
THE AMBIGUOUS RHETORIC OF VISIBILITY AND INVISIBILITY IN WOMEN'S LIVES: JUXTAPOSITIONS, ASSUMPTIONS, AND COMPLICATIONS

A RETÓRICA AMBÍGUA DE VISIBILIDADE E INVISIBILIDADE NA VIDA DAS MULHERES: JUSTAPOSIÇÕES, PRESSUPOSTOS E COMPLICAÇÕES

Gender, Power, and Invisibility

Much of feminist scholarship has been directed toward exploring and understanding the diversity of women's experiences, particularly with regard to race and class (Miranne and Young, 2000). It is generally accepted that we can no longer lay claim to the myth of universal womanhood (Sanders, 1991). We argue here that in addition to the dominance of race and class; which have indeed been key determinants of how gender difference is understood and portrayed; the socio cultural and the autonomous subjectivity of women interacts with each other and with the spatial in different scales/locales (from the body to the city). Of particular importance is the ambiguous rhetoric of visibility/invisibility (the ability – or inability- to manipulate whether or not one is seen, unseen, or whether one occupies the intersection between the two. What surfaces

in these photos is the way that women present themselves to be seen and how they use visibility/invisibility to negotiate power and unearth the political and symbolic connotations that invisibility has in enabling the 'weak' to resist the 'powerful' (Scott, 1985). Observing women use their invisibility as a means of achieving tactical power over their socio cultural environments complicates our thinking about the performance and enactment of gender. It also sheds light on the ambiguous rhetoric of invisibility (Baudrillard, 1981). Here, we examine the visual culture of women who occupy different spaces, places, and positionalities. We foreground the value of visibility/invisibility, not to the neglect of the other aspects of the lived experience of women; but as a lens into something not typically considered. "Visibility is a (perhaps THE) most notable aspect of our culture (Classen, 1997). How do women who reckon with attributes of difference (race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion,

Loreley Garcia

Universidade Federal da Paraíba, Brasil

e-mail: loreleygg@gmail.com

Rickie Sanders

Temple University, Filadélfia, EUA

e-mail: rsanders@temple.edu

and age) manipulate visibility/invisibility to negotiate power and ways of being? Is it a conscious decision? How do they use hidden and unseen (invisible) spaces to achieve what cannot be achieved in public space? What does invisibility offer? What does visibility offer? Is it possible to be simultaneously both visible and invisible? Are there cultural differences – in this case between public spaces in Philadelphia and João Pessoa, Paraíba, Brazil? What intrigues us is the juxtapositions, assumptions, and complications we see when we look at the photos. These are the provocations that prompted our work.

Photography

Unlike the written text, photography allows us to capture people in places and spaces with an intensity and immediacy that gives birth to stories that long to be told. The photographs we present below allow us to ask different questions and in viewing them, fill a void in our mind's eye. Indeed, “. . . the advantage of photography is that it can conjure so much meaning on so many levels -- in the conscious mind and the unconscious mind -- not just memory, longing, dreams, and the immediate present, (which instantly becomes the past as soon as the photograph is snapped) but the intimate truths, shields, wounds, silent wishes, desires, shared understandings, fears, and confidences. The disadvantage is that there are things that can't be shown visually, that require words, . . .” (Behar, 2012:2). Such is the nature of invisibility and its counterpart visibility.



Figure 1

(Photo by R Sanders)

Figure 1 Caption: Invisibility holds unassailable appeal for those who live under the threat of scrutiny and oppression, but it is complex and paradoxical. Unlike other writers who have argued that invisibility/anonymity holds little in terms of contributing to a vision of a public sphere (Garber, 2000); we suggest here that invisibility is a 'weapon' for women who are members of marginalized groups. In this way, we can begin to understand human behavior in various guises, situatedness, and locales (Newton 1998:70)



Figure 2

(Photo by Lorena Monteiro)

Figure 2 Caption - Gender emerges from a web of discourses which construct women as desiring to be seen by men, a performative undertaking subject to the male gaze. The photograph as a mode of representation emerges from what is commonly believed to be truth. Does photographing something that presents an alternate reality (lesbian and queer spaces where gender is not performed for the male gaze) still represent truth or does it produce a distortion, a spectacle, something untrue?



Figure 3a

(Photo by Lorena Monteiro)



Figure 3b

(Photo by Lorena Monteiro)



Figure 3c

(Photo by Lorena Monteiro)

Figures 3a,b, c Caption - The private relationship hides a profound recognition and acceptance of the public verdict. Individuals know themselves to be judged if not by their objects, by their positionality. In the private secluded sphere, in the autonomous field of needs and satisfactions, below or beyond the social constraints, the individual evinces or claims legitimacy. . .(adapted from Baudrillard, 1981)



(Photo by Loreley Garcia)



Figure 4

(Photo by R Sanders)

Figure 4 Caption - Identity group affiliation and anonymity are both necessary to achieve the ideal of social differentiation without exclusion, suggesting that there is a relationship between being anonymous and being identified with or within a group (Young, 1990, 238-239). Attaching meaning to what we see as it relates to group affiliation is produced by a certain type of social thought.



Figure 5

(Photo by R Sanders)

Figure 5 Caption - Papanek (1982) describes the burqa as “portable seclusion” that enables women to move out of segregated living spaces while still observing the separation and protection of women from unrelated men. Women in burqas trouble the idea of invisibility. . . they occupy a contradictory space of both invisibility and visibility.

In a similar way, the South Korean sex workers (yanggongju) were visible significations of collective shame (not to be seen) and also (visible) buffers between respectable South Korean citizens and the US military struggling woman (invisible) negotiating the poverty of South Korea and diplomats (visible) fulfilling patriotic duties by keeping US interests engaged (Cho, 2007).



Figure 6

(Photo by Loreley Garcia)

Figure 6 Caption - In the lives of women, being able to manipulate when, where, and how one is seen is connected to power



Figure 7a

(Photo by R Sanders)

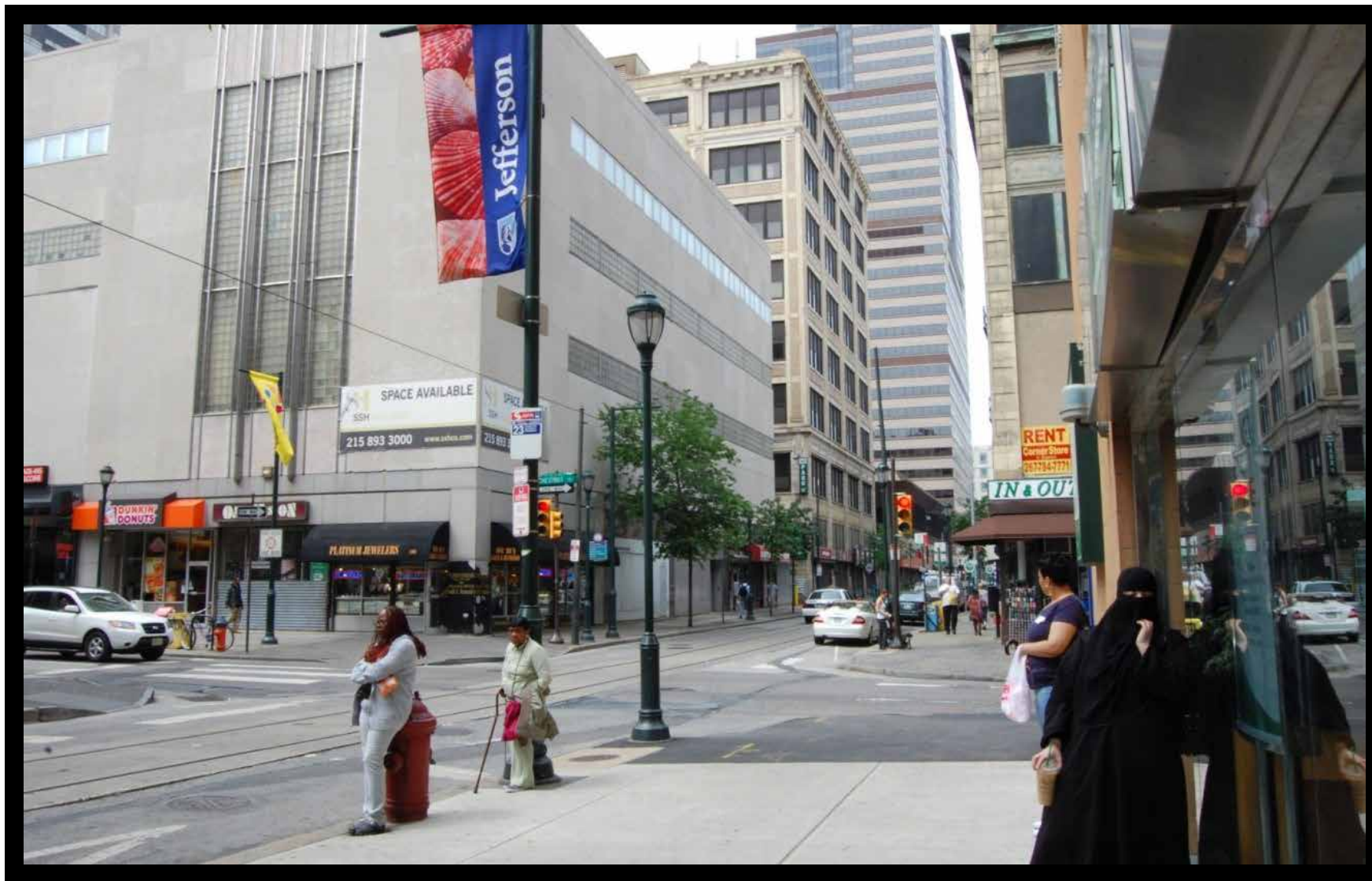


Figure 7b

(Photo by R Sanders)

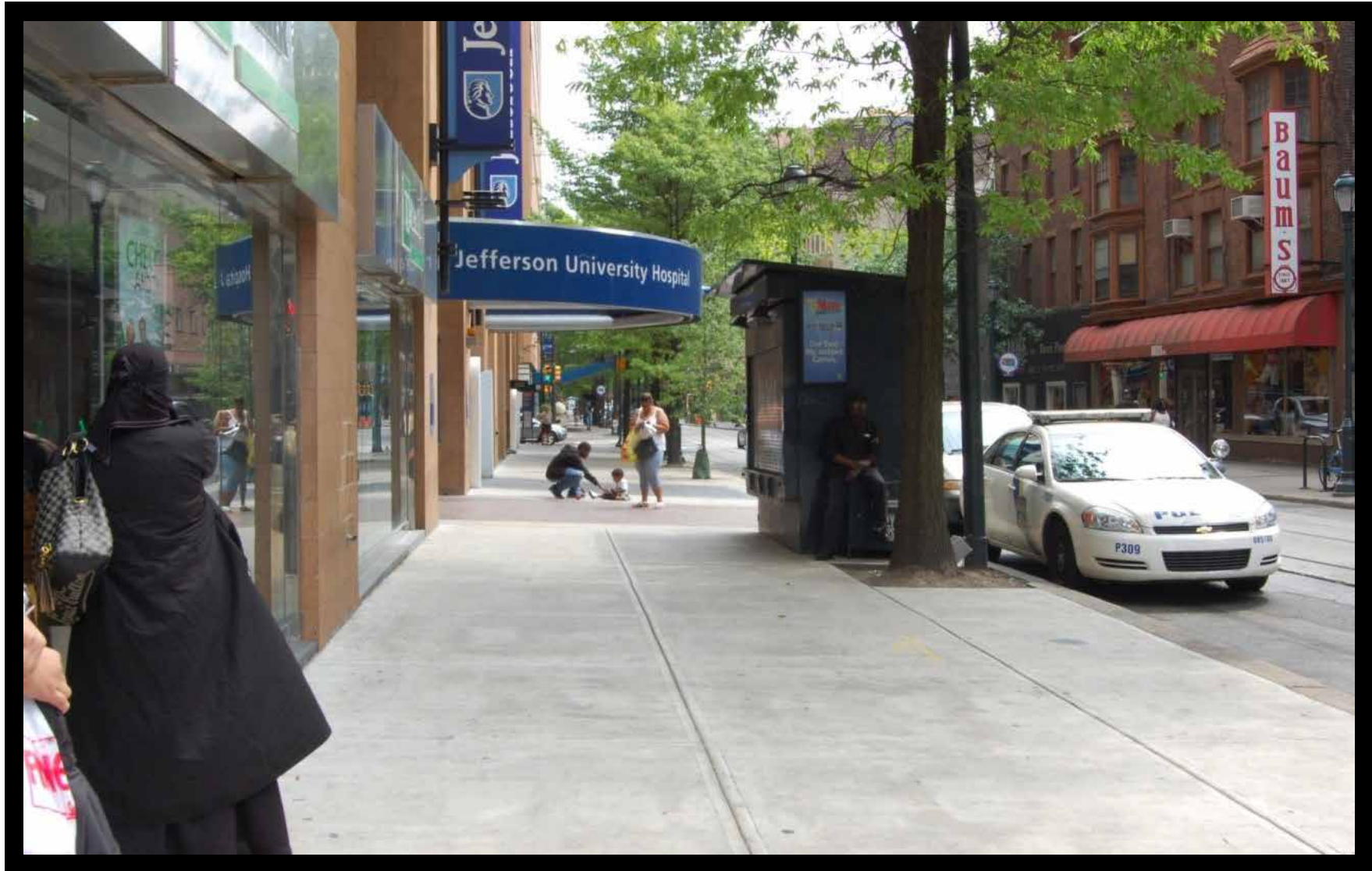


Figure 7c

(Photo by R Sanders)

Figures 7a, b, c Caption - According to Abu Lughod (2002), the burqa marked the symbolic separation of men's and women's spheres, as part of the association of women with family and home, not with public space. She thought these enveloping robes as "mobile homes," which were "supposed to assure their protection in the public sphere from the harassment of strange men byt symbolically signaling to all that they were still in the inviolable space of their homes, even though moving in the public realm"(Abu-Lughod, 2002:785).

To what extent is invisibility/visibility appealing in and of itself, and to what extent is it merely a survival strategy that women assume until more successful or appealing strategies come along? When understood this way, negotiating invisibility is largely a “defensive” strategy. For many Muslim women in particular being invisible covers up radical and subversive practices, such as wearing cosmetics and seductive lingerie. It may also be seen as resistance to colonial and postcolonial patriarchy and even a way of responding to the homogenizing force of globalization (Farrell, 2007; Nafisi, 2003)



Figure 8a

(Photo by R Sanders)

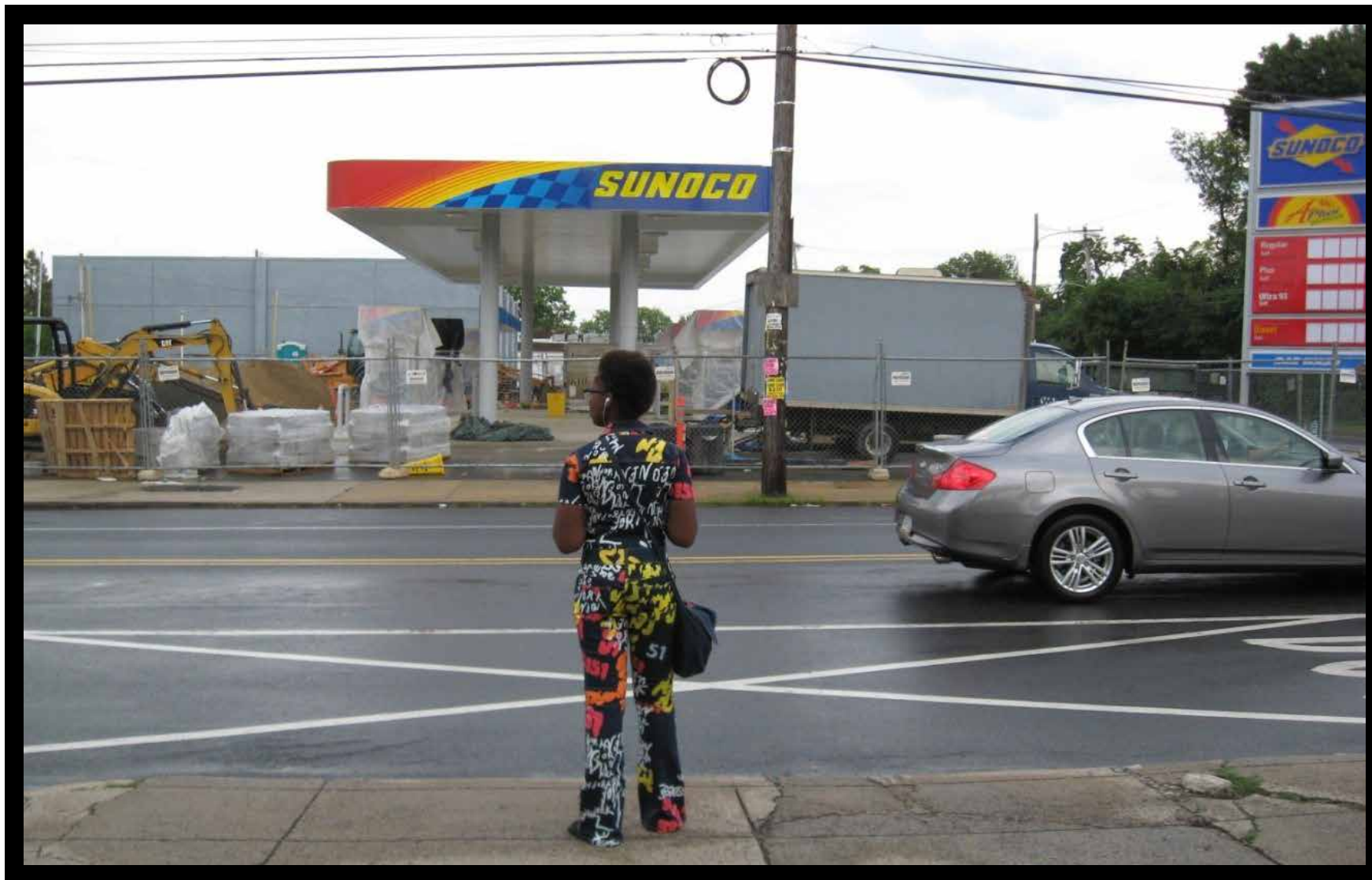


Figure 8b

(Photo by R Sanders)



Figure 8c

(Photo by R Sanders)

Figures 8a, b, c Caption - Is there a story here longing to be told? Where does it come from – age, gender, posture, place? What narrative does aging (young and old) conjure in the photo. Subordinate groups have developed an arsenal of techniques that serve to shield their identity while facilitating open criticisms, threats and attacks (Scott, 1990, 140))



Figure 9

(Photo by R Sanders)

Figure 9 Caption - Visibility lies at the intersection of the two domains of aesthetics – (perception) and politics (power) – the symbolic; something that is aesthetically impressive and semiotically relevant in social relations. The hidden is both visible and invisible for women in burqas. . . the ambiguous space of invisibility and visibility.

CONCLUSIONS

What we suggest here is that shifting between visibility and invisibility is a practice that women summon at critical moments. Similar to a camouflaged building (Robinson, 2012), a woman in a burqa may be visually present, while remaining socially absent at the same time. It is a tactic which holds its value for the 'weak' being both absent and present. It holds the potential to subvert power relations and permits women to become power holders.

REFERENCES

- ABU-LUGHOD, L. 2002. Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others. *American Anthropologist* 104(3):783-790.
- BAUDRILLARD, J. 1981. *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. New York: Telos Press.
- BEHAR, R. and BRINK-DANAN, M. 2012. Media journeys: Looking at People, Looking for People. *Visual Anthropology Review*, Vol. 28, Issue 1, pp. 1-12.
- BRIGHENTI, A. 2007. Visibility: A Category for the Social Sciences. *Current Sociology*, 55(3): 323-342.
- CHO, G. 2007. Prostituted and Invisible Bodies. In *Gendered Bodies: Feminist Perspectives* by Lorber, Judith and Lisa Moore. Los Angeles: Roxbury Publishing Company.
- FARRELL, S. 2007. Hidden Symbols: Women's Religious Bodies. In *Gendered Bodies: Feminist Perspectives* by Lorber, Judith and Lisa Moore. Los Angeles: Roxbury Publishing Company.
- GARBER, J. 2000. Not Named or Identified: Politics and the Search for Anonymity in the City. In *Gendering the City: Women, Boundaries, and Visions of Urban Life*, Miranne, K. and A. Young (Eds.) Rowman and Littlefield: Lanham Maryland.
- KENNEY, M. 2001. *Mapping Gay L.A.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- NAFISI, A. 2003. *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. New York: Random House
- NEWTON, J. 1998. Beyond Representation: Toward a Typology of Visual Behavior. *Visual Anthropology Review* 14(1):58-72.
- PAPANEK, H. 1982. Purdah in Pakistan: Seclusion and Modern Occupations for Women. In *Separate Worlds*. Hanna Papanek and Gail Minault, eds. Pp. 190-216. Columbus, MO: South Asia Books.
- ROBINSON, J. 2012. Invisible Targets, Strengthened Morale: Static Camouflage as a 'Weapon of the Weak.' *Space and Polity* 16(3): 351- 368.
- SANDERS, R. 1991. Integrating Race and Ethnicity in Geographic Gender Studies. *The Professional Geographer* 42(2): 228-232.
- SCOTT, J. C. 1985. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Resistance*, London: Yale University Press.
- VALENTINE, G. 1993. "(Hetero)sexualizing Space: Lesbian Perceptions and Experiences of Everyday Spaces." *Environment and Planning: Society and Space* 11: 395-413.

WALTERS, M. 2005. *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

YOUNG, Iris Marion. 1990. *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

BIOGRAPHIES

Rickie Sanders is Professor of Geography/Urban Studies and former Director of Women's Studies at Temple University. During her tenure at Temple University she has served as both Graduate Chair and Chair of her Department and was a Fellow at the Center for the Humanities at Temple.

She has published in numerous publications including Women's Studies Quarterly, Journal of Geography, Professional Geographer, Gender Place and Culture, Journal of Geography in Higher Education, Antipode, Urban Geography, and a Legislative Atlas for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Her current research focusses on images of the city/ photography/visual studies, urban geography, gender on the landscape, and teaching geography.

In addition to her publications, she has served on numerous committees and received numerous awards and honors. The Finding A Way Pro- ject under her directorship received the Eleanor Roosevelt Fund Award Special Commendation from the American Association of University Women. She was recently awarded the Association of American Geogra- phers Enhancing Diversity Award.

Loreley Garcia has a master degree in Political Science from the University of São Paulo, and began a doctorate at the University of Hamburg where she spent three years. After completing a doctorate in Sociology at the University of Sao Paulo, she began working at the Federal University of Paraiba in the 90s. She was a founder of the Post Graduate Environment and Development program at this institution, linking the humanistic vision to environmental issues.

During the years 2001 and 2002 she completed a Post Doctorate in Women's Studies at the University of Berkeley in California. In 2010, she was a visiting professor at Temple University, in Philadelphia, USA on a Fulbright Scholarship. She also completed a post-doctoral internship at Southern Oregon University in Ashland during the summer semester of 2010.

She is currently the coordinator of the Graduate Program in Sociology at Federal University of Paraiba. Her research has developed focusing on the theme of gender inequality within disadvantaged population such as peasants, indigenous peoples, and prostitutes.