A method to analyze invisibility: Navigating the dissonance between woke and safe

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Abstract
This article starts by considering how ‘the talk’ that black and non-black minority families give to their children comes as a duty to transfer the wisdom of how to be invisible forward through generations. It is not uncommon to think about being visible as a social good, but this is not quite so straightforward when one occupies a body deemed as ‘other.’ This article exposes this tension to explore how invisibility can be understood as an independent, complex, and nuanced social dynamic in its own right by considering literature that uses invisibility as an analytical lens, providing a synthesis of that literature to offer a preliminary multidimensional model of invisibility to extend extant tools for sociological study. This literature considers race, gender, sexuality, various presentations of power, and different social systems to demonstrate a model that identifies how the intersection of power, affect, presence, and voice fluidly transfigure across time and space to create an overall social construct of invisibility. This suggests that deeper development of a multidimensional construct of invisibility can provide a reasoned and valuable additional lens to address a range of social dynamics.

Keywords
Invisibility, methods, social theory, visuality

Two weeks after a mass shooting in Parkland, Florida, Wal-Mart self-imposed restrictions on ammunition sales (Tensley, 2019). It was a business decision with far-reaching social and political implications. Though not nearly the first US mass shooting, somehow, a...
tipping point had been reached. Even living outside of America, this carries import for what it says about contemporary dynamics of mattering. In an opinion piece written for the *New York Times*, Douthat (2018) described it as the rise of ‘woke capital’ in response to ‘a perfect storm of articulate student outrage and savvy online activism, merging with a rising tide of resentment’ (Thompson, 2018). Corporations felt forced or perhaps enabled to step outside of their public-secret practice of supporting ‘both sides’ equally to not lose favour with one or the other. But as Thompson (2018) suggests, ‘Uber is not an immigration firm. Disney is not a climate-advocacy organization. Merck is not a civil-rights group.’ Cynically, one could argue that Douthat’s use of the term ‘woke,’ then, is both an appropriation and an abomination. It elevates a much less visceral magnanimous market calculus outside of how the term ‘woke’ is more typically used to capture the rising consciousness of marginalized subjectivities. Yet, it is possible that it can be both a cynical strategy of becoming differently visible and a state of necessary consciousness to understand how one is viewed by and thus must approach others. In both ways, this ‘wokeness’ mirrors what historian Jon Grinspan (2009) describes as the catalysts for the ‘Wide Awakes’ who combined consciousness with action prior to the US Civil War. They made this consciousness material by mustering resistance to partisanship that created egregious wrongs, often felt but not spoken. Being ‘woke,’ then, is and was about seeing yourself *in situ* combined with an urgency but not a prescription to act.

Prior to the Parkland shootings, the movement ‘#BlackLivesMatter (#BLM) was founded in 2013 in response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin’s murderer’ (BLM, n.d.). Trayvon Martin was an unarmed 17-year-old black teenager, also in Florida, who was shot to death by a white man. Where Parkland inspired an immediate and pervasive corporate wokeness, the killing of Trayvon Martin created a much different but wider social movement. Initially situated in African American communities, it has spread well beyond, become global, and has redoubled with each tragic repeating of the murder of a black-bodied person at the hands of a summarily punitive authority. Writing about the murder of another black man in 2014, Eric Garner, Pérez (2018) considers work like what #BLM does as the embodiment of a responsibility to create coalition against precarity, too often unseeable at the ‘edges’ of society. In her reference to Eric Garner, Pérez invokes some of his powerful last words, ‘I can’t breathe,’ to describe how his dying voice issued a clarion breaching a collective and willful seeing but ignoring of the suffering of black lives.

And yet, in 2020 this pattern of violence against black bodies persisted, rearing its head repeatedly, erupting most prominently again in the US on three occasions: in March with the murder of Breonna Taylor (Oppel et al., 2020); in May with the murder of George Floyd; and again in August with the murder of Jacob Blake. Each variously at the hands of police, and sadly not the only three. These events prompted new waves of ‘wokeness’ that migrated well outside of the black community (see Buchanan et al., 2020). Breonna Taylor’s murder added a layer to #BLM, by invoking her intersectional position as black and also a woman through the campaign #SayHerName (AAPF, 2020). George Floyd’s murder stretched the width of ‘wokeness’ beyond the edges, and sparked public outrage when his last words echoing, exactly, the last words of Eric Garner, ‘I can’t breathe’ (Fernandez and Burch, 2020) were captured on video and uncontrollably circulated as a double-edged hyper-visible appropriation of his death to both honour and disavow his life, casting him as a symbol and not (at all) a man.
Further into the height of the pandemic summer, the murder of Jacob Blake brought this question of ‘wokeness’ full circle to the corporate level noted at the outset. This was particularly prominent during the re-start of the National Basketball Association (NBA) season where players, coaches, and the league, reflected their collective outrage on their bodies, through their words, and emblazoned on their courts. Yet, as Toronto Raptor Fred VanVleet noted with the death of Jacob Blake, ‘corporate wokeness’ cannot be limited to ‘what we show,’ but must also be measured by action. ‘Do we actually give a [expletive] about what’s going on? Or is it just cool to wear BLM on the backdrop or wear a T-shirt?’ (Zillgitt and Medina, 2020). His very simple question, ‘What are we willing to give up?’ seems rhetorical, but addresses the obligation to consider how seeing, saying, feeling, and being able to do something must work hand in hand to make changes in time and space. This article considers how these elements come together to form a fertile liminal space by looking at them as the negotiation of multiple concurrent levels of invisibility.

Black and racialized bodies negotiate invisibility

Interestingly, during the pandemic, there were fewer reports of mass gun violence coming out of the US even as the punitive control of black bodies raged on. Noting this caused a re-thinking of how to re-situate the need for this article to address what Licona (2018) describes as the substitution of one culprit for another, where societies thrive on the preservation of manageable ‘monstrosity’ to create simple binaries where some things can matter and others cannot. Whereas in this moment, being ‘woke’ around #BLM has inspired social understanding that black lives do matter, its broad adoption introduces opportunities to be cynical. Like earlier corporate wokeness, while their suffering is socially visible, the struggles of the black selves that occupy black bodies have been made available for momentary consumption and possession by non-black selves, to be re-presented as symbols of one’s own woke compassion. This complicates whether ‘wokeness’ is ever already real. That is not to say that being an ‘ally’ is insincere or impossible, but that it is forever incomplete and perhaps temporally fleeting ‘for an outsider,’ who can choose whether or not to possess wokeness. By contrast, within a body deemed as other, being woke does not abdicate the concurrent obligation to be safe. Outside of such a self, it is virtually impossible, for example, to truly understand the need for ‘the talk’ that repeatedly must occur as an abhorrent but necessary rite of passage for black and other minority children.

Indeed, for the newly woke, the mere mention of ‘the talk’ might foremost signify sexual education no matter how often its contextual meaning is explained. Feeling its meaning fully can never occur without having to realistically prepare for its need first-hand. For a black-bodied self, as with many other minority-bodied selves, ‘the talk’ is an understood intergenerational transference of instructive haunted wisdom (see Morrill, Tuck et al., 2016) about accepting the pragmatic reasonableness that one must at times become invisible. Even as a non-black minority parent, the need to have this talk was not a welcomed rite so much as a duty to disabuse the notion of universal freedoms. That talk outlines the specter of understanding that invisibility can also be a choice that one ought to consider making in some circumstances to avoid the externally imposed disciplinarity of some forms of visibility as experienced by countless scores of black-bodied men,
women, and children. Lollar (2015) would consider this a form of ‘strategic invisibility.’ She describes such things as practices that live within but are unknowable by the ‘mainstream.’ Instead of thinking of this as disempowerment, she thinks of it as ‘an act of agency, however brief, for the purpose of safety and privacy . . . possibly the first step toward a stronger act of resistance’ (p. 312). But how can we make sense of this kind and other kinds of invisibility more broadly and extend their value as a social construct or analytical lens?

A construct of invisibility matters

Having arrived at the importance of invisibility abductively, it was strange to discover that it is rarely considered as an analytic lens in its own right; rather it is mainly presented as a taken-for-granted supplicant to visibility (e.g. see Brighenti, 2007). When used in the literature in a more nuanced way, invisibility is still frequently concomitant to the porousness of visibility through the use of a slash (see Allen, 2012), framed as in/visibility. But what if invisibility is more socially complex, context-making, and independently robust? What happens if invisibility is not thought of exclusively as lack, and is perceived as a purposeful choice, not exclusively as an externally imposed negative outcome? This article hopes to fill this gap. Further, in relation to the idea of ‘the talk’ noted earlier, it hopes to capture what is clearly extant everyday wisdom about invisibility and use it to develop analytic tools to think about invisibility as both byproduct and product, neither good nor bad, but multivalent and intellectually powerful.

As Lollar (2015) notes, ‘invisibility discloses information and insight into a shared world with multiple situated places of dwelling’ (p. 312). Licona (2018) similarly adds the work of Kaja Silverman challenging us to think about visibility beyond the binary of seen/unseen, presenting the ‘threshold of the visible’ to introduce how visibility is social and not just physical. She extends this with the work of Judith Butler, who describes it as a much wider democracy of perception and implies that both visibility and invisibility are imbued with dynamics of power and its exercise as agency. Starting first from the position of invisibility as distinct phenomenon and not singularly binarily obligated to visibility allows us to take up Licona’s suggestion that ‘these are productive rather than reductive practices . . . with moving possibilities and mobilizing potentials’ (p. 181), further buttressing the possibility of thinking about invisibility multidimensionally.

This article synthesizes literature that forefronts ways to perceive invisibility as a mode of analysis and not just an outcome or absence of evidence. Collectively, this research moves thinking about invisibility beyond the limitations of simple ocular fetishization (see Cruikshank, 2010), and is here combined to propose a multidimensional model of invisibility that could be thought of as an offer to your analytical toolbox, but should be treated as an open question for further exploration.

Using invisibility as a ‘shield’

Visibility, like invisibility, is a social construct that can also but should not only be understood as a physical phenomenon. Moving away from a strict binary of visible/invisible is a necessary first step toward thinking about invisibility within the social field of
visuality, ‘how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing or the unseen therein’ (Foster, 1988: ix). Multiple invisibilities cohabit the social realm, each with unique implications and differing abilities to be subject-controlled. We cannot always choose how we are seen, no matter how much we try. Focusing on the visibility of immigrant Islamic women in postwar Dutch society, Ghorashi (2010), presents a case study reporting this struggle in the Netherlands over how to reconcile the visuality of difference within and outside immigrant communities. She describes it as negotiating tensions between ‘being seen’ and ‘being recognized.’ Outside of an absolute binary, Ghorashi notes that recognition, though theoretically visual, can also usurp capacity for continuous self-definition by being forcefully and fixatedly transformative, making people into distinctive and externally absolute units of exchange for machineries of the state and society.

For some immigrant women in the Netherlands, this meant choosing between replacing one invisibility, of being ‘out of sight,’ unseeable, and forgotten, for another, being out of power. Ghorashi identifies forces that inculcate the singularity of visualities that simultaneously deny Islamic women, undercutting self-determination by ‘painting a picture’ that influences how wider Dutch publics can feel about them. Each of these elements provides additional layers of invisibility as the women only ‘become visible when it comes to serving as background figures and invisible when it comes to serving as experts and specialists in various societal fields’ relevant to their own experiences (Ghorashi, 2010: 84). Thinking about this as a simple continuum of being seen, then, is incomplete. This first assertion thus proposes seeing as a socially fluid element of a multidimensional dynamic of invisibility. Seeing is not ‘fix-ed’ so much as fixation.

Still, staying out of sight and mind presents a curious double-bind. One can be made to disappear within the act of being seen, but the irony of the visibility of Islamic women is that it creates blindness that consumes the experiences of the women themselves who can only become ‘seen’ by trading their agency in order to be heard. They must be de facto ‘there but not there.’ This is further complicated in a growing context of global ‘Islamophobia.’ As noted in ‘the talk’ at the outset, to be visible and present in what one self-perceives as an unwanted body means being ‘top of mind’ which is not always desirable when it induces constant scrutiny. This adds a new consideration to our growing model, affect; a continuum between care and fear, or even apathy, creates an additional concurrent element that contributes to the multidimensionality of invisibility. In the case of Islamic women, becoming visible remains tied to generalized affective responses outside of their control; whether they can rationally be ‘seen’ by the state, they are shrouded by a blanket of emotions that renders them indivisible from the specter of Islam which renders them untenable. In this way, remaining semi-voluntarily invisible, ‘out of sight, out of mind,’ in ‘closed communities,’ may be a reasonable response.

Like Holland, Canada has a long history of receiving global migrants. In this context, Arat-Koç (2012) explores how ‘racialized immigrant women’ face additional invisibilities because of public policies focused on a mythology of acceptance. To be accepting requires a ‘straw person’ of ‘otherness’ against which belonging is measured; that is, in order to be inclusive of ‘others’ there must be an ‘us’ that extends that offer. According
to Arat-Koç, as Canadian public policy makers tacitly deploy inclusive Canadianess to consider the presence of non-Western/European traditions and peoples, it does so to reconcile an always already-ness of Anglo-Franco-European culture that itself denies Indigenous peoples as ‘outsiders’ and ‘challenges.’ This happens through immigration quotas and framing non-Western and Indigenous cultures as relative to the ‘Canadian way.’ Arat-Koç (2012) also uses the work of Alexandra Dobrowolsky to address that thinking about public policy this way allows us to see the ghosts of belief systems codified into accepted practices. She shows how women, for example, are made ‘peripheral,’ paraphrasing a former Prime Minister and a Minister Responsible for the Status of Women, who said that ‘women’s equality had already been achieved in Canada; [which means that] equality no longer needed to be a government priority’ (Arat-Koç, 2012: 8). This renders women’s issues mute – this word used purposefully to identify stifling voices as a willful act of externally imposed invisibility. Arat-Koç considers this invisibility as framing that extends controls over voice and power, the remaining two independent variables in our growing multidimensional model.

How invisibility is operationalized

Licona and Maldonado (2014) explore similar tensions arising from framing, the creation of hypervisibilities, and the development and constant negotiation of invisibility in a community ethnography of Latin@s [sic] in a small American town. They argue,

. . . the meanings of visibility and invisibility extend beyond just presence or absence. Neither presence nor absence can be fully understood without taking into consideration how power functions to make meaning of what can be accomplished through visibility and invisibility for a multiplicity of social actors, locations and relations. (Licona and Maldonado, 2014: 520)

They describe how Latin@s, and all others in Perry, Iowa must constantly negotiate mutual dynamics of invisibility and, as in Arat-Koç’s analysis, address how unflinching hyper-visibilities force mechanisms of control. Their informants in Perry identified that ‘to be visible in community spaces [is not only to be seen] but means to be included, to have a voice that gets heard’ (Licona and Maldonado, 2014: 520). Under constant scrutiny of a ‘regime of deportability,’ the authors argue that being seen is something that must be necessarily selective and situated in a broader context of spatialized cybernetic invisibility, where hiding, turning a blind eye, and ignoring are routinely used as mutual strategies of invisibility on both sides of the immigration coin. This, they argue, is central to keep the community functioning. These negotiations in/and/through invisibility tactically betray the simple binary of visibility–invisibility in the lived world as ever being an either/or proposition. Sometimes, operationalizing invisibility is the best choice.

The Latin@ population in Perry describe that regardless of legal status, being Latin@ automatically carries a badge of ‘otherness,’ creating a feeling of being apart that begets the constant need to think about when and how to be invisible rather than when and how to be visible. This happens as fear of deportation migrates into a generalized fear of being visibly Latin@. Growing up this way, ‘the hypervisibility that young Latin@ males experience triggers increased surveillance, which in turn produces conditions for the
imposition as well as the pursuit of invisibility’ (p. 525). Finding few ‘official’ welcoming places, young men congregate on ‘the corner,’ at the gas station, and in small groups around town. This leads to assumptions of being up to no good, which in turn encourage them to ‘go underground’ to avoid being seen as ‘public villains.’ For Latin@ adults in Perry, hyper-visibility-as-risk discourages interactions with the wider community, limiting intercultural exchange. This is codified by a mutual culture of ‘looking away’ described as ‘look/don’t look,’ to forge a fragile safety through invisibility. All of Perry is in on it.

In an inverse example, Harms (2013) calls this ‘conspicuous invisibility’ that complicates and extends Lollar’s (2015) concept of strategic invisibility. Conspicuousness addresses that invisibilities can be performed both privately and shared ‘in plain sight’ if done purposefully. In the case of Latin@s in Perry, this ranges from widespread under-the-table work, often in dangerous, underpaid, and undesirable jobs that are key to the regional economy, to unspoken widely held assumptions that all people of Latin@ look or heritage are ‘illegal’ or that all interaction with white people threatens deportation. For Harms, the notion of conspicuousness enacts similar tools of hiding for different tactical purposes. He discusses it in relation to being ‘A Boss’ in a transitional Vietnam.

Invisibility as social adaptation

Being ‘A Boss’ in Harms’s study exceeds the idea of ‘being in charge,’ invoking his subject’s sense of ‘divine right.’ One does not work one’s way up to being a Boss; one is born a Boss. This is complicated in a communal society that values mutuality and modesty, where wealth and personal power can be seen as deviant. In this context, there is a constant need to maintain a mask of modesty in order to retain cultural standing while concurrently ‘living large’ to satiate the urge to exert one’s Boss-ness. Conspicuous invisibility allows concurrent display and masking. In this case, as with ‘the talk’ noted at the outset, the dynamic of invisibility as the control of display and as masking in the face of social power adds the importance of time and space to our multidimensional model. Rather than being variables, however, time and space add the nuance of context-specificity to understand invisibility as a malleable dynamic rather than just as a fixed output. Time and space are the ground upon which the intersection of seeing, hearing, power, and affect unfolds. Here, Harms demonstrates the power of context in invisibility by identifying how harmony is achieved through the cultivation and use of conspicuous acts of invisible opulence that, elsewhere, might not make much sense.

He does so by discussing the Javanese understanding of power as a constant intercession of lahir (visibility) and batin (invisibility). Harms’s subject, Vū, constantly and purposefully deploys invisibility to circumnavigate Ho Chi Minh City, avoiding the suspicion of ‘ordinary people’ who assume that wealth is always corruption. He uses invisibility as a shadow in which to display his need for excess, inconspicuous to the untrained eye, constantly straddling the concurrent invisibilities of concealment and protection to maintain and maximize social stratification but not be harmed by doing so. Most people engage these same dynamics: dressing up or down in to ‘fit in,’ or ‘feel safe,’ buying gifts we cannot afford to obfuscate our actual means, etc.
Invisibility as presence

Despite social polarity, the cases offered by Harms (2013) and Licona and Maldonado (2014) both demonstrate how invisibility can be used as an answer to the ‘problem of visibility.’ Harms shows that his subject uses dark tinted windows of a chauffeured car to travel invisibly, seeing out but unseeable within. This helps him live luxuriously while remaining hidden. He is out of the direct and judging eyes of a society in which his wealth elicits disdain. In Perry, Latin@ women similarly use vehicles to stay ‘under the radar,’ choosing back roads to travel well out of the way to avoid being seen, and they do not venture out alone in case they are stopped and unsparingly separated from their families. Licona and Maldonado call these ‘expressions of the lived knowledges that form [self] invisibilizing tactics’ (2014: 524). Keeping one’s head down to avoid scrutiny is a reasonable survival mechanism, just as ‘the talk’ says that it should be. For Vū, it is a thin veil of invisibility used to satisfy his need to assert authority while remaining deferent to cultural piety. For the Latin@ population in Perry, it is literally ‘out of sight, out of mind’ to avoid censure.

Harms describes how Vū uses invisibility purposefully to avoid the flak of being visible. In Vietnam, being ‘out there’ is an important aspect of being a Boss while concealing overt displays of wealth is important for cultural standing. This necessitates another ‘open secret.’ In Vietnam, . . . if conspicuousness reaffirms status, invisibility helps manage it. Invisibility redirects attention away from overt signs of wealth and enables the Boss to sculpt a moral identity that conforms to the demands of state socialism, discourses of corruption, the moral tenets of expected social behavior, and also protects him against the rise of crime in urban spaces. (Harms, 2013: 199)

Thus, ‘conspicuous invisibility refers to a strategy Bosses employ to engage in ostentatious display while also hiding those displays’ (Harms, 2013: 198). This includes religious philanthropy, building large and flamboyant temples ‘sanitized’ by the monks who occupy them, allowing wealth to be masked by deference to culture. Rightfully, or wrongfully, this happens in many other everyday situations of ‘dressing down’ or otherwise comporting one’s self purposefully so as to both be and not be concurrently.

Because this is not always ‘fair,’ as in the case of ‘the talk,’ not speaking up when you feel wronged does not remove the strategic deployment of invisibility for otherwise righteous purposes of social and physical safety in the moment. Living in controlled and measured ways deploys invisibility as an answer to the problems associated with being otherwise uncontrollably visible. Harms further describes this in Vū’s private splashing around of wealth to assert power. He says that ‘natural enjoyment’ of high-quality experiences does not require obvious flashy visual displays (Harms, 2013: 197). Strategic private spaces like unassuming massage parlors can, on the surface, appear meek, but allow him to pay extravagantly for services to impress colleagues and friends. It counts even if it is not widely seen. As Vū might describe, such invisibility mystifies people by offering visual experiences that obscure much more complicated social and cultural dynamics.
**Invisibility and ‘passing’**

Considering a different sort of immigrant experience than that of the Latin@ population described previously, Naber (2000) demonstrates a necessary caution over what may thus far appear as an unabashed championing of invisibility by discussing its dual roles throughout the history of pan-‘Arab’ settlement in America. He shows how American public policy over the last century reduced people of many different origins from across a vast and plural region to a singular if shifting visibility. He does so by asserting a visual interpretation of census demographic terminology that melts people into a single monolithic category of ‘Arab-American.’ This imposes a form of invisibility devoid of nuance, rife with official, tactical, and often restrictive external power. It codifies ‘otherness’ through the rhetorical practice of ‘prefixing’, making people forever linguistically qualified as Arab-Americans, unable to ever become Americans, full stop.

Naber argues that this kind of external invisibility through official classification systems creates an urgency for a paradoxical response, where some subgroups of ‘Arab-Americans’ craft and deploy their own almost retaliatory tactics of invisibility. Some ‘hide’ in cloistered and self-supporting parallel communities that are invisible to the wider society. Others, when able, ‘blend in’ and become invisible by being guarded or by suppressing their origins (publicly). Naber, though, demonstrates that many of the first waves of Arab immigrants to the United States came from Syria and because they were phenotypically able to ‘pass’ as ‘white-enough,’ anglicized their names, abandoned public use of their languages, and adopted ‘American customs.’ They ‘passed’ in order to survive and make a new home in an adopted country that was otherwise unreceptive. The important caveat to this tactic of invisibility is that ‘Arab Americans’ are a vast plurality of peoples, belief systems, racial visualities, and histories of struggle. Here, though Naber wrote prior to September 2001, these ideas remain prescient to understand the intragroup struggles with invisibility as questions of borderlands circling ‘authenticity’ and ‘pride.’ He values complicating the construct of invisibility, saying that ‘Arab Americans do not always possess the power to choose “to pass” or “not to pass” as white’ (p. 51). He also recognizes that times of turmoil bring increased scrutiny to ‘Arabness’/otherness, which means that it is sometimes tacitly understood that if you can ‘pass’ – render your ‘Arabness’ invisible – invisibility can be as preferred as problematic. Returning to how black and non-black minority children are given ‘the talk,’ this invisibility, for example, is tactically valuable when trying to negotiate an airport or speak to the authorities.

**When invisibility cannot be controlled**

Dotson and Gilbert (2014) consider the experiences of Black Americans (itself a simplification of a complicated category), describing similar double-binds that create pressures for ‘authenticity’ and ‘presence.’ They call these dynamics and their outputs ‘process-based invisibility.’ The authors describe them as narrative gaps that emerge to induce the disappearance of agency and reduce affectability, the will to care:

To say that some of the lives and experiences of Black women are rendered invisible in public narratives is not to say that they are always already invisible, but rather should aspects of our
lives and experiences become subject to public narratives, they can quickly be dismissed due to machinations aimed at obfuscating, erasing, and/or discounting those lives and experiences. (Dotson and Gilbert, 2014: 873–874)

Dotson and Gilbert’s analysis demonstrates a two-fold addition to our model and reflects the urgency to address invisibility as demonstrated in the #SayHerName movement. It betrays the simplicity of visibility as a prize, demonstrating dissonance between how black bodies and black lives can be seen and still be socially invisible in time and space. It highlights invisibility as a social product, by focusing on ‘affectability,’ the ability to feel connected to and concerned about. Dotson and Gilbert, similar to Gorashi, Naber, and Arat-Koç, describe that when we are disinterested in or fearful of those who we see, the presence of their bodies is diminished, or rendered less knowable. Here, Dotson and Gilbert refer to Fannie Barrier Williams (1905), who says that this is longstanding and, for example, resulted in the ‘black girls’ unknowability.’

In a more contemporary sense the idea is reinforced by the work of Rebecca Wanzo (2009), who says that the suffering of black lives ‘will not be televised,’ since nobody would care to watch (in Dotson and Gilbert, 2014). Curiously, the wide circulation of images depicting the final suffering of George Floyd in particular supports rather than rejects Wanzo’s belief. One could argue that the video of his death stopped being about him once it became enfolds into multiple, competing narrative frames where his suffering became an object of circulation rather than exclusively the representation of an empathetic experience.

Hiding in plain sight

Jarenski (2010) expands the importance of negotiating such narrative presence through a socio-literary analysis of Ralph Ellison’s novel *Invisible Man*. Here, she deepens reasons to question binary thinking about invisibility. Focusing on the belief that visibility is a solution to the problem of invisibility, she asks whether visibility is always more desirable. The very notion that invisibility is exclusively a form of disempowerment overlooks that matrices of power are rooted in using visibility as a tool of power. Visibility defines bodies and shapes them to suit regimes of interpretation. In Ellison’s work, Jarenski shows how ‘being seen’ has often been a conduit for the appropriation and commodification of black culture (most famously Rhythm & Blues music in the context of this novel). Though this visibility elevated the profile of ‘black music’ and ‘black dances,’ Ellison tells us that it did not equal the acceptance of the black lives that occupied the black bodies that produced them. Jarenski argues that invisibility in this way is not the erasure of agency, particularly when the alternative, visibility, begets counterfeiting as a kind of ‘cred’ that consumes the value of blackness while also rejecting it. It is a traumatic schism that makes self-controlled invisibility a rational way to maintain agency to evolve and become rather than be fixed and finite as lesser.

Here, it is helpful to consider the work of Anderson Franklin (1999) that addresses the internalizations of external invisibilities that proffer ‘fixedness.’ For Franklin, being made to feel invisible by being painted as an unchanging visual problem manifests a debilitating psychological state. Focusing largely on Black American men’s experiences, he explores the externally imperceptible ‘microaggressions’ that pepper the daily lives of
black men in places where they are a minority. Recognizing the cues that outline the inferiority of ‘one’s place’ is often the basis of ‘the talk’ noted at the outset. Franklin describes how internalizing the trauma of microaggressions produces a sense of worthlessness he calls an ‘invisibility syndrome.’ This leaves Black Americans to feel unknowable as complex social equals, while being hyper-visible as ‘problems.’ The invisibility syndrome creates a self-fulfilling cycle of internalizing external invisibility where one’s black body becomes a site of fear or pity and induces a feeling of unwelcome. As a clinician, he attempts to intervene in an individual’s sense of imposed invisibility by disrupting the operational power of the gaze of others, replacing it with more intrinsic self-description and selective deployment of how to be valued and left alone. He suggests a resolution created by hiding in plain sight through a focus on self-definition and self-worth.

Using Franklin’s framework, Tovar-Murray and Tovar-Murray (2012) describe group counseling where black participants relate experiences of people ‘looking away’ or ‘being silent’ similar to the dynamic described by Licona and Maldonado (2014). Shunning and internalizing the fear presented by others creates a sense of isolation, an external invisibility irreconcilable in strictly visual terms: one can be well dressed and well-spoken but still black taken in a non-visual, social sense. Triggered by corporeal visibility, Tovar-Murray and Tovar-Murray’s respondents found that people around them rendered them socially un-visible, pretending they were not there, selective of what to say (‘political correctness’), and slow to want to meaningfully connect. They considered the social outcomes of these experiences as correlations between physicality and implication; this, they said, was most firmly grounded by the shackles of visibility rather than invisibility.

Negotiating invisibility

Still, considering invisibility as an ‘undesirable outcome’ imposed by the gaze of others is logically reasonable. Lewis Gordon (2000) describes socially constructed invisibilities as an ongoing narrative of lack, rendered by clear and fixed boundaries of who belongs and thus who can be seen in certain spaces and how they can be seen. He calls this a ‘dialectic of disappearance’ (p. 375) hinged on neutralizing that which is seen but is incongruent with what one wants to interpret. Nothing ‘pre-exists’ visually but must always already be made to be visual socially, through dynamics of representation (see Foster, 1988). Gordon, here, focuses on similarities between the processes of seeing black and Indigenous people that leads to questions about their right to occupy space. He uses this to probe the caustic potential of externally enforced invisibility, often as an act of aggressive control, always as a measure of power. Lubkemann (2008) considers this as ‘displacement in place’ that disarticulates people from the land or context and systems in which they live and assumes the absence of mutual resonance. Some people ‘belong’ to the land, and others are always already ‘outsiders’ and forever visibly invisible. As Dee Watt-Jones (2004) argued, the use of such definitional violence ‘seems to obscure or deny the malignancy of those empowered, or their systems of institutions,’ which she describes as the ways in which visibility becomes ‘the process by which groups or individuals are made into [persistent] problems’ (p. 507).
Building on the foundational work of Kimberlé Crenshaw, Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach (2008), here add a notion of intersectionality to our model of invisibility. Intersectionality refers to the idea of living within multiple concurrent identities simultaneously and having to negotiate what each means separately while also having to reconcile how each identity complicates rather than parallels the others. Individual identities are cross-layered and deeply compounded rather than distinctively divisible. As a part of our model, intersectionality helps us appreciate that the elements of invisibility do not fit into ‘neat simple boxes.’ Instead, the four overlapping variables of our model, corporeality (sight), agency (power), ephemerality (voice), and affectability (emotion), occur at constantly changing rates of saturation across time and space. Each variable is important to consider in every analysis of invisibility because it interrelates with while also complicates each other. They are intersectional and cannot be separated.

As proof of this, Purdie-Vaughns, a social psychologist, considers how identity intersections are negotiated when multiple subordinate identity features can render a person unknowable by members of their primary identity group(s), let alone by total ‘outsiders.’ If the visibility of ‘difference’ produces the notion of a ‘subordinate’ identity, and the notion of subordinance suggests a hierarchy of power, the idea of multiple subordinate identities implies the further removal from any sort of grand agency through an exponential compounding of incompleteness. Any parent of a multi-racial child knows this every time their child favors one of their points of origin more than the other. If being a person of color represents a ‘minority’ or subordinate (i.e. lower power-holding) social position, being a woman of color adds the layer of gender-power-subordination to the subordination of color alone. As one adds additional layers such as age, sexuality, class, religion, language and so on, these intersections create complicated visibility dilemmas: where does this person belong?

Interestingly, many of the challenges of intersectionality occur because of the tendency for the visual to favor absolution, physically and rhetorically. But life is complicated and rarely so linear. Yet visuality prefers for subjects to fit into tidy boxes. According to Purdie-Vaughns, intersectional people (which we all are to one extent or another) struggle to be recognized when they are constantly asked ‘where they belong.’ Curiously, while one can be disadvantaged by not fitting neatly into a single box particularly when it comes to intragroup acceptance, one can also be advantaged by this by avoiding external oppression associated with one aspect of an intersecting identity by dampening another aspect of that identity in times that suit. This fluidity of invisibility shows that our model recognizes that invisibility is not fixed, but is, instead, forever shifting. This allows ‘the talk’ about when you ought to be invisible to take on new meaning because it reflects the pragmatic wisdom of recognizing that invisibility does not resolve whether something is fair or right, just that it is sometimes phenomenologically possible.

**Codifying invisibility in society**

As legal scholars, Onwuachi-Willig and Onwuachi-Willig (2009) describe that the legal ‘visibility of persons’ necessarily simplifies people into discrete points of origin to consider right and wrong through the creation of ‘classes’ that reduce identities to steady and tidy categories that can be contrasted with one another. The law likes to make people
visible when they can belong to clearly bounded groups that help processes unfold more easily by re-manufacturing complicated subject identities into well-ordered and abridged objects that can be clearly adjudicated.

Returning to Purdie-Vaughns (Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach, 2008), this leaves no mechanism to address being simultaneously and multiply identified as visually subordinate. One cannot be a woman of color. Under laws, one must be ‘a woman’ and ‘of color’ separately even if concurrently. Such visual distinctions require a hierarchical ordering of mattering, as if intersecting identities simply coexist in parallel rather than ecologically in an indivisibly intertwined compound web. ‘Intersectionality challenges us to contemplate what it means to have a marginalized status within a marginalized group’ (Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach, 2008: 389), by asking us to consider what it is like to be unseeable as a member of a group that is itself already unseeable.

Purdie-Vaughns accounts for this tension accepting that visible identities are often treated hierarchically. Some identity characteristics deploy more power than others and the cultural exigencies of more power-full identity features can influence the execution of less power-full identity features in a given moment. For example, she describes ‘codes of silence’ that pervade many racialized communities where one does not ‘air dirty laundry’ in front of outsiders to maintain a sense of unity and solidarity. Tucker (2009) describes this as a ‘cost’ of invisibility further imposed by the absolutist tendencies of visual display. Discussing queer visibility in Africa, Tucker discusses how ‘a particular visibility, tied to a particular spatial logic, and political, social and cultural history [can] obscure other visibilities’ (p. 188). He uses this framework to question the rhetoric of ‘the closet’ as it resides in queer mythologies in relation to the celebratory narrative of ‘coming out.’

In time and space, this absolute visual move between ‘the closet’ and ‘out’ is fraught with liminal uncertainty. In the ‘West,’ while most prevailing progressive social thinking assumes that being out is the only way to live ‘openly and honestly,’ as Tucker reminds, being ‘out of the closet’ or ‘openly queer’ is a social act more than a visual one. The metaphorical ‘closet’ is a conceptual space of social invisibility that can be constantly and variably negotiated by queer people who need to determine whether, where, when, and with whom they can be ‘open,’ i.e. ‘visible.’

This additional consideration highlights the reason why our multidimensional model of invisibility must be thought of as always in motion, to reflect how invisibility is always relational and in flux. In Tucker’s research in Sub-Saharan Africa, ‘the closet’ offers a rhetorical invisibility that allows queer people to live openly if perhaps not as ‘visually open’ in societies where homosexuality is, in places, currently illegal, but moreover is deeply blamed for the devastations of the AIDS epidemic and not only about sexuality. According to Tucker, the closet acts as a positive metaphor of invisibility to answer the problems associated with being ‘out’ in the time and space of his study, though it makes sense differently at the same time, in other spaces.

**Conclusions**

Invisibility is always around us. Building on Goffman (1973), ordinary things are invisible not because we cannot see them or they do not matter, but because we make them
routine and expected. This explains why it is hard to notice changes in people we see every day, like weight or hairstyle. The complex variable nature of invisibility in the research in this article demonstrates that seeing is no more universally good than invisibility is bad. Such thinking is needlessly limiting. The multidimensional construct of invisibility this article offers adds a reasoned and valuable additional lens to consider a range of ways in which we can think about the negotiations of presence in the social world at the intersection of seeing, power, voice, and affect as they travel together through time and space, and fluctuate with experience.

Returning to ‘the talk’ that started this article, rethinking the invisibility that it proffers as empowering makes sense in relation to perceived consequences of being sometimes visible. Such thinking, ironically, itself lives in a space of invisibility that Rifkin (2010) describes as the invisible hand of empathy: we have to embody caring for something to matter. Fixating on invisibility as absence is a logical oversimplification. Merleau-Ponty, instructively summarized by Weate (2003), recognizes this as misunderstanding the visible as a singular prize when invisibility has its own independent value.

Still, the idea that invisibility could be desirable is almost counterintuitive. One might assume that being seen reverses the abjection of being invisible, but when invisibility is elevated beyond a simplification of seeing (or not), opportunities emerge to consider other possibilities. Girard (2013) helpfully demonstrates Bruno Latour’s assertion that invisibilities ‘are both made and real; they are constructions and actors.’ They constitute the conjoined efforts of people and processes to create what ‘Latour (2010, 163) labels “regimes of invisibility,” complex sets of practices, technologies, mediators, knowledges, and translations.’ Though never neutral, not automatically negative.

Used purposefully, invisibility can be a powerful social mediator of affect and power. It is not enough to presume a simple immutable binary, that things that cannot be seen are therefore not important or powerless without also exploring how invisibility is a social construct that is understood and regularly deployed. This presents a multidimensional model of invisibility as a construct worthy of further development as a concerted analytic lens.

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**Author biography**

Ravindra N Mohabeer holds a PhD in Communication and Culture from York University in Canada and is a faculty member and Chair of the Department of Media Studies at Vancouver Island University. His research focuses on a multidimensional social theory of invisibility to understand how mattering is negotiated, particularly at the intersections of digital expression, do-it-yourself and everyday culture, and overall questions of belonging bisected by race, class, and non-urbanity.

**Résumé**

Cet article commence par examiner comment le « discours » que les familles issues des minorités noires et non noires tiennent à leurs enfants se révèle comme un devoir de transmettre l’intérêt d’être invisible à travers les générations. Il n’est pas rare de penser qu’être visible est un bien social, mais cela n’est pas si simple lorsqu’on occupe un corps considéré comme « autre ». Cet article expose cette tension pour explorer comment l’invisibilité peut être comprise comme une dynamique sociale à part entière, indépendante, complexe et nuancedée, à partir d’un examen de la littérature qui a recours à l’invisibilité comme angle d’approche analytique. L’article fournit une synthèse de cette littérature de manière à offrir un modèle multidimensionnel préliminaire de l’invisibilité qui permette de développer les outils existants pour l’étude sociologique. Cette littérature prend en compte la race, le genre, la sexualité, ainsi que diverses présentations du pouvoir et différents systèmes sociaux, pour faire apparaître un modèle qui permet d’identifier comment l’intersection du pouvoir, de l’affect, de la présence et de la voix se transforme de manière fluide à travers le temps et l’espace pour créer une construction sociale globale de l’invisibilité. Cela semble indiquer qu’un développement plus approfondi d’une construction multidimensionnelle de l’invisibilité peut fournir une optique raisonnée et précieuse supplémentaire pour aborder une série de dynamiques sociales.

**Mots-clés**

Invisibilité, méthodes, théorie sociale, visualité
Resumen
Este documento empieza examinando cómo ‘la charla’ que las familias de minorías negras y no negras dan a sus hijos se convierte en un deber para transferir el conocimiento sobre cómo ser invisible de generación en generación. No es raro pensar en ser visible como un bien social, pero esto no es tan sencillo cuando uno ocupa un cuerpo considerado como ‘otro’. Este artículo expone esta tensión para explorar cómo la invisibilidad puede entenderse como una dinámica social en sí misma, independiente, compleja y matizada al considerar la literatura que utiliza la invisibilidad como una lente analítica, proporcionando una síntesis de esa literatura para ofrecer un modelo multidimensional preliminar de invisibilidad que permita extender las herramientas existentes para el análisis sociológico. Esta literatura considera la raza, el género, la sexualidad, diversas representaciones del poder y diferentes sistemas sociales para mostrar un modelo que identifica cómo la intersección del poder, el afecto, la presencia y la voz se transfiguran fluidamente a través del tiempo y el espacio para crear una construcción social general de invisibilidad. Esto sugiere que el desarrollo más profundo de un constructo multidimensional de la invisibilidad puede proporcionar una lente adicional razonada y valiosa para abordar una variedad de dinámicas sociales.

Palabras clave
Invisibilidad, métodos, teoría social, visualidad