una fotografía [...]. Es porque es vivida e intuida que una fotografía alcanza sus fines”. A lo largo de mis frecuentes estancias etnográficas en los *bateyes* dominicanos, cuando mostraba fotografías tomadas en visitas anteriores, ni los protagonistas de las imágenes ni otros observadores se enfocaban en los aspectos formales o compositivos de la representación visual. La atención se centraba siempre en posibles indicadores (*índices*, como diría Peirce) que pudieran revelar aspectos significativos de la realidad y del contexto de referencia. El significado del *índice*, en efecto, siempre depende de coordenadas espaciotemporales. Así, las fotografías servían para *indicar* afiliaciones a una determinada empresa azucarera (deducidas, por ejemplo, del logo en un sombrero), la calidad de los equipos de protección (evaluando las condiciones de las botas), los salarios pagados por una tonelada de caña en un lugar o tiempo específico (leyendo fechas e importes en los recibos), y otros detalles similares. La cuestión estética, en el sentido artístico del término, no era absolutamente tomada en consideración.

Si desde un punto de vista émico –para los sujetos interesados–, las fotografías tienen una función contextualizadora, para el/la autor/a-fotógrafo/a y los/las lectores/lectoras de su etnografía, tienen una función antropológica. Esto significa que las fotografías no son “sólo” imágenes individuales y, sobre todo, no tienen valor artístico en sí mismas. Forman parte y encuentran sentido en un contexto etno(foto)gráfico, es decir, en una obra antropológica orgánica, donde las fotografías colaboran en la construcción de un discurso argumentativo. Fundamental, por tanto, es el diálogo entre imágenes y texto (ya sean pies de foto, pasajes referidos a los sujetos de la representación o testimonios directos de los protagonistas retratados). En resumen, podría decirse que la etno-grafía es el contexto de la fotografía de carácter antropológico.

He sostenido que las imágenes antropológicas no tienen valor artístico en sí mismas. Esto no significa que no puedan ser apreciadas estéticamente como productos artísticos, sino que su calidad, o “bondad”, depende de factores distintos a las técnicas de composición fotográfica, es decir, de la capacidad de producir significado y “funcionar” –o actuar socialmente–, dentro de un contexto determinado. Por otra parte, es siempre el contexto el que determina la elección de las convenciones iconográficas que se emprenden en las producciones fotográficas específicas. Cada ideología visual está forjada culturalmente y responde principalmente a la tradición iconográfica de pertenencia de el/la fotógrafo/a, pero también se modifica en el encuentro etnográfico y responde tanto a condiciones técnico-materiales como a imaginarios y expectativas émicas. Por ejemplo: el uso del blanco y negro, en general, y en mi caso particular, remite en formas más o menos explícitas a una convención fotográfica característica de la tradición documental. Como subraya Terence

Wright (2016: 203, traducción mía), “una de las características esperadas de la fotografía documental es la imagen cruda, granulada, en blanco y negro”. El blanco y negro enfatiza líneas y contrastes, produciendo un efecto dramatizado y des-temporalizando la escena. Por esto, a menudo está ligado al fotoperiodismo, al género social y de investigación.

Ya he mencionado los riesgos potenciales que esto conlleva, especialmente si se aplica a contextos y sujetos del Sur global, donde puede traducirse en un enfoque pietista y victimista. Por otro lado, el blanco y negro puede estimular procesos que activan el compromiso del observador: lleva la atención a la sustancia más que a la forma, ejerciendo al máximo grado lo que en la teoría de la comunicación de Roman Jakobson (1965) –aplicable también al lenguaje visual– se conoce como la función referencial-deíctica, como diciendo: “aquí, mira esto”. Así, la fotografía en blanco y negro invita a los/las observadores/as a concentrar la mirada “en la intensidad de las personas, en sus actitudes, en sus miradas, sin que sean distraídos por el color” (Salgado 2013: 151, traducción mía). Por lo tanto, también se configura como una herramienta de promoción y valorización de la dignidad humana y de reconocimiento de agentividad. Esto involucra la función conativa o performativa de la comunicación (Jakobson 1965, Austin 1962), por la cual “una imagen es como un llamamiento a hacer algo, no solo a sentirse perturbado o indignado. La foto dice: ‘¡Basta! Intervengan, actúen’” (Wenders & Salgado 2014, traducción mía).

“El color es descriptivo. El blanco y negro es interpretativo”, habría dicho el gran fotógrafo Elliot Erwitt. Y es sin duda cierto que, más que el color, el blanco y negro deja amplios márgenes a la función poético-creativa, porque “la imagen monocromática exalta la imaginación del espectador. Los colores que no están presentes en la fotografía pueden ser de alguna manera completados mentalmente a través del proceso de percepción” (Wright 2016: 203, traducción mía). Sin embargo, como afirma el mismo Salgado (2014) en referencia a su producción fotográfica de género social, aunque “el lenguaje fotográfico es un lenguaje formal, ligado a la estética [...], no quiero en absoluto que estas [fotografías] sean leídas como obras de arte. De hecho, no nacen para ser objeto de arte, sino como un conjunto de imágenes para informar, para provocar discusiones, debates”.

Conclusiones

Volviendo entonces a la reflexión de partida, es decir al tema de la relación entre la academia y los derechos en el proceso de producción de conocimiento de la alteridad y específicamente por lo que se refiere a la cuestión de la representación de la alteridad subalterna con medios visuales –es decir, como contestar a la pregunta que pide: ¿qué hacer “ante el dolor de los demás” (Sontag 2003)? –, creo que hay que tener seriamente en cuenta estos dilemas (est)éticos como un desafío para pensar y luchar no solo *por*, sino que, sobre todo, *con* los sujetos interesados. En fin, la tarea que nos espera anhela a una estética decolonial.

Tenemos entonces que preguntarnos ¿qué categorías perpetúan los complejos de visualidad coloniales? ¿Qué prácticas locales (desde una perspectiva émica) de producción de imágenes pueden cuestionar estas categorías y estos complejos de visualidad? ¿Puede otra representación visual ayudar a descolonizar el imaginario colonial? ¿Cómo realizar otra representación visual involucrando la perspectiva émica?

No tengo aquí las respuestas a todas estas preguntas, ni realmente sé si las hay, pero tal vez puede ser útil retomar el concepto del “derecho a la mirada” así propuesto por Nicholas Mirzoeff (2011: 1), según el cual:

El derecho a mirar no consiste en ver. En un sentido personal comienza con la mirada a los ojos del otro para expresar amistad, solidaridad o amor. La mirada debe ser mutua; en ella, debemos construirnos los unos a los otros o fracasará sin remedio. Como tal, es una mirada que se

sitúa más allá de la posibilidad de representación. Este derecho a mirar reivindica también autonomía. No individualismo o una mirada *voyeur*, sino una subjetividad política y un sentido de colectividad [...], implica el reconocimiento de la otredad en una posición desde la que reivindicar tanto un derecho (claim a right) como la decisión sobre que es lo correcto (determine what is right).

De alguna manera, en esta propuesta de Mirzoeff resuena la invitación a una mirada compartida y, sobre todo, comprometida, que, desde una perspectiva antropológica, remite a posiciones críticas con respecto al principio del relativismo cultural, ya que este supondría la imposibilidad de adoptar criterios comunes de juicio moral, desembocando así en teorías justificacionistas radicales (Véa Gellner 1987, entre otros). De hecho, la posición de la que se ha llamado *engaged anthropology*, es decir de una antropología ética y políticamente comprometida o militante, reclama con fuerza un cambio de paradigma metodológico que suponga el pasaje de una observación participante a una “participación artesana” (Caulfield 1979; Sanadjian 1990) cuya finalidad sea justamente el bien común, contribuyendo así a la emancipación del género humano.

Para mejor entender a que se refiere este enfoque antropológico “artesano”, merece aquí la pena retomar algunas reflexiones propuestas por Nancy Scheper-Hughes (2005: 293, traducción mía) como comentario a la pregunta sobre en que momento el antropólogo, ante situaciones de sufrimiento ajeno, se convierte de testigo ocular en espectador, sino en cómplice de las injusticias:

Si bien estos siguen siendo problemas agobiantes y sin resolver, la tarea específica de la antropología y la etnografía sigue siendo clara: alinear-nos a nosotros mismos y a nuestra disciplina del lado de la humanidad, de la salvación y la mejora del mundo, incluso si no siempre estamos completamente seguros de lo que esto significa, de lo que se requiere de nosotros cuando las vidas de nuestros amigos, sujetos de estudio e informantes están en peligro. En última instancia, sólo nos queda esperar que nuestros métodos de testimonio empático y comprometido (“estar con” y “estar allí”) –por muy viejos y trillados que puedan ser estos conceptos– nos proporcionen las herramientas para que la antropología pueda crecer y desarrollarse como una pequeña práctica de la liberación humana.

En otras palabras, “estar con” y “estar allí” significa establecer “la primacía de lo ético” (Scheper-Hughes 1995) en el trabajo de investigación y de restitución etnográfica, es decir llegar a considerar la antropología no solo como campo de conocimiento (como disciplina), sino también como campo de acción y lugar de lucha. Esto, según Scheper-Hughes, conlleva e implica una transformación esencial para la misma figura del/la antropólogo/a, que está llamada a dejar de lado la supuesta objetividad y neutralidad de su observación para comprometerse con la responsabilidad de la participación, aquí entendida sea cómo *tomar parte* que, sobre todo, cómo *tomar partido*. De ahí, su reconfiguración como *compañero/a*: testigo responsivo y reflexivo, política y moralmente comprometido. De hecho, según la antropóloga estadounidense, asumir la primacía de lo ético significa exactamente rendir cuentas, sentirse responsables del Otro (“responsibility, accountability, answerability to the Other” [Ivi: 419]).

Por lo que se refiere específicamente a las políticas de la representación visual, la misma Scheper-Hughes (Ivi: 416) se plantea el reto de promover una estética éticamente orientada hacia la alteridad, capaz de producir imágenes que eviten tanto el sensacionalismo como el pietismo, ya que estos solo generan “miradas en blanco” y “encogimiento de hombros”, fruto de una “estetización” del sufrimiento, “(transformado en teatro, visto como performance) y, por lo tanto, minimizado y negado”. Una estética éticamente orientada debe

11 Los/las autores/autoras del artículo utilizan el término “periferia” para referirse a contextos no occidentales y extraeuropeos, considerándolos subalternos en relación con la tradición de la antropología visual (ibidem).

implicar lo que el filósofo Richard Rorty (1989: xvi, traducción mía) ha descrito como un “proceso de llegar a ver a otros seres humanos como ‘nosotros’ en lugar de como ‘ellos’”. Parafraseando a Bourgois (2002), hay que comprometerse a rehuir y rechazar esa suerte de *pornografía del sufrimiento* y de *voyerismo* de matriz colonial que a menudo califica nuestra mirada hacia la vida de los que padecen condiciones de injusticia, opresión y marginalidad extremas. “Quienes nos ganamos la vida observando y registrando la miseria del mundo –confirma Scheper-Hughes (1995: 416)– tenemos la obligación particular de reflexionar críticamente sobre el impacto de las duras imágenes del sufrimiento humano que imponemos al público”.

Esta reflexión crítica sobre el uso de la tecnología visual en relación con la representación de la otredad subalterna, de hecho, es lo que debería comprometernos como investigadores/as y antropólogos/as, puesto que, “cuando utilizamos medios audiovisuales en el trabajo de campo, la cámara es parte de nuestra mirada, actitud y relación con el otro, y el producto obtenido es tanto un registro del objeto de investigación como un medio de acceso a nuestra propia visión sobre él” (Moya, Álvarez, Campano, Lanzeni & Torres 2006: 117). Es decir que no está en juego simplemente la producción de una narrativa visual sobre el otro, sino que, al representar a ese otro, también estamos representándonos a nosotros mismos, reflejando nuestro propio ser. Desde esta necesaria toma de conciencia, debemos aceptar la responsabilidad a ejercer una crítica activa de las epistemologías etnocéntricas occidentales que han colonizado y universalizado la estética moderna para abrirnos a la posibilidad de considerar otros lugares epistémicos de enunciación y promover lo que León (2012: 111) llama la apertura de una *estética-otra*, de *culturas visuales-otras*, de *tecnologías de la imagen-otras*.

Este, yo creo, es el gran desafío al que debemos enfrentarnos si queremos realizar una estética decolonial que, al mismo tiempo, se presente como una ética decolonial. Por un lado, es necesario desprendernos de las representaciones que perpetúan los patrones visuales coloniales: esa “colonialidad del ver” de la que habla Barriandos (2011). Para ello, tiene una importancia primordial reconocer su penetración generalizada y comprender sus fundamentos históricos, con el propósito de adoptar una postura comprometida con la diversidad de enfoques, perspectivas y miradas alternativas que surgen “para y desde la periferia¹¹” (Moya, Álvarez, Campano, Lanzeni & Torres 2006: 114). Por otro lado, esto demanda la implicación del “otro” y un esfuerzo colaborativo tanto en el proceso de investigación como en el de construcción y restitución etnográfica de las representaciones visuales y culturales en su sentido más amplio. Este enfoque participativo sería capaz de promover una mayor precisión y respeto por los sujetos representados, contribuyendo a su empoderamiento. Es, en el fondo, una reivindicación “moral y política: afirma la dimensión dialógica y colaborativa de la etnografía” (Pinney 2011: 149, traducción mía).

Desde una perspectiva antropológica, entonces, una fotografía “buena”, “bella” y “justa” es la que nos permite reflexionar críticamente sobre nuestra postura metodológica y epistemológica en el campo, la que implica un compromiso dialógico y nos obliga a considerar una historia visual más extensa, la que surge de una experiencia social y, finalmente, la que tiene la capacidad de ejercer un potencial performativo: “la importancia de la fotografía no reside principalmente en su potencial como forma de arte, sino más bien en su capacidad para moldear nuestras ideas, influir en nuestro comportamiento y definir nuestra sociedad” (León-Quijano 2022: 590, traducción mía).

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Reports

"May I show you our school?"

Biocultural ethics in a visual ethnography in southern Chile

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Abstract

This report describes the relationship between a rural school in northern Patagonia and its immediate surroundings. Through an ethnographic approach, it brings together different images of the everyday lives of students and teachers, challenging the boundaries between anthropocentric moralities and ecological urgencies, state education and Mapuche cosmovision, classroom and forest.

Keywords: Visual ethnography, Visual culture of schools, Biocultural ethics, Chile, Mapuche

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I can notice it in the children who have graduated: they have already acquired the habit of asking for permission, for example, seeking permission from a tree to take a dihueñe [a type of mushroom]. These are things that you can teach in everyday life. Because it's like the stage where children are more receptive and you impact a lot on them (Visual arts and technology professor, Primary School of Hualapulli, 2023)

This report will describe the relationship between a rural school in northern Patagonia and its immediate surroundings. By quoting a teacher's words on the importance of asking a tree before grasping the dihueñe mushroom that only grows in its branches, we want to stress how biocultural practices articulate everyday pedagogical experiences, bringing together references to ancestral, local and instructional ways of knowing.



Figure 1 A wooden sign at the entrance of the school greets “Alongside natural resources, true values are lived. Welcome”. Photo by Irene Silva Jara, 2023.

Private Primary School number 33 of Hualapulli is located in Chile, in the region of Araucanía, Municipality of Villarrica, in a rural area between lakes, volcanoes and forests, amidst the ancestral land of the Mapuche people. Its environment is characterised by an exuberant native nature, shaped by the agricultural and forestry practices of the Mapuche, the Chilean peasantry and the European immigrants who arrived in the 19th century.

Among the 54 students, aged between 7 and 11, some children have lived in the countryside for generations, others commute every morning from the town of Villarrica (10 miles away), and some have recently arrived with their families, moving away from the cities that suffered from the Covid-19 pandemic. These demographic changes, together with an ongoing social tension concerning the ownership and use of land complexly reflect in educational spaces. Specifically regarding how families, students, teachers and authorities perceive and understand coexistence among different peoples and beings.



Figure 2 Side view of the school façade. On the front right side, the mural portrays Kai-Kai and Tren-Tren, on the back left side the almost unnoticeable Chemamull (traditional wooden human sculptures) merge in the forest. Photo by Irene Silva Jara, 2023.

Upon arriving, a circular path leads to the building. The front resembles a wooden country house, with the Chilean flag on one side, like many others in rural areas in the region. However, this school has a distinctive mural on one side: the snakes Kai-Kai (in blue colour for the sea) and Tren-Tren (in red for the fire of the volcanoes) teach an ancestral allegory about the origins of the world: they are engaged in a never-ending fight in which there are neither winners nor losers, but beings who learn to co-inhabit through complementary energies. The fact that both snakes are accompanied by the local kingfisher and the chucao (bird endemic to the region) adds to the understanding that this school procures to integrate natural, aboriginal perspectives into a cohesive project.

1. Biocultural ethics as a lens for ethnographic interpretation

Based on contributions from biology and environmental philosophy, Rozzi (2013) has advanced the notion of “biocultural ethics” as a lens to reconcile the well-being of humanity with that of all beings on the planet. To this end, he proposes a threefold relationship between habitats, habits and co-inhabitants that we adopt as a framework for observing the daily work of this school.

It is interesting to note that the notion of habitat derives etymologically from the Greek ἦθος [ethos], literally, the den, dwelling, or residence of an animal (Liddell and Scott 1889). In this sense, the habitat goes beyond the mere physical consideration of space and implies a place of everyday life. In other words, while there are many geographies, territories and environments in the world, the place that is named habitat is defined by a certain commitment and interdependence that deserves to be cared for and shared. For the community of Hualapulli, the habitat of their school is defined by a broad understanding of the immediate forest that incorporates the school building and surroundings, as well as the trails and different spaces for gardening and recreation that have taken shape over the years.

Habits emerge as recurrent practices of thinking, feeling and acting in the world that facilitate or shape life in a specific habitat. In a school like

Hualapulli, these practices typically reveal the intimate connection between biological and cultural dimensions. For instance, when students feel sick, they approach their gardening teacher and ask for herbal water. This is a clear example of how the consumption of medicinal herbs is intertwined with the care of the garden, which in turn implies a relationship with the plants being cared for. In the garden, teachers teach a form of care that requires respect and gratitude with the plants. Moreover, the tradition of drinking herbal water to cure an upset stomach is reinforced by the exercise of going to the garden and asking the plant for permission to take its leaves and use them to heal oneself.

Co-inhabitants are all of us (human and other-than-human) who, through our habits, shape the habitat we share. This includes the interactions between species and cultures. In this sense, the students and teachers of Hualapulli have an impressive ability to name and describe birds (such as *queltehue*, *chucaco*, *bandurria*, *pitío*, and hummingbird), trees (including *coihue*, *hualle*, *maqui*, *hazel*, *radal*, and *arrayán*), and Mapuche mythological beings (such as Chemamull, Tren Tren, Kai Kai, and Ñgen) that they share their habitat with. Their recognition of co-inhabitants is so developed that some of the children and teachers can even imitate birds' songs or refer to particular individuals of the local biota by their names, like "the canelo" or "the wailing tree".



Figure 3 Among the trees there are two Chemamull, wooden sculptures that symbolise an allegory of the origin of the world. In the words of a teacher, they are "the protection that we have, the school, nature [...] I go out and I see it [...] I remind myself that there are things that are superior to me". Photo by Irene Silva Jara, 2023.

This triple lens of the biocultural ethics helps attend to usually unadverted aspects of school life. For example, while in the Araucanía Region one-third of the population identifies as descendants of the Mapuche people, recent studies have shown that the educational experience in schools within the region often separates the official curriculum from the ancestral knowledge of native peoples. Specifically, school textbooks do not include teachings about native flora (Medina et al. 2020), and some schools promote an essentialist stance on aboriginal culture that favours a pure tradition and cancels dialogues between students from different social backgrounds (Luna 2015).

On the one hand, such a situation risks ignoring the relevance of ancestral custodians of habitats, reducing conservation habits to technocratic initiatives,

and creating an anonymous hierarchy between human and other-than-human cohabitants. On the other hand, there is a real opportunity for schools to foster emotional connections with local habitats while generating positive attitudes towards co-inhabitants through direct embodied experiences.

It is often suggested that combining traditional wisdom with scientific knowledge is essential to tackling social and environmental issues. However, attempts to promote intercultural environmental actions often fail due to the lack of a common framework for dialogue (Mackey & Claudie, 2015). Hence, as the Hualapulli school undergoes the transition from traditional to modern rural life, it presents an environmental, educational, and intercultural challenge worthy of exploration.

2. A visual ethnography in the school of Hualapulli

Visually examining the everyday life of the school of Hualapulli implies moving beyond the usual study of the “visual culture of schools” (Prosser 2007) to include the sensory experience of local biota, weather, surroundings. In this sense, in Chile, the text “The invisible (f)actor: everyday aesthetics and visual culture in school spaces” (Errázuriz 2015) was a milestone, expanding the investigation of visual culture towards the sensory experience of the general surroundings of the school. This relationship has made it possible, for example, to explore which images of nature teachers choose to present local landscapes and cohabitants to their students (Méndez et al. 2023), or which pedagogical criteria guide the management of visual resources in schools and education faculties (Bravo and Marini 2023), among others.

In methodological terms, these studies have been moving towards visual ethnographies that are permeable to multisensory aspects (Pink 2013), which in turn allow for a more complex grasp of the relationships between school and natural environment. In this way, it is possible to produce econarratives (Payne 2013) that describe the different relationships between humans and other-than-human in indoor and outdoor classroom spaces, or the transformation of the school habitat with the passing of the seasons, among other experiences that show layers of interaction with the environment.

Over the past three years, one of the authors of this report has been conducting an ethnography at the school of Hualapulli. During the last year, another author joined the task intending to produce a visual record of the school. During a visit, an unexpected situation arose. As the authors arrived on one cold autumn morning, the headmistress approached them and offered to show them around the school. They agreed and began walking towards the main corridor of the building, but the headmistress turned them around and invited them to follow her towards the forest while some students joined them. This unexpected invitation compelled us to ponder the school’s perception of its surroundings with regards to its institutional educational plan. Accordingly, we began to visually document the routes that students and teachers typically take in, around and about, between school facilities and forest.



Figure 4 “Mari mari, chumleymi?” (Hello, hello, how are you?) is the friendly welcome on the threshold of the main entrance, next to the Director’s office. Photo by Irene Silva Jara, 2023.

Throughout this process, certain visual artefacts, climatic qualities, and animal and plant life gave rise to reflections and practices that were intertwined with environmental considerations. In describing their experiences, both students and teachers drew freely upon knowledge of the Mapuche cosmovision, references to formal school culture, and insights from their immediate territory. Their ability to effortlessly navigate through different epistemic registers led to the following question:

What do the visual features of the places that students and teachers routinely visit (paths, forest, playground, corridors, classrooms) reveal about the experience of nature that this school embodies?

It is interesting to recognise that as we talked, questioned, walked, stood in silence and paused over many visual details together with students and teachers, this visual ethnography was enriched by multi-layered, multi-sensory experiences. In an iterative and inductive exercise, the task of seeing became less isolated and dominant, contributing to more subtle and complex exchanges between colours, shapes and shadows that were signified in the community. As if the natural adjustment to the rhythm, pace and walking style that comes from sharing many paths with others had metaphorically and interpretatively permeated not only the identification of what the school shows but also how it does it.

For example, on a dry spring day, the route between the path (Figure 5), the stream (Figure 8), and the playground on the hill (Figure 11) often invites a race between the children, making the trail’s details ethereal and almost irrelevant. During winter rains and snowfalls, this same route becomes slow and difficult, but the risk of slipping on some icy puddle is rewarded by a clearer awareness of the interweaving between the cadence of the body and the vision of the environment, especially when climbing a hill as described by Lund (2005). Something similar can be said about playing soccer in the pitch and how it is transformed when the wetland emerges or remains hidden beneath the surface (Figure 13).



Figure 5 And so we went into the forest to have our hosts introduce their school.
Photo by Irene Silva Jara, 2023.

3. The Wailing Tree



Figure 6 “The wailing tree”, is the centre of an opening in the forest. Three girls are
“listening”. Photo by Irene Silva Jara, 2023.

Flanking one of the entrances to the forest next to the school's facade, we find a *coihue* of titanic proportions, probably the largest and oldest specimen on the entire property. It is an evergreen tree, more than 30 metres high with leafy branches that sways elegantly in the wind and generates a dome of sun reflections around its circumference. No grass grows in its shade, but there are cut trunks and benches that suggest a place to rest.

Both teachers and students refer to it as “the wailing tree”. The reason is that when students behave disruptively in the classroom, the teacher asks them to “go listen to the tree”. But what do they hear there? In principle, nothing, there is no strange music or a hidden device saying something. However, the very presence of the tree, the overwhelming size of its branches, and its imprint among the other species in the forest generates a kind of wonder halo. One feels called to linger, keep at a distance from the trunk, open the eyes a little wider and look up, enraptured by this daily and marvellous experience of being in front of a unique tree.



Figure 7 For the Mapuche people, the *copihue* flower is a symbol of happiness, friendship and gratitude. Due to its indiscriminate extraction, in 1971 its total or partial cutting, transport and commercialisation was prohibited. Photo by Irene Silva Jara, 2023.

It is relevant to point out that when students “go and listen” to the tree, they are not being expelled with the typical “get out of class” or “go to the principal’s office”. On the contrary, the entire school community trusts that “the wailing tree” will be able to teach something that has no place or that has been disabled in class. On the one hand, this practice of going out, stopping, looking carefully and connecting with all the senses favours what we could call a pedagogical symbiosis. Students arrive in ebullience, probably frustrated at not finding a proper place in class and having been ordered to leave. The tree receives them, welcomes their disorientation or restlessness and responds in the only way possible: upright, docile to the wind, generous in its shade, and present to the very moment.

On the other hand, this entry into the forest makes it possible to interrupt or slow down the typical school rhythm, which is often hectic due to curricular requirements and pedagogical tradition. Within the halo of this tree,

there are no deadlines, learning sequences or standardised assessment criteria. The pause justifies itself.



Figure 8 Two girls observe mushrooms by the Poinpoinko stream. Photo by Irene Silva Jara, 2023.

As time passes, one can suddenly notice that a vine has taken the *coihue* as a support, and grows to embrace it and intertwine the highest branches. It is the *copihue*, “Chile’s national flower” which has beautiful red petals in the shape of a small flame hanging upside down. There is also the Poinpoinko stream that meanders through the trees, and houses all kinds of daily games and ancestral traditions. For example, during the Wiñol tripantu (the Mapuche celebration associated to winter solstice), the whole school goes to its waters to wash their faces as a sign of renewal together with nature. Next to the stream, an infinite number of mushrooms of diverse and intriguing colours, sizes, shapes and textures appear.



Figure 9 “we don’t touch them so as not to hurt them”. Photo by Irene Silva Jara, 2023.

The *copihue*, the Poinponko and the many mushrooms have always been there, but probably when we reached the tree preoccupied with school, research or our usual tasks, we could not notice them as co-inhabitants. Recalling Merleau-Ponty, one could argue that this experience is not about listening “to the tree” but “with it”, that is to say, being sensitive enough to perceive together with the tree the stream, the wind, the birdsong; learning to recognise a kind of background rhythm, unpretentious yet ever-present, of which we are always members and which unites us to the entire forest.

4. The playground



Figure 10 Three girls pause before entering the forest. They are surrounded by different species of trees and bushes. At their feet, a sign reads ‘SENDERO’, the Spanish word for ‘trail’. Photo by Irene Silva Jara, 2023.

Entering the forest demands the practice of some daily rituals. Between games, walks and classes, children incorporate them. The first and perhaps the most important is the greeting. When approaching each of the forest’s paths, students and teachers make an almost imperceptible pause, asking permission from those who take care of the place: to the trees and the forest as a whole, particularly to the Ngen. For the Mapuche cosmovision, the Ngen are energetic beings who protect the balance of life, oversee all behaviours and demand some form of retribution in case nature is altered in any way. Hence the importance of greeting with an attitude of respect, becoming conscious of how we care for the forest we inhabit.

As students guide us uphill through this path surrounded by trees, asking permission from the other beings that live there, teachers constantly remind everyone that we need to keep an attitude of respect. Within this atmosphere, when we finally reach the top of the hill we find a section of the forest transformed into a playground built of wood, connecting branches at different heights, hanging ladders and even bridges. The teachers call this place “the psychomotor circuit” and explain that it was designed for climbing, balancing and jumping. The children call it “the playground” and describe it “as a place to play... But the idea is that if there is one child before you, the others have to wait for their turn”.



Figure 11 A teacher talks with students in “the psychomotor circuit” or “the playground”. Photo by Irene Silva Jara, 2023.

Students’ calm enthusiasm makes us inquire about the frequency of their visits to this playground. When asked, one girl answers “We come sometimes...every other week. We want to leave this place alone for the birds, it’s like their home”. Another student commands us “We mustn’t shout because birds live here too”.

These conversations give us a glimpse of the relationship children have developed with the forest: it is a place of play, but it is also a place that is inhabited by birds they know well, and which they take care of as they acknowledge this playground is their home. The relationship between play and care is a significant one, especially if we think of it in terms of childhood experience. This is to say, regulating the impulse to play, or even postponing the visit to the playground as a child is a task that we find astounding. It reveals a pedagogical practice that creates common limits in connection with nature, amplifying the sense of pedagogical symbiosis: this playground it is a space for play and games but, at the same time, it is an inhabited share of land where one has to know when to be silent, when not to interrupt, how to leave, and when to get back in the appropriate time.



Figure 12 The view from the top of the slide. Photo by Irene Silva Jara, 2022.

While doing a photographic exercise during a break, some girls came up to talk to us and suggested that we take a photograph of the school from the top of a slide. As we talked, they described the scene “You can see the children, you can see the houses, the classrooms...and because there is a pitch, that is the meeting place where they are almost every day”. As we climb the ladder of the slide to fulfil the request (Figure 12), it was possible to notice how the school and forest have grown together. The school has created an opening which offers the only level ground where students and teachers can play without obstacles. The forest has enveloped the school, shielding it from harsh winds and snowfalls.



Figure 13 The wetland. In the back of the scene, children are playing soccer. Photo by Irene Silva Jara, 2022.

A wetland lies at the foot of the hill. Rainfall determines whether it will emerge, remain as a puddle or disappear due to the layers of groundwater, creating an intriguing natural phenomenon which affects teachers and students differently. For the teachers, it entails looking after children as they risk getting wet and muddy, especially during the wet season. For students, the wetland is a year-long fun: as it gets dry it becomes an extension of the soccer pitch; when it is partially wet during the freezing winter mornings it becomes a small ice-skating field, when all ice melts it becomes a puddle for intense mud combats.

5. To be nature or to be in nature?



Figure 14 As the bell rings, a girl runs to class. In the centre of the figure, a mural portrays local biota. Photo by Irene Silva Jara, 2022.

Coming down from the hill, through the pitch, we face the school's back entrance. There, the different materials in the roofs and walls, and the alternate volumes of each space, give the impression that the building grew in stages, like so many schools -rural and urban- that are born as a single house that then evolves according to the needs of the community (Errázuriz & Marini 2016). Sometimes, this ends up getting in the way of the landscape; other times, as is the case in Hualapulli, the buildings strive to maintain continuity with the surroundings.

An indication of this continuity is the mural that greets those who pass between the classrooms, the bathrooms and the playground. Here the same flora and fauna of the neighbouring forest are reproduced, consisting of ferns, Canelo flowers, a huala, a chinita, beetles and even a mushroom. One morning, while we were returning from visiting the hill, a teacher told us at that exact spot, as if summarising her experience, "This school is not in nature, this school is nature". Such a statement accords with students' descriptions of "the wailing tree" and "the playground": In Hualapulli, the awareness that nature is always *here* is evident. Nature reveals as a mediation between the world and the school, right now; an emergent net that maintains an essential porosity between all beings.



Figure 15 The reflection of the sky in the ceiling, the *ñinim* (Figure that represents the Mapuche cosmivision) design in the door, and the wooden heater in the corner tint this otherwise average class with typical Patagonian traits. Photo by Irene Silva Jara, 2022.

As we approached the classrooms from this backyard, we encountered another aesthetic gesture that emphasised the fluidity between habitat, co-habitants and school: the large windows of the classes reflect the sky in the ceiling of the room. It would seem that the classic inside-outside or artificial-natural distinction has no place in here; as if the knowledge and habits associated with the natural environment were allegorically admitted into the lesson's usual space.

In contrast, as we enter the main corridor and head towards the room shown in Figure 15, there is such an abrupt change that one might doubt whether we are still in the same school, region, or country. References to local flora and fauna seem to have been extinguished. At first glance, the darkness of this space and the scarce traces of purposeful appropriation stand out. Concerning obscurity, other studies in southern Chile have already noted that the interior spaces of rural schools tend to be dark, perhaps due to the materials used to insulate from the cold and rain, which prevent the use of large windows or skylights. If the function of the corridor were merely to communicate the entrance with the classrooms and the backyard, this lower-quality lighting could be justified, as there would be nothing relevant to look at here.



Figure 16 Main hallway. The ochre of the walls' dado and the white of the upper part of the walls and ceilings connect all interior spaces of the school. Photo by Irene Silva Jara, 2022.

However, there is a deliberate visual design of the artefacts that populate this corridor. The three yellow circles with Mapuche iconography that refers to the relationship with the different energies in the natural world, and the black and white weft that joins the upper frame of the corridor with the right wall, implied the use of a ladder and a careful bonding of surfaces. Yet, they are made of less durable materials than those used to welcome all visitors (Figure 4). Furthermore, although the position of the books in the shelves seems to indicate frequent use, the emptiness of the two bulleting boards -in an image captured in the middle of the school year- as well as the solitary table and chair make it difficult to understand the visual purpose of this corridor.

The end of the visit to the Hualapulli School brings echoes of the road sign that greets all visitors (Figure 1): the welcome sign on the blackboard and the geometric design of the *ñimin* as the window frame of the classroom door. Inside the classroom, the welcome sign between the clock and the whiteboard are world heritage of school visual culture. It would be hard to imagine a primary school without some form of these artefacts, designed to teach the value of chronological time, the relevance of welcoming each other, and the importance of learning to look to the front.

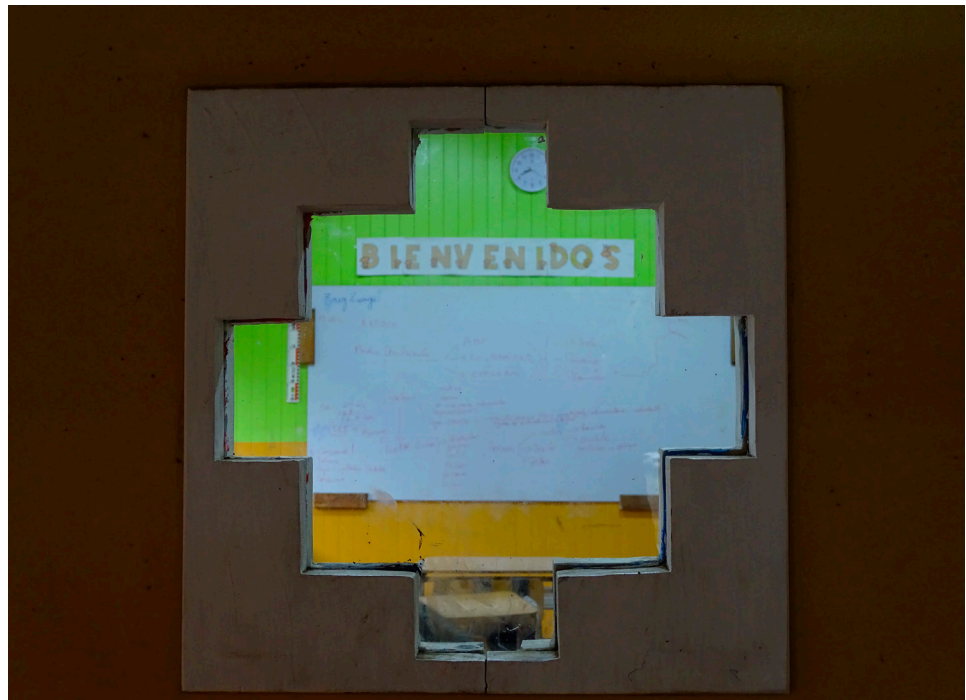


Figure 17 Classroom doors take the figure of the ñimin as their window frame. Photo by Irene Silva Jara, 2022.

The *ñimin* is a traditional design that arises from imagining a cross or two ladders linking heaven and earth (up-down), forest and home (outward-inward). As if it were a pedagogical metaphor, the *ñimin* reminds us that these are the fundamental relationships that need to be taken into account in education and life. In this doorway, it is the vantage point from which to look into or out of the room.

Within an overall fluent and enriching dynamic, Figures 16 and 17 help notice a subtle tension in the relationship between school and nature: when pedagogical practices extend to “the wailing tree”, the stream, “the playground”, the hill and the wetland, the very life of the school *is* nature. Everything becomes slower, docile to the weather and attentive to a multi-sensory understanding of learning. But when we enter interior school spaces, the visual culture of the classrooms and corridors seems to keep repeating that the school is *in* nature or that it symbolically refers to nature, without becoming an expression of it.

One could argue that the habitat of the forest merges the school institution and its habits and cohabitants into a common relationship; while the traditional school space of classrooms and corridors leave cohabitants outside, acknowledging nature as a vital metaphor for school learning, but not necessarily reconfiguring its instructional practices, ways of looking and organization of class time.

All in all, the identification of this tension allows us to value the daily exercise of education that takes place in Hualapulli, not only for the sake of continuing working with this community, but also with the hope of sharing its practices and sensibilities with other rural and urban schools in Chile and the world.

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Photo-essays

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The Battle of the Barbers:

a photographic essay

Abstract

This visual essay documents a competition that brings together hundreds of barbers – most of whom are young men who live in Rio de Janeiro's favelas (Brazil). Ethnographic evidence suggests that this segment of the informal labor market has been flourishing in the last few years and that digital platforms have radically transformed it. The photographs have been taken as part of a more extensive research project. In the broader investigation, I explore how social media have reshaped longstanding modalities of informal work in Brazil, including autonomous, self-employed, gig work, and petty entrepreneurship. Combining ethnographic observation, in-depth interviews, and focus groups, the research examines the drastic economic, social, and political consequences stemming from the encounter between socioeconomic struggles in a peripheral capitalist society and algorithm-driven companies based in Silicon Valley.

Keywords

Social impact of digital technologies; transformations on work and labor; platform economy; social media platforms; informal labor.

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The *Sambódromo* parade grounds, the main venue for Rio de Janeiro's world-famous carnival, looked and sounded somewhat different on October 9, 2023. On that day, two events were taking place simultaneously. The first was a music festival called *Rio Parada Funk*, allegedly the world's biggest gathering for dancing carioca funk, a rhythm born in the city's favelas that became increasingly popular over the years. The second event is documented in this photographic essay. It is called the Battle of the Barbers (*Batalha dos Barbeiros*, in Portuguese). In its 8th edition in Rio, the contenders, most of whom were young men who lived in Rio's favelas, attempted to win the prize for the best barber.

This photographic essay is part of a more extensive research project in which I explore how new digital technologies, particularly social media, have reshaped longstanding modalities of informal work, including autonomous, self-employed, gig work, and petty entrepreneurship in Brazil. Combining ethnographic observation, in-depth interviews, and focus groups, the research documents the economic, social, and political consequences stemming from the encounter between socioeconomic struggles in a peripheral capitalist society and algorithm-driven companies based in Silicon Valley.

While digital technologies have profoundly transformed various sectors of the informal labor market in Brazil (Marins, 2020), the effects of social media platforms on the work of barbers are evident. The use of multiple platforms is intense among barbers, even more so among the younger ones. Barbers rely on their smartphones for essential activities. For communicating with the clientele and scheduling appointments, for example, WhatsApp is a fundamental tool. Barbers also interact with one another using WhatsApp groups, exchanging advice, or negotiating work supplies. Instagram and TikTok are used by barbers to reach new clients, build their brands, and learn new techniques. For many of those workers who spend hours on social media every day, creating content to post online and trying to figure out the opaque algorithms that will get this content promoted are activities carried out with the hope of finding new opportunities, improving working conditions, overcoming financial struggles, and ultimately finding an effective avenue of upward social mobility.

As a few workers manage to grow their customer bases, they start charging higher rates for their services, and their workspace becomes more elaborate. Evidence of successful trajectories is extensively publicized on social media. Those atypical individuals who manage to grow their businesses often become aspirational models for young men who dream of upward social mobility through the barber business. As documented by scholars who carried out research among workers in different contexts, they monetize as they cascade models of success (Soriano and Panaglian, 2019; Guerra & Carlos d'Andréa, 2022). This dynamic in which algorithm-controlled platforms mediate the relationship between particular types of influencers and barbers who dream of achieving success displayed on social media is at the heart of the Battle of the Barbers. One of the main event's attractions is the opportunity to meet in person with barbers who gained national fame by growing audiences on Instagram.

I first heard of the "Battle" from a 39-year-old barber who lives in a low-income suburban neighborhood at the north edge of Rio de Janeiro. He participated in a focus group I was moderating then (Marins and Rezende, 2022). When I asked the other participants whether they also knew about *Batalha dos Barbeiros*, they all replied as if it was obvious: "Everyone does; the Battle of Barbers is quite well known" one said. Later that week, when searching for the Battle online, I was convinced to incorporate the event into my fieldwork activities. Spending a day surrounded by barbers from different parts of Rio and some who traveled from other Brazilian states provided a clearer picture of these workers' techniques, socialization dynamics, hierarchies, and aspirations.

The Battle of the Barbers was conceived by Erica Cristina Santana Nunes, a 40-year-old woman best known as "Madrinha" (the Portuguese word for god-mother), herself born in *Maré*, a complex of 16 *favela* communities in Rio de

Janeiro. Since its first edition in 2016, *Batalha dos Barbeiros* has gained popularity through online videos shot on smartphones and shared on social media. The reputation of The Battle of Barbers became so well known that Erica and her husband developed it into a variety of businesses: besides being an annual event that takes place in Rio and other Brazilian urban centers, it is a brand for men's grooming and styling products, a barbershop as well as a private institute that offers professional training courses for adults who work or aspire working in the beauty industry (as barbers, but also as manicures or eyebrow designers, for example). The event I photographed for this essay is simultaneously a showcase of such businesses and a nodal point for a cultural movement around the barber world that emerged in Rio's *favelas*.

The day when the 8th Battle of the Barbers in Rio took place was particularly warm. The heat, however, did not put off the crowd. As I wandered along the event for the whole afternoon, I saw mostly young men and a few women who seemed excited to be at the Battle. Not all attendees were competing that day, but those who watched the Battle of the Barbers were absorbed in every round of competition that went on for hours to the sound of carioca funk music.

The loud music that played without interruption made it virtually impossible for me to hold conversations with the Battle participants. As attendees saw me shooting, they would pose, ask me to see the images, or request that I send the picture so they could keep it in a file or post it on their social media accounts. In this same direction, the organizers of the events welcomed me at all times to photograph as I wished, allowing me, for example, to get up on the stage in search of the best angles. I interpreted this attitude as a sign that the publicity of the event and of its participants was, for them, a measure of their success.

The way the attendees of the Battle of the Barbers approached me spontaneously, asking that I added them to my list of contacts on Instagram, as well as the way several interactions developed into conversations through this social media platform in the following days became one more indication, among many others in the field, of the impacts of new digital technologies on longstanding forms of informal work in Brazil. Before the popularization of smartphones, working as a barber essentially meant cutting, trimming, and shaving hair or beard, usually in low-key barbershops scattered throughout the city. But even if the core activities of the barbers remain the same, digital technologies – and social media, in particular – produced significant changes in their business model, created new professional hierarchies, and brought aspiring barbers to the core of a new consumer market. Rio's Battle of the Barbers is both a consequence and an expression of such transformations.



Figure 1 The 8th edition of Rio's Battle of the Barbers occurred in one of the city's most emblematic landmarks, the *Sambódromo* parade grounds. The picture's background shows the Arc of the Apotheosis, designed by Oscar Niemeyer, a Brazilian architect considered one of the key figures in the development of modern architecture. The picture also displays one of the city's *favelas*, "*Morro da Mineira*." The men seen in the foreground of the image are either competitors or members of the jury. Even though the Battle of the Barbers takes place in several cities in Brazil, the one in Rio is known for attracting the most participants, some of whom are visitors from states such as São Paulo and Minas Gerais.



Figure 2-3 While haircuts in well-off districts occur in luxurious salons, the barber's workspace is often improvised in favelas and peripheries of Rio. Margarine containers are used for mixing bleach and developer, while kitchen vegetable brushes are used for styling. Beginners usually give haircuts in a corner of their houses or on the sidewalk. This ability to improvise a workspace in different environments could be seen in the Battle of the Barbers event. This image shows the surroundings of the main stage. During the afternoon, barbers would use whatever free space they found to practice.



Figure 4 Although scholarly work often refers to non-traditional employment such as informal, autonomous, self-employed, gig work, and petty entrepreneurship as precarious jobs, ethnographic evidence shows that young men who work as barbers in Rio mostly reject the idea of precariousness. Instead, barbers often emphasize the freedom of not having a boss and say they consider their daily activities fulfilling. They also hope to achieve upward social mobility by cutting and styling men's hair. That ambition shows in the young men's choice of clothing and accessories used in their professional activities. Walt Disney's Uncle Scrooge – "the richest duck in the world" – theme on the barber cape is an example of these carefully chosen accessories.



Figure 5 As is often the case in economies where informality is a structural feature of the labor market, it is hard to tell the size of barbers in the Brazilian economy. Ethnographic evidence suggests, however, that this is one segment of the informal labor market that has been booming while radically transformed by digital platforms. The predominance of young men among the Battle of the Barbers attendees is one of several qualitative indicators of a flourishing work segment. Everton, on the right, wearing a cap, works in a barbershop located in Piabetá, a district in the Metropolitan Area of Rio de Janeiro. Everton was 20 years old and attended the event accompanied by his friends (from right to left) Rafael, 21 years old, Kevin, and Davi, both 18 years old. This photo has been taken at the youngster's request.



Figure 6 Some Battle of the Barbers participants were accompanied by their families. In this picture, the mother of one competitor wears a custom jersey. The inscription on the back of the jersey translates as “Mom of Xandin [her son’s nickname].”



Figure 7 The Battle of the Barbers hosts competitions in three different categories: traditional haircut (*corte*), artistic drawing (*desenho*), and lined-up highlights (*reflexo alinhado*). This photo shows a barber giving a boy the finishing touches for a traditional haircut. It is not rare to spot boys as young as five years old serving as models throughout the competition.



Figure 6 Lined-up highlights (“Reflexo alinhado”) became extremely popular in Rio’s favelas in the last few years. This style takes time and requires that barbers work meticulously, first by placing a pierced rubber cap on the model’s head. Then, barbers pull loops of hair using a metal crochet hook. Next, they prepare a mixture of bleaching powder and hydrogen peroxide and apply it thoroughly to the model’s hair. After the bleaching process, which usually takes around half an hour, barbers remove the chemicals and carefully pull off the rubber cap for the final finishing touches.



Figure 12 Barber practices artistic drawing on a model at the side of the stage where the competition took place.



Figure 13 It is common among young Brazilian barbers to engrave symbols of their profession. Scissors, straight razors, combs, and barber poles were the most popular tattoos in Rio's Battle of the Barbers. While research on tattoos reveals that marking one's body with indelible symbols expresses a deeply felt and enduring identity (Sanders, 2008), inked barbers signal a renewed professional identity in this Brazilian informal labor market segment.



Figure 14-15 According to the report State of Mobile 2022, smartphone users in Brazil spent, on average, over 5.3 hours per day on their devices, making mobile usage in Brazil higher than in any other country. This intense use of smartphones and social media platforms, particularly, was ubiquitous in the Battle of the Batters. Photo 14 shows Erica Madrinha, the Battle of the Batters founder, creating content to post on her accounts. Spending time on social media was also the most popular pastime among those who waited for their hair to be done (photo 15).



Figure 16 Once all rounds of the competition have been completed, the judges determine the winners of each category. Different rules apply to each category, and evaluation follows distinct criteria. Barbers are not allowed to use hair pigmentation for traditional haircuts and artistic drawings. Evenness and symmetry are essential for the line-up highlights category. The first, second, and third-best barbers in each category win cash prizes and barbershop supplies.



Figure 17 One of the winners wipes his tears while holding his much-expected award.



Figure 18 Besides attracting much attention on social media, the 2023 Rio's Battle of the Barbers appeared on one of the most watched shows on Brazilian television. The organizers considered the coverage on national television a significant sign of the event's success.

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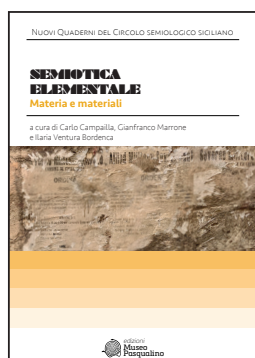
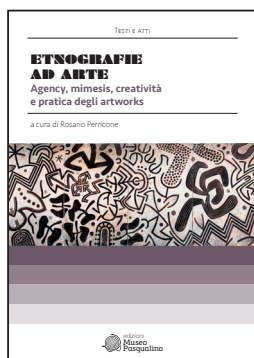
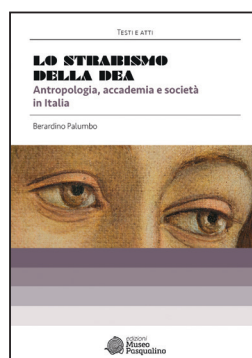
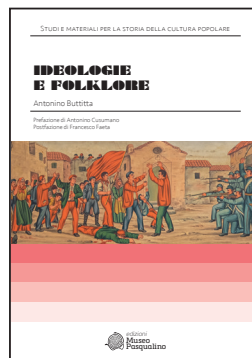
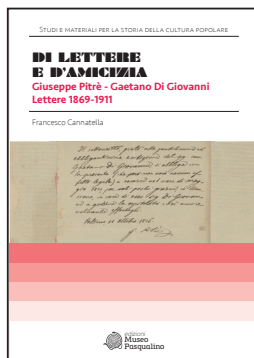
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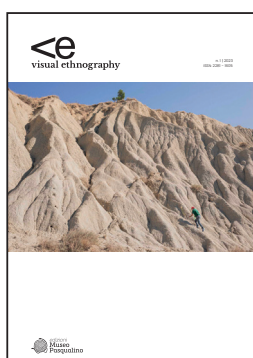
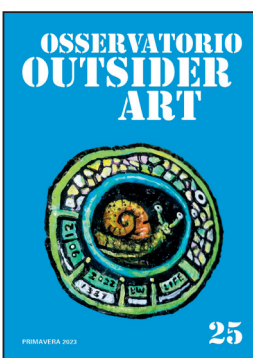
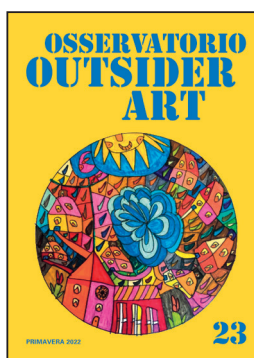
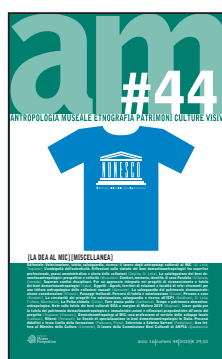
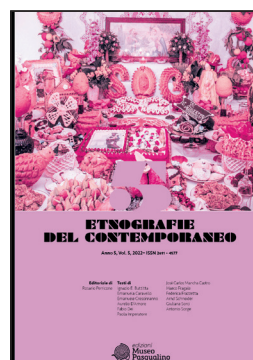
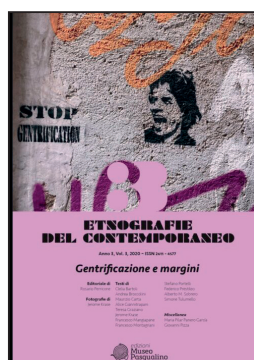
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