

# **The Intersectional Right to the City: Non-Binary and Trans People Navigating Gender, Race, and Class in Barcelona**

## **ABSTRACT**

The concept of the right to the city has been central in urban studies and social justice movements, yet it frequently neglects the intersectional inequalities experienced by marginalized groups. This article examines the right to the city through the lens of intersectionality, focusing on how overlapping oppressions related to gender, race, class, and migration status shape urban experiences. Using a qualitative methodology of in-depth interviews and Relief Maps with 30 non-cisgender individuals living in Barcelona, we explore how multiple social positions intersect to produce specific forms of exclusion and negotiation within urban space, considering both public and private spaces as interconnected sites where these exclusions and negotiations unfold, challenging spatial hierarchies in urban studies. By foregrounding how these categories intersect, our research moves beyond essentialist understandings of marginalization and challenges rigid binaries of inclusion and exclusion. Instead, it highlights the complex, shifting and sometimes contradictory ways individuals navigate urban life. In doing so, we position the right to the city within broader debates in urban theory, particularly the tensions between more economic perspectives and those rooted in feminist, postcolonial, and queer critiques. This perspective is particularly relevant in Southern Europe, where colonial histories, migration, and racialization follow different logics than those dominant in Anglo-American urban theory. We argue for a reimagined right to the city that dismantles exclusionary hierarchies by embracing the relational nature of urban experiences, recognizing that belonging and access to the city are shaped by a complex interplay of social categories.

**Keywords:** Right to the City - Intersectionality - Non-binary and Trans People - Race - Spatial Justice

## Introduction

The right to the city has been a key concept in urban studies and a central notion in the human rights agenda within policy circles. Social movements around the world have used the concept to mobilize for social justice and against inequalities, showing the importance of spatiality for building more just cities. It has been described as “one of the most precious human rights and yet also one of the most neglected” (Harvey, 2008: 23). Lefebvre (1968) understood this right as the right of those who inhabit the city and implied a rethinking of the notion of citizenship based on inhabitance. The right to the city encompasses both the right to appropriate urban space and the right to actively participate in its production (Purcell, 2003). In this sense, it connects the daily life of city dwellers to political and institutional participation, becoming a demand to transform urban space into a place for building collective life.

However, the right to the city also reflects broader debates within urban theory, particularly the tensions between more economic perspectives and those rooted in feminist, postcolonial, and queer critiques. Claims to the right to the city often reflect androcentric and economistic views of space, social relations, and inequality. Originally formulated to address capitalism’s impact on urban life, the concept has been criticized for overlooking individual and collective differences and ignoring patriarchal power relations in daily life spaces, especially private ones (Fenster, 2005). Purcell (2022), in his analysis of urban democracy and spatial inequality, defends the idea that while all urban inhabitants depend on space for survival, their experiences are deeply unequal due to structural differences in vulnerability and precariousness. Purcell takes Lefebvre’s notion of *differential space*, defined as a space that resists homogenization and continuously generates new differences through the lived

practices of its inhabitants, to emphasize its role in fostering democratic self-management and countering the dominance of abstract space. However, he contends that Lefebvre is “less helpful” (3043) in addressing the question of how inhabitants differ in their dependence on urban space for bodily survival and argues that Butler’s concept of *precarious life* offers a more nuanced perspective. By drawing on Butler’s work, he emphasizes that urban democracy must acknowledge and navigate these differences, rather than assuming a homogeneous collective subject.

This approach resonates with broader debates in urban theory, particularly the discussions regarding planetary urbanization (see Brenner, 2018 and Brenner and Schmid, 2015), which has been criticized for offering a totalizing framework that marginalizes feminist, queer, and postcolonial perspectives (Oswin and Pratt, 2021). Those debates underscore the limitations of universalizing theories that overlook the multiplicity of intersecting identities, experiences, and power dynamics, calling for urban theory to better account for the diverse and context-specific realities of urban exclusion. Oswin and Pratt (2021) argue that such totalizing frameworks fail to recognize the significance of local knowledge and epistemologies, instead imposing a hegemonic, one-size-fits-all understanding of urbanization.

Our contribution builds on these debates by expanding the conceptual framework of the right to the city and difference through a central focus on the intersectional experience of space. Intersectionality is a conceptual framework that examines how multiple dimensions of identity such as gender, race, ethnicity, social class, age, disability, and sexuality intersect to create unique experiences of privilege or oppression (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins and Bilge, 2016). It challenges single-axis approaches to inequality, demonstrating that individuals do not experience discrimination or advantage based on just one axis, but rather through the dynamic interplay of multiple social categories.

To do so, we analyze the experiences of 30 non-cis participants living in Barcelona showing that the right to the city is not a fixed state but a constantly negotiated process. By foregrounding how race, gender, class, and migration status intersect in ways that reshape urban experiences, we challenge rigid binaries of inclusion/exclusion and instead highlight

the complex, shifting, and sometimes contradictory ways individuals navigate urban life. This approach engages with critiques of universalizing frameworks which tend to obscure the situated and embodied experiences of marginalized urban subjects, and also repositions urban democracy as an ongoing, relational practice that must contend with intersecting structures of power and inequality. In doing so, our research moves beyond essentialist understandings of marginalization by focusing on individuals whose positions defy binary categories, whether in terms of gender (trans and non-binary) or race (racialized outside dominant Black/White paradigms). This lens reveals how non-cis and racialized individuals experience urban space in ways that challenge both normative identity categories and traditional urban theories, reinforcing the need for a more nuanced, intersectional approach to spatial justice.

### **Intersectional Perspectives on the Right to the City**

One of the core ideas behind the right to the city is the democratization of urban space and resources in terms of their use, production, and design (Attoh 2011). The concept, however, has become diffuse, entailing multiple definitions and has “almost become something of a catchphrase” (Purcell, 2002: 100). It has been framed as a collective right to reshape urbanization (Harvey 2008) or as a claim by those who inhabit and shape the city through everyday experience (Purcell 2002). It appears in struggles for housing, food security, protection from police abuse (Mitchell and Heynen 2009), and the right to occupy space (Mitchell 2003). It has also been argued that the right to the city is ‘*strategically fuzzy*’ (Attoh, 2011: 678) in the sense that it can link the struggles of different social groups. This conceptual openness is seen as a strength, since it enables solidarity across political movements (Mitchell and Heynen 2009).

However, the right to the city is generally conceptualized and employed to challenge the exclusionary dynamics of socio-spatial segregation and displacement understood only (or mainly) in relation to capitalism. Moreover, as Purcell (2014: 145) argues, for Lefebvre, the

“analysis of space, and specifically of the ‘lived spaces’ that people actually experience, would be able to apprehend human life as a complex whole and avoid reducing our understanding of experience to small fractions of life, such as class status, gender, race, income, consumer habits, marital status, and so on”. The right to space takes the desire for the Lefebvrian holistic understanding of space and everyday lived experience but, instead of denying class, gender or race, it recognizes their interrelatedness and co-constitution among them and with space as a central element. Building on this critique, Purcell (2022) proposes a radical rethinking of democracy as a collective project in which urban inhabitants directly manage the production of space. Drawing on Judith Butler’s concept of “precarious life” (Purcell 2022: 3053), he emphasizes the need to redefine the democratic ‘we’ and highlights how urban inhabitants’ varying degrees of vulnerability shape their collective reality, underscoring the importance of a more inclusive and plural understanding of democratic urban space.

Following this idea, from a feminist perspective, understanding the right to the city mainly as the right to decide on the distribution and the use of urban resources entails a very narrow understanding of power relations and inequality. As Massey pointed out, (1991: 24) “women’s mobility is restricted... not by ‘capital’, but by men”. In this line, Fenster (2005) argues that Lefebvre’s definition of the right to the city doesn’t challenge gender, ethnic, national or cultural power relations that limit the right to the city of certain groups and shows how restrictions on participation at any level of governance is also conditioned by these power relations. Fenster’s critique mainly refers to Lefebvrian work, but it could also be applied to other scholars. As Beebeejaun (2017: 325) argues, “many writers in articulating the right to the city subsume gender within the urban citizenry rather than theorizing gender as a structuring dimension of peoples’ identities”. The analysis of how different power structures and their interrelations affect the access to the city is then a central question for a spatial justice conceptualization but also for the conceptualization of the struggle against inequalities.

Feminist geographies and geographies of sexualities have also contributed to the discussion on the gendered experiences of urban spaces beyond a binary conception. Transgender and gender variant individuals challenge the hegemonic conventions that link

bodies, gender roles, and expected lives, questioning the strict gendered division of space (Doan, 2010; Browne and Lim, 2010). As Doan (2010) describes, the 'tyranny of gender' manifests in both public and private spaces, where trans and non-binary individuals face exclusion and are forced to negotiate their gender performances. These individuals must constantly adjust their expressions depending on the space, experiencing varying levels of visibility and confrontation. Ultimately, spaces are not neutral; they are gendered and governed by binary norms that perpetuate exclusion, making it essential to recognize how non-binary identities disrupt these boundaries, often facing hostility and marginalization in the process (Doan, 2010; Browne and Lim, 2010).

Another central criticism to the conceptualizations of the gendered right to the city is in relation to the public/private dichotomy. Fenster (2005: 229) argues that the right to the city only refers to the public spaces of the city although "the right to public spaces is closely linked to the right of private spaces, especially from a gendered perspective, and the analysis of the two cannot be separated". Despite the importance of the private sphere, urban cities, their configuration, conceptualization and the political struggles for their democratization and equal redistribution have traditionally been centered on this public dimension (see Hayden, 1980; Rose, 1993) as has the concept of the right to the city (see Mitchell 2003).

Besides the feminist critique, critical race theory has underscored the role of race and ethnicity in shaping urban inequalities. While race is a social and political construct (Millington, 2011; Grosfoguel, 2004), racialization produces real, context-specific hierarchies that reinforce social stratification (Bonilla-Silva, 1999; Fallon, 2020). These processes are rooted in local histories and cultures.

Race and ethnicity are key in shaping both the material and symbolic dimensions of urban life. Urbanization reinforces societal perceptions of these categories, influencing experiences of inclusion and exclusion (Beebeejaun & Modarres, 2020). Racialization, often intersecting with other markers like language or religion, continues to structure the social and spatial organization of cities, affecting how marginalized groups navigate urban spaces (Bhopal, 2018; Grosfoguel et al., 2015; Foner, 2015; Lurbe, 2015). While U.S. debates are

shaped by the black-white racial divide, Europe, and particularly Spain, often adopts a "post-racial" or "colorblind" discourse (Hellgren & Bereményi, 2022; Rodríguez-García, 2022; Goldberg, 2006). Nonetheless, colonial legacies sustain ethnoracial hierarchies, as seen in the racialization of Eastern European migrants or the rise of Islamophobia (Grosfoguel et al., 2015; Bhopal, 2018; Foner, 2015). This reflects the concept of "cultural racism" in Europe (Grosfoguel et al., 2015: 645), where markers such as language, religion, and culture are racialized and embedded in hierarchies of superiority and inferiority, sustaining broader systems of exclusion (Grosfoguel et al., 2015; Lurbe, 2015; Foner, 2015). These dynamics shape urban life by producing spatial and symbolic boundaries that limit the mobility, visibility, and participation of racialized groups in the city (Millington, 2011).

Understanding the right to the city through a lens of difference is essential, but it is not enough to examine the limitations faced by specific groups in isolation; rather, we argue that it is important to consider how multiple axes, such as race, gender and class, intersect and shape urban experiences and the production of public space in complex and dynamic ways (Ruddick, 1996). As intersectionality scholars have shown, social context is crucial in shaping how power systems operate, with multiple geographies influencing the salience of different axes of oppression in specific contexts (Collins, 2000; Collins and Bilge, 2016; Rodó-Zárate, 2023).

In this regard, viewing urban space through the lens of lived experiences and everyday practices adds another dimension to our understanding, highlighting the importance of considering how these practices are shaped by intersecting social categories. As Katz (2021:599) argues, by focusing on the "planetary without foreclosure," urban theory must shift away from totalizing frameworks that marginalize these lived experiences. Instead of complementing existing urban theory, such an approach challenges us to reconsider urbanization from a different optic, one that acknowledges the diverse, context-specific ways in which social positions are lived and experienced within the urban space. Also, in line with Simpson's (2017) critique, which questions the universal application of concepts without considering their context-specific roots, we argue that urban theory must engage with *in-the-world* knowledge practices that foreground the singularity and situatedness of these

concepts as they travel across spaces and contexts. This requires us to approach urban theory not from an all-encompassing perspective but from a more grounded, localized understanding of the complexities of urban life.

In this article, by centering the experiences of non-cis individuals whose positions do not fit within binary gender classifications (man/woman), and racialized individuals whose experiences do not conform to the dominant Black/White racial paradigm used in much of U.S.-centric urban theory, we aim at challenging binary conceptualizations of inclusion and exclusion in urban research. These findings illustrate that urban exclusions should be understood based on how multiple categories interact and shift contextually.

In the following section, we will explore the specifics of the context of Barcelona and the qualitative methodology employed in this study. We will then present the results, organized into two main themes: the intersectional exclusions in public space and the dynamics within private spaces. The article concludes by calling for an intersectional rethinking of the right to the city, one that moves beyond spatial hierarchies and social binaries to embrace the lived complexity of urban belonging.

## **Context and methodology**

In the European context, Spain ranks among the five most progressive countries in terms of LGBTIQ+ rights, particularly those related to the transgender population (ILGA-Europe, 2025). Within the national territory, Catalonia is at the forefront of legislation and public policies for this community (Coll-Planas and Cruells, 2013), while the city of Barcelona, through its own City Council, proudly identifies itself as diverse and a defender of sexual and gender diversity. Consequently, Barcelona has become one of the most LGBT-friendly cities worldwide, chosen by many individuals from the community not only as a tourist destination but also as a place of residence. Simultaneously, Spain has emerged as a rather peculiar case within Europe due to the rapid increase in international immigration, which has quadrupled in recent years, reaching nearly 14% of the total population (Rodríguez-García, 2022). This figure rises to

approximately 23% and has remained stable in recent years specifically in the city of Barcelona. However, despite the progressive image of the city, it remains a hotspot for reported cases of both LGBTIQ+phobia (OCL, 2023) and racism (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2024). The former characteristics make Barcelona a cosmopolitan, complex and profoundly diverse city, providing a perfect case study to incorporate an intersectional perspective that delves into the specificities of non-normative gender identity and the ethnic/racial issues embedded in the unique configurations of the Catalan city.

For the present research, we have chosen a qualitative methodology based on two different techniques: Relief Maps and in-depth interviews. Relief Maps are a conceptual and methodological model for working on geographies of intersectionality. In a few words, Relief Maps is a digital tool which relates three dimensions in a single image. First, the social which represents the different identities people embody such as gender, sexual orientation, social class, ethnicity, age, (dis)ability, religion, etc. Secondly, the geographic which refers to spaces of daily life and third, the psychological that alludes to the feelings and emotions (see Rodó-Zárate 2014, 2023). It is a self-administrated digital tool<sup>1</sup> in which participants reflect on their everyday life in an intersectional way by reflecting on their subjective experience in different places and for different social positions. For example, they are requested to express how they feel at home/public space/workplace/etc in relation to their sexual orientation, their race, their age, etc, respectively. This methodology has the potential to systematize sophisticated information about the lived experience in a single image. It distinguishes between positions and their corresponding effects, acknowledging the overlap and interaction between oppression and privilege. The data was gathered in 2024 through the Relief Maps and is part of the larger project (INTERMAPS), which involves over 1,000 participants and covers a wide range of themes (see [intermaps.upf.edu](https://intermaps.upf.edu)). However, for this specific article, we have selected data from participants and locations that are directly relevant for this article. Regarding the interviews, we used a semi-structured design, which gave us sufficient flexibility to capture

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://reliefmaps.upf.edu/> (last accessed 11 September 2025)

aspects that might have been overlooked in the research design or not revealed through the Relief Maps.

In total, we reached 30 non-cis people living in Barcelona city and its Metropolitan area. Among them, 20 completed the Relief Map, while the other 10 were interviewed. Participants identify with a range of gender identities, including 5 trans women, 3 trans men, 1 trans person, 1 trans queer, 6 non-binary individuals, 1 non-binary woman, 1 non-binary man, 1 non-binary trans woman, 2 non-binary trans men, 3 non-binary trans persons, 1 non-binary/gender dissident, 1 non-binary/monstra, 1 travesti, 1 travesti/non-binary, and 2 individuals identified as "other" (non-specified). Regarding origin, nearly half of the participants (13) are Catalan, while the rest come from other parts of Spain and Europe (8), Latin America (6), and other parts of the world (3). The vast majority have declared themselves to be white, followed by Latinos, Asians, and Maghrebis. All participants have regular administrative status (European nationality or work/residence permit) except for 2 participants who are refugees or asylum seekers. One-third of the participants have declared themselves to be neurodiverse or to have a psychological disability. In terms of age, while we have participants ranging from 14 to 50 years old, there is a concentration between 20 and 40 years old. Excluding young people living with their families of origin and 2 individuals in institutions or supervised housing, the majority live in rental arrangements, ranging from living alone, with a partner and/or friends, or sharing an apartment with strangers (only 3 are homeowners). Social class and educational level were the least diverse areas; participants tend to be mostly middle-class and well educated (17 university graduates and 7 with post-secondary education). Despite some differences in income levels and employment situations, very few participants declared extreme difficulty in making ends meet. Their references to their families' social class further support the notion that they come from middle-class socioeconomic backgrounds. Lastly, these are individuals highly involved in social activism (predominantly feminist and LGBTIQ+, anti-ableist, and anti-racist).

From the perspective of Haraway's (1995) situated knowledge, it is crucial to recognize that all knowledge production is inherently tied to the specific position of the researcher. In this

study, being two cisgender researchers necessitates a careful examination of our positionality, as well as the potential biases in our research (Galupo, 2017). Similarly, from a feminist epistemological standpoint, we are challenged to faithfully represent the voices and experiences of a marginalized group, ensuring that we do not speak for them or alter their message (Zabos and Biglia, 2009). However, our positionality is not solely defined by our gender position; our sexual orientation, origin, and racialization also play significant roles in data analysis and in establishing rapport with participants. In this regard, both belonging to the LGBTIQ+ community and sharing cultural backgrounds with some participants enrich and facilitate the research process.

### **Navigating Intersectional Exclusions: Passing, Surveillance, and Visibility Dynamics in Urban Spaces**

Participants reveal how they must constantly adjust their identities to avoid harassment and conform to normative expectations shaped by race, gender, and class. Passing, understood as the act of disguising elements of one's perceived innate identity, including class, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender, through intentional changes in appearance and behavior (Ginsberg, 1996), emerges as a key strategy in this process. These behaviors are not solely performative acts but represent a continuous negotiation with dominant social structures. In many cases, participants engage in 'self-censorship,' where they consciously adapt their expression and behaviors in response to the pervasive threat of discrimination, violence, and exclusion. This self-regulation is not a passive act but a strategic maneuver in an ongoing interaction with the urban space and its institutions, driven by the need for safety and belonging.

"I often don't dress the way I'd like because I'm afraid of facing harassment. I tend to dress quite masculine, and it makes me feel frustrated because I can't dress

however I want without being on guard”<sup>2</sup> (Pol’s Relief Map, Trans man<sup>3</sup>, Catalonia)

The politics of passing (Ginsberg, 1996) expressed in Pol’s quote shows the strategic alteration of identity to avoid discrimination and gain societal acceptance within dominant heteronormative or cisnormative frameworks. This concept underscores the tension between personal authenticity and the necessity to conform to social expectations for safety or social mobility, revealing the inherent discomfort and power dynamics involved in navigating marginalized identities (Ginsberg, 1996; Dias et al., 2021; Ozbilgin et al., 2023). This passing often related to sexual orientation or gender, is deeply interwoven with race and/or origin, meaning that fitting in does not occur in a racial-neutral way but is shaped by other intersecting categories.

“There’s no exercise of changing my identity unless it’s with those damn institutions. Because the migrant fear is huge, [...] I don’t take risks anymore. I even hide my curls because I feel like they’re something Euro-whites still associate with being a migrant or marginalized. I wear glasses, I remove my nail polish, anything to play into the binary game. Look, at first, I wanted to act carefree, but it ended up costing me because I went two and a half years without a passport, and I thought, ‘I should have kept my head down from the beginning and played it smart’. I hate thinking that”. (Orka, Non-binary/*monstra*, Latin America)

The quote highlights the pervasive sense of surveillance and the pressure to conform to Eurocentric, binary, and racialized standards in institutional settings. It shows the experience

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<sup>2</sup> All translations from Spanish or Catalan to English have been undertaken by the authors

<sup>3</sup> Names were changed to ensure anonymity. Self-identifications are presented as expressed by participants, in order to respect the context-specific and political nature of these terms, which lack exact equivalents in English. Although some of them do not have a single definition, they all relate to non-normative, non-binary or dissident gender positions or expressions

of being “out of place,” (Cresswell, 2008) showing how those perceived as “others” must constantly adjust to fit into norms established by whiteness and gender binarism to avoid discrimination or exclusion. For Orka this adaptation is not a choice but a survival strategy shaped by the pervasive fear of being denied rights or access, what they describe as the “migrant fear”. Building on this, Purcell (2022) highlights that survival in urban space is deeply conditioned by the need to navigate structures of surveillance that selectively render some bodies hyper-visible while forcing others into concealment. As Orka’s experience illustrates, surveillance is not just about being watched, but about how visibility is differentially imposed as a mechanism of control, shaping access to rights, mobility, and urban belonging. Those who must constantly adapt their appearance and behavior to fit dominant norms are not simply seeking acceptance, but enacting survival strategies within the urban landscape. In this context, passing operates not only as a means of self-protection but also as an active strategy to navigate institutions, allowing individuals to resist stereotyping and discrimination in ways that challenge the notion of passing as purely submissive (Ozbilgin et al., 2023).

Moreover, attempting to conform to binary gender norms through passing may add layers of prejudice since gender and societal expectations cannot be disentangled, as the relations among categories are plural and context dependent (Jorba and Rodó-Zárate, 2019). Attempts to “fit in” within one axis of identity, such as gender, do not neutralize other intersecting biases. Instead, they can create paradoxical positions in which conforming to binary norms reinforces other forms of exclusion and structural inequality. Passing, therefore, operates at the intersection of multiple systems of power, revealing the limits of simply “adapting” to social norms that themselves perpetuate exclusion and inequality.

These dynamics become evident when considering how surveillance and racialization intersect in public spaces, particularly in the context of gender transitions. Racialized individuals are policed differently depending on their gender presentation:

“<sup>4</sup>I: Why do you think they stop you?

**P:** Either because I’m Latino or because they think I’m Arab, they confuse me sometimes, and either way, it’s going to be bad. And it’s been happening since I started my transition; it’s pretty clear that’s the reason. Before, it could still happen, I obviously have the same phenotype, but the issue was that my style didn’t fit what they expected: a butch Latina, a masculine girl, doesn’t exist for them. So they were often surprised that I was Latino. Even at the airport, they thought I was coming from France or something like that. Being a guy is more dangerous for society: a guy is going to rob you; a girl is going to steal your husband, according to the racist logic. I have a friend who’s Spanish, from Zaragoza, but has some Romani ancestry, and the same thing happened to him. When he transitioned, the police started stopping him more often too. One time, we were together in Zaragoza, and, of course, they stopped us”. (Gonzalo, Trans man, Latin America)

Gonzalo reflects on how his racial identity—whether identified as Latino or misread as Arab ("moro")—renders him a target of hyper-surveillance. This racialized scrutiny became more pronounced after transitioning and being perceived as male. The association of masculinity with danger plays a pivotal role in the intensification of this surveillance, which in turn highlights the racialization of fear, as studies have shown that white women often experience fear through a racialized lens (Day, 1999; Valentine, 1989; Pain, 2001), further perpetuating the stigmatization of specific marginalized groups. The pluralistic approach to intersectionality recognizes that positions of privilege can, in certain contexts, intensify oppression when intersecting with categories like race and age. The experiences of racialized trans men illustrate how shifts in positionality reveal the relational and context-dependent nature of privilege and oppression, challenging static views of social categories.

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<sup>4</sup> I: interviewer / P: participant

The speaker provides a clear example of this dynamic in the context of airport security and police stops. As a butch Latina, their identity was often misread, even leading to assumptions that they were European (e.g., French), which afforded them a form of unintentional privilege. Post-transition, the alignment of their racial identity with masculinity resulted in increased institutional surveillance. This dynamic cannot be fully understood without considering how racialization in Spain is deeply rooted in its colonial past and intertwined with religious and cultural factors (Rodríguez-García, 2022; Rodríguez-García et al., 2021; Flores, 2015). In light of this complex intersection of factors, it's not surprising that in cities like Barcelona, racism emerges as the primary reason for discrimination, with the most affected groups being people of Maghrebi or Arab origin, Black people, and Latin Americans (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2024).

The example about his friend of Romani heritage experiencing similar treatment after transitioning further illustrates this point. The shared experience of being stopped by police while walking together demonstrates the existence of everyday borders. These interactions function as technologies of control that not only enforce social hierarchies but also sustain narratives of inclusion and exclusion, reinforcing who belongs and who does not (Yuval-Davis, 2011). Understanding these dynamics requires an intersectional approach that accounts for how overlapping identities, such as race, gender, and class, shape the ways individuals experience and are targeted by these everyday borders.

### **Shifting Boundaries of Belonging: The Uneven Terrain of Urban Social Life**

Class adds another layer that underscores the interplay between identity and socioeconomic factors. In the following quote, the participant contrasts different queer spaces in Barcelona, highlighting how class distinctions shape access, belonging, and safety within these spaces.

“Barcelona has always been a bit binary. I’ve never really hung out in gay bars because I didn’t identify with that environment. Not so much because of the gay vibe, but because of the “peseta rosa” thing that’s never interested me. I understand the need for safe spaces; I’d go to some bar like Jasmine, but that’s a whole other story. It’s not part of the gay lobby, and it’s in El Raval for a reason, that’s why people like us go there. There used to be another one on Robadors Street, a gay bar, but it was for the gays of El Raval, totally different from the Gaixample”. (Rio, Non-binary/gender dissident, Spain)

Rio critiques the classed dynamics within Barcelona’s queer spaces, such as the contrast between the Gaixample (a gentrified, middle-to-upper-class gay neighborhood) and queer spaces in El Raval, a historically working-class and immigrant neighborhood. They point out how spaces like the Gaixample are characterized by “la peseta rosa” (the “pink money”), symbolizing the commodification of queer identities within capitalist, consumer-oriented spaces. These spaces cater predominantly to affluent, cisgender gay men as Gaixample have become one of the main gay leisure areas in Europe, offering goods and services primarily for gay men with financial means, though some spaces also serve lesbians and trans people (Langarita Adiego et al., 2019).

The dynamics Rio describes reflect broader tensions within LGBTIQ+ urban spaces, which are often shaped by the intersecting forces of inclusion and exclusion, described by Doan and Atalay (2021: 263) as “centripetal and centrifugal forces”. These complexities highlight the dual role of LGBTIQ+ urban spaces as both havens and sites of exclusion. For trans individuals, this duality is particularly evident: while they may find refuge in queer bars and neighborhoods, they often face binary barriers to full inclusion within them (Browne and Lim, 2010; Doan, 2007; Nash, 2010). Historically, these spaces have served as safe spaces, offering sanctuary and visibility to marginalized groups. However, these two often exist in tension: while visibility is crucial for gaining recognition and advancing rights, it can also invite surveillance, regulation, and even displacement. Sanctuary, on the other hand, may shield

marginalized groups, yet doing so can also restrict their visibility and inclusion within dominant social systems. This contradiction between refuge and exposure illustrates the ambivalent position of LGBTIQ+ spaces within cities (Doan, 2010; Nash, 2010, Doan & Higgins, 2011; Hess and Bitterman, 2021). These tensions are further exacerbated by gentrification. As LGBTIQ+ enclaves become more vibrant and culturally prominent, they often attract capital and tourism, which in turn displaces the very communities that created them. This process particularly affects the most vulnerable members of the community, such as trans people, migrants, and working-class queers, who are pushed to the margins of urban space (Doan & Higgins, 2011; Hess and Bitterman, 2021). Simultaneously, it may reproduce class-based hierarchies within the community, as affluent, often white, cisgender gay men emerge as both beneficiaries of and contributors to these transformations due to their privileged socioeconomic position (Knopp, 1990). The result is a contested landscape where inclusion and exclusion remain in constant tension, shaped by the intersecting forces of sexuality, class, and urban inequality (Doan, 2015).

This dynamic aligns with an intersectional critique of the right to the city, which calls for recognizing how overlapping systems of oppression, such as classism, sexism, racism and cisnormativity, limit access to urban resources, safety, belonging and community for certain groups. The right to the city must therefore be reconsidered through a relational and intersectional framework that accounts for the ways in which privilege and exclusion are co-constructed within urban space.

### **Beyond Spatial Hierarchies: Rethinking the Boundaries of Urban Life**

The relationship between public and private spaces is also a crucial factor in understanding how exclusions are experienced and reproduced. Fenster (2005) highlights that the right to the city must go beyond access to public space to also address the exclusions shaped by private and domestic spheres. The experiences of trans and non-binary individuals further

extend this critique by showing that exclusion is not only a matter of formal governance structures but is also deeply embedded in everyday negotiations. The 'tyranny of gendered spaces' often extends into the private sphere, where the invasion of personal space by societal norms further marginalizes non-normative identities (Doan, 2010). However, the home can also serve as a site of resistance and empowerment, as described by another participant:

"Here [at home], I feel so safe that I carry that sense of security with me. In the street, don't come at me with nonsense—I'm not asking for your approval" (Laura, Trans woman, Latin America)

This quote underscores that the safety and confidence gained within these private environments become essential in navigating the external challenges they face, particularly when societal norms challenge their identities. Alba also illustrates this experience when she reflects on how home provides not just safety, but the grounding needed to navigate other, often hostile spaces, where gendered aesthetic performances must be negotiated daily.

"[My home is a] safe space, warmth, and tenderness with my partner and my cats. In other areas it causes me discomfort, but not in terms of gender [...] My home is a starting point for other spaces. Often, it's where I confront strong discomfort while preparing for the aesthetic that will empower me in public" (Alba's Relief Map, Trans woman, Catalonia)

The safety within the private sphere empowers trans and non-binary individuals to build resilience they draw on when facing scrutiny, judgment, or hostility in public spaces. The home becomes both a shelter and a place of resistance, providing emotional support and confidence to confront society. This security helps them regain strength and resist normative forces, enabling them to face hostile environments. Several scholars (see Levi Herz and Rozmarin, 2023; Hartal and Levi Herz, 2024) have argued that resilience emerges not from the rejection of vulnerability, but from its active engagement, which gives rise to particular forms of agency and expression. Neoliberal understandings of subjectivity frame strength as the ability to

overcome fragility or detach from others, but vulnerability instead becomes the ground for connection and support, allowing individuals to sustain themselves in adverse conditions. From this perspective, resilience is not an isolated or internal trait, but a relational process that extends beyond the domestic sphere and informs how individuals navigate public life (Levi Herz and Rozmarin, 2023; Hartal and Levi Herz, 2024). In this sense, this relational resilience also contributes to the formation of political subjectivities, as LGBTIQ+ individuals negotiate vulnerability and exclusion in their daily lives. In this process, they become political subjects through the ongoing choices and practices that resist oppressive norms (Hartal, 2024). This ongoing negotiation between private refuge and public exposure highlights how the home and the city are deeply intertwined spaces where resilience is both forged and tested.

The interrelation between public and private spheres is further complicated by intersectional dynamics, where categories such as race, gender, and migration status intertwine, shaping how individuals navigate and negotiate their identities within domestic and public spaces. As Orka illustrates:

"I feel more resistance for being a '*sudaca*'<sup>5</sup> and for listening to *cumbia*<sup>6</sup> on the balcony than for going out fully dressed up. I had a very ugly situation when someone painted graffiti on the elevator door that said, 'Get out, you filthy *sudacas*, Spain for Spaniards,' along with a swastika." (Orka, non-binary/*monstra*, Latin America)

This quote highlights the porous boundaries between public and private spaces and the blurred lines between the two. At the same time, it reveals how these boundaries can become sites of violence, in this case, particularly LGBTIQ+phobic and racialized violence that target those who fail to conform to dominant norms. The attack on Orka is not only a response to the transgression of cultural and gender norms in a semi-public space like a balcony, but also a manifestation of nationalist exclusion, where the mere presence of certain bodies and sounds

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<sup>5</sup> *Sudaca* is a derogatory term for South Americans

<sup>6</sup> *Cumbia* is a popular music and dance genre of Colombian origin, widespread across Latin America

is perceived as a threat to the normative order. Building on Foucault's theory (1975), the reticulated power dynamics among citizens have generated control mechanisms that have eroded the walls separating the interior from the exterior, infiltrating the intimacy of the private sphere and shaping its expression in the public sphere as well (García Cortés, 2013). For LGBTIQ+ populations, no space is often entirely private, as it can be invaded by the judgmental gaze of others, such as family and neighbors (Johnston and Valentine, 1995; Doan, 2010). In some instances, this results in private matters becoming public, further blurring the boundaries. Whether understood as public or private, these spaces are highly politicized and directly involved in identity struggles (Elwood, 2000). The case of Orka exemplifies how normativity is spatialized and enforced through violence, operating as both a mechanism of conditional inclusion where one must “be normal” to access public space, and a tool for regulating rights by confining non-normative expressions to the private sphere, or excluding them altogether. Thus, violence does not simply police the borders between public and private but actively constructs them, shaping who can inhabit which spaces, how, and under what conditions.

The dichotomy between public and private spaces has been a foundational element in shaping urban and domestic life, deeply embedded in patriarchal and colonial systems of power (Pateman, 1988; Segato, 2016). Feminist geography has long challenged this binary, showing how home is a contested space of negotiation, oppression, and resistance (Blunt, 2005; Blunt and Dowling, 2006; Brickell, 2012; Massey, 1994; Pascual-Bordas and Rodó-Zárate, 2022). As Blunt and Varley (2004) argue, the home is a space that encompasses both belonging and alienation, intimacy and violence, as well as desire and fear. Moreover, recognizing the home as a site of political struggle challenges the traditional notion of domestic spaces as apolitical havens, revealing how they are deeply shaped by and contribute to broader systems of power and exclusion. But this relationship between spaces is not only fluid, it is structured by the movement of violence across them. LGBTIQ+phobia is not confined to the public gaze; it often enters the home, carried by words, or threats that blur the boundary between outside and inside. Power relations within the home, whether rooted in patriarchy,

heteronormativity, racism, or class, interact with external pressures, producing overlapping forms of vulnerability. At the same time, these conditions give rise to forms of resilience, as individuals find ways to protect themselves, assert their identities, and navigate hostile environments. Resilience, in this sense, does not emerge from rejecting vulnerability but through engaging with it as a site of agency and connection (Levi Herz and Rozmarin, 2023; Hartal and Levi Herz, 2024). Understanding how violence links public and private spaces makes visible the everyday negotiations through which safety, recognition, and agency are constructed.

## **Conclusions**

This study examines the right to the city through an intersectional lens, demonstrating how gender identity, race, and class interact to shape the urban experiences of non-binary and trans individuals in Barcelona. Our findings highlight how overlapping axes of oppression produce context-dependent exclusions and negotiations, disrupting the assumption that urban space is neutral or universally accessible. The fuzzy concept of the right to the city (Attoh, 2011) should be revisited in light of critiques that emphasize the need to rethink democracy as a collective urban project, where lived spaces are shaped by varying degrees of vulnerability and interrelated social identities (Purcell, 2014, 2022).

Our work contributes to ongoing debates on spatial justice and the right to the city by showing that they cannot be understood apart from intersecting systems of power and oppression. Rather than understanding it as a homogeneous claim, the right to the city must be reimagined as relational and plural, grounded in situated experiences that reveal how belonging and exclusion are co-produced. The non-binary approach in relation to social positions is especially relevant in Southern Europe, where histories of migration, racialization, and colonialism interact in ways that differ from those in Anglo-American urban contexts. It

also expands urban theory by highlighting the often-overlooked role of private spaces in shaping urban belonging (Fenster 2005).

By embedding an intersectional and non-binary perspective in debates on the right to the city, this paper engages with feminist, queer, and postcolonial perspectives on urban theory (Oswin and Pratt, 2021). This approach underscores that the right to the city must account for everyday negotiations, exclusions, and resistances, which are dynamic and context-dependent. Only by grasping these shifting relations can we address the intersecting inequalities that shape urban experiences. In this sense, we advocate for an urban theory that not only moves beyond static social and spatial hierarchies but also positions the intersectional right to the city as a critical framework for understanding and transforming contemporary urban belonging.

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This study was approved by the Institutional Committee for Ethical Review of Projects (CIREP) at Universitat Pompeu Fabra (Approval No.282). All participants provided informed consent before enrollment in the study.

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