

# In/Visibility: Absences/Presence in Feminist Theorizing

## Introduction: In/Visibility in/of Feminist Theory

### Cluster Editors

**Ilya Parkins** is Associate Professor of Gender and Women's Studies at the University of British Columbia, Okanagan Campus. She is the author of *Poiret, Dior and Schiaparelli: Fashion, Femininity and Modernity* (2012) and the co-editor of *Cultures of Femininity in Modern Fashion* (2011). Her research has appeared in such journals as *Feminist Review*, *Australian Feminist Studies*, *Time and Society*, and *Biography*.

**Eva C. Karpinski** is Associate Professor at the School of Gender, Sexuality and Women's Studies at York University in Toronto. She is the author of *Borrowed Tongues: Life Writing, Migration, and Translation* (2012) and co-editor of *Trans/acting Culture, Writing, and Memory: Essays in Honour of Barbara Godard* (2013).

**Invisibility.** One of the problems of producing a feminist dictionary. How do you show that women's words and definitions have been lost when women's words and definitions have been lost? A starting point is to deduce presence from absence. The virtually complete absence of women's terms for males and male activities in most standard dictionaries defies common sense about the many centuries women have been in the world as speakers and writers. Thus one must conclude that these words and definitions (1) have been lost or suppressed, (2) have been expressed in subtexts or other subversions of conventional expression, (3) have been expressed orally but not written down, and (4) have been expressed in non-linguistic forms. Possible avenues of research thus include (1) the examination of 'lost' works, unpublished writings by women, and the records of women's communities and activities, (2) the 'close reading' of women's written work to discover its subversive meanings, (3) the use of oral histories to capture the language of women who do not read or write or are not likely to write themselves, and (4) the codes and symbols produced by women in non-print form. This dictionary includes examples of all these approaches.

—Cheris Kramarae and Paula A. Treichler, *A Feminist Dictionary* (1985)

This self-reflexive, archival entry from *A Feminist Dictionary* (1985) might be seen as emblematic of an almost obsessive preoccupation with in/visibility as one of the central tropes organizing Western feminist thinking. In/visibility has surfaced again and again as a shifting signifier of feminist desire for presence. Associating invisibility with absence, exclusion, and erasure, feminism, from suffragettes to "slut walks," has constructed visibility as an effective strategy of protest and resistance, where "becoming visible" is accomplished literally by taking to the streets, marching, and occupying public spaces. Deducing presence from absence has become a specialty of feminist historians and other scholars confronted with the question of "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists/Philosophers/Scientists, etc.?" (Nochlin 1971). Kramarae and Treichler (1985) above name different approaches to this work of recuperation and revision that has spurred new feminist canons and new methodologies, allowing us to re-

cover invisible, marginalized knowledges. In the span of time that has elapsed since the early seventies, when Linda Nochlin (1971) asked her question, feminist theorists have been engaged in the processes of naming and challenging ever new frontiers of the invisible in such spheres as politics, economy, culture, sexuality, and the body. In the eighties and nineties, identity politics was by far the most productive arena for the strategic deployment of in/visibility within the liberal, multicultural frameworks of recognition and accommodation that hinged upon the emergence into visibility of self-identified subjects of difference. These projects coincided with intense theoretical examinations of intersectionality, embodiment, representation, and subjectivity; all inflected with the internal tensions of in/visibility and poststructuralist deconstructions of unity and coherence. The primacy of vision in contemporary Western feminism reveals how much it is still beholden to its Enlightenment legacy of the intolerance of secrets, of the expansionist, colonizing mind in pursuit of clarity and classification. In fact, feminist philosopher of science, Evelyn Fox Keller (1986), calls scientific enlightenment “a drama between visibility and invisibility, light and dark, a drama in need of constant reenactment” (69-70) of attempts to pry open nature’s secrets, solve all mysteries, make everything explainable, and leave no room for doubt.

The two essays we have collected here respond, in different ways, to the persistent dichotomization—and value-laden evaluation—of what might be called “presence” and “absence” in feminist theory and activism. As Aimee Carrillo Rowe and Sheena Malhotra (2013) note in their introduction to *Silence, Feminism, Power: Reflections at the Edges of Sound*, “[t]he articulation between silence and powerlessness is almost common sense within Western culture, an assumption that is reified across literary, progressive academic, and activist contexts” (Malhotra and Rowe 2013, 1). The same might be said of the conceptual entwinement of powerlessness with invisibility and with a host of other figurations of non-presence: the ability to be heard and seen has come to signify as the foundation of empowerment. Consequently, invisibility has been defined as “a dangerous and painful condition” (Rich 1984, 198) or “an unnatural disaster” (Yamada 1983), at the same time as silence or muteness on the part of marginalized people has been equated with colluding with dominant

groups. A long history of titles in feminist history and literary theory, and indeed from anti-oppressive theories across fields, emphasizes the importance of moving from a state of absence or non-articulation, to one of visible, or audible, presence. Consider, for example, the many books and articles titled “Becoming Visible,” and especially those employing a variation of “coming to voice” (e.g. Bridenthal, Stuard and Wiesner-Hanks 1998; Jenings 1994; Bruegemann et al 2001; Donovan 1998; Torrens and Roley 2004; Drevahl 1995). In stressing the importance of a time-bound process of overcoming invisibility or voicelessness, these titles suggest that audibility and visibility are the conditions towards which oppressed people must necessarily move as consciousness is raised. Indeed, presence is figured as the ground of meaningful action; without presence, liberation or empowerment is impossible.

The description of a movement of the subject from non-presence to presence, though, is itself value-laden. The term “becoming visible” is analogous to moving something into the light: a concept with a clear Enlightenment heritage. Such a conceptual apparatus casts suspicion on—and even maligns—that which remains outside of the light; exposure becomes the guarantor of moral probity. We might ask what becomes, in this schema, of marginalized subjects who struggle—or refuse—to come into the light; what kinds of positions does their non-presence seem to authorize? Those who have “not yet” moved into visible or audible framings of self are often imagined as victims; a designation that not only negates their full subjectivity, but also pre-empts an important inquiry into the uses and potential meanings of non-presence and how these might articulate with the vaunted “empowerment.” Already in her 1977 essay, “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action,” Audre Lorde begins to address these paradoxes inherent in the contradictory valuation of in/visibility by the most vulnerable subjects who may yearn for the protective security of being invisible in a hostile environment (Lorde 1977). For them, the fears and threats attending the politically expedient visibility include, on the one hand, the foreclosure of their freedom of becoming and, on the other hand, the exposure to the scopical regimes of surveillance. However, at the same time as this apparatus of making visible insists on producing the hypervisibility of difference, it consistently obscures the problem of invisible privileges of those

with power who approximate unmarked categories of white Western capitalist able-bodied cis-gendered hetero masculinity. Again, such coupling of power and invisibility can be traced back to the epistemological conceptions of scientific truth and objectivity, which ignore the knower's situation and construct a universal view, simultaneously from everywhere and from nowhere.

The Enlightenment heritage of the concept of "becoming visible," or being compelled to appear, also indicates the way that appearing or being heard is foundational to the very concept of the modern subject. As Upendra Baxi (2006) writes, in the modern episteme and its classificatory systems, the designation of people as less than human "consisted of making whole groups of people socially and politically invisible" (46, cited in Hesford 2011, 30). In/visibility is deeply entwined with the possibility of modern subjectivity, then. But this connection to the taxonomic logic of Enlightenment modernity raises questions for feminist theorists in a post-foundational era: To what extent does becoming visible or audible demand legibility? Might a person—or a marginalized community—become visible without according with dichotomous logics of identity? Is it possible to be identified and incorporated—into the social world, into feminism or into other social movements—when what you offer is dissonant with dominant understandings of the category in which you are becoming present? The traces of the concept of moving toward enlightenment, which inhere in constructions of becoming socially present, signal the concept's potential accordance with inflexible identitarian understandings of subjectivity that can, paradoxically, undermine the supposed "end goal" of becoming visible, empowerment. For example, in Gertrude Mianda's essay in this cluster, "Reading Awa Thiam's *La parole aux Nègresses* through the Lens of Feminisms and English Language Hegemony," she outlines what might be described as the provisional "becoming-visible" of Awa Thiam in mainstream Anglo-American feminism. And yet, as Mianda shows, even this visibility came at a high cost. Elements of her work that were digestible to a feminist audience in the late 1970s—including most spectacularly the discussions of FGM—conspired to make a very particular vision of the "African woman" visible in the Global North. At the same time, elements of her work that advanced a nuanced and complex vision of the lives of

women in Africa remained outside of, or inconsequential to, feminist discourse. Nor does a provisional presence, as Mianda shows, guarantee ethical or full engagement by others; being visible or audible in a dominant representational regime might alienate or even violate subjects when it does not fully capture the complexity of their lived experience, or when the scrutiny and surveillance it can bring erodes the psychic resources that sometimes accompany non-presence. Mianda's essay indicates that the "becoming visible" that Thiam's work occasioned was partial and power-saturated.

This underscores another peril of the dichotomous construction of presence and absence: whereas a group or phenomenon might be absent from one context, it might be present in another. Or, if we conceive these as political positions that enable particular tactics, both might be used in different places and times toward the same political end. The conventional understanding of movement from absence to presence describes a teleology that does not capture the situational variability of absence and presence. Indeed, Frances Latchford argues in her contribution to this debate, "Unidentified Remains: The Impolitics of Non-Identity," that visibility and invisibility might best be conceived of as interdependent "modes of resistance" in LGBTQ politics, rather than pitted against each other as tactical approaches. As Latchford conceives it, the turn in queer theory and activism towards refusals of identity claims—and the deliberate construction of opacity or invisibility—can certainly be effective, but only within the relatively enclosed discursive terrains of "queer space and time." She suggests that the spirited, positive identity claim continues to have critical and political purchase within heteronormative spaces, whose smooth functioning relies on the backgrounding or non-presence of queer subjects. Even as it embraces the identity claim—that performative enactment that is so often read as a straitjacket—Latchford's account, in fact, helps us to move beyond the perception that visibility, audibility, and presence are static and limiting. If we consider such presence to be entwined with invisibility, opacity, and absence, then we can see how multifaceted and variable presence can be, even as we recognize its perils.

Staying attentive to the rich polysemy of in/visibility and holding ambivalence at the heart of our debates of absence/presence, we need to engage with concepts and practices of silence, concealment, and

secret-keeping to interrogate the symbolic violence of both producing presence and invisibilizing. While it remains vital to highlight the importance of inclusion, it is also a challenge to unlearn the negative value attached to invisibility and accept the presence of the unknowable. The spectre of invisibility may be an inescapable part of our condition, lived in the shadow of always present absences—ideological, spiritual, and material—whether in the form of hidden assumptions and gaps in meaning, eruptions of biology and sacrality into everyday life, or hauntings of our reality by contemporary modes of invisibility experienced by undocumented migrants, domestic servants, Nigeria’s kidnapped schoolgirls, Mexico’s missing women, or Canada’s disappeared Indigenous women.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps embracing complexity and contradictions in our own existence might help us reckon with the spectre of feminist theory’s own in/visibility in the present neoliberal moment, when spaces of feminist theorizing are shrinking, and when it is crucial not to forsake the belief that feminist theory can still be productive *in absentia* in different social, political, cultural, and academic sites.

**Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> See M. Jacqui Alexander’s work on making the sacred tangible (2005) and Esther Peeren’s development of the concept of spectrality (2014).

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