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People Who Aren't Really There as a Field of Enquiry

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that sociologist Erving Goffman's concept "non-person" should be expanded to denote a broad field of inquiry. It proposes that "non-person" be re-considered as "people who aren't really there", and it suggests that looking carefully at people who aren't really there draws together insights about invisibility, silence, and ignorance that otherwise tend to be discussed separately or in piecemeal fashion. In this sense, people who aren't really there offer a coherent field of study. Bringing together examples of people who both want to be imperceptible and who do not want to be imperceptible reveals crucial dynamics involving power, vulnerability, agency, desire, and subjectivity.

Contents

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Introduction

> "...a kind of visible invisibility: *I see you are not there*."
>
> Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 16

A woman enters the stage from the wings, dressed in black, poker-faced, silent, trailing the musicians like a shadow. As the musicians bow to warm, welcoming applause, she moves across the spotlight, approaches the piano, opens a musical score to the appropriate page, arranges it on the piano's music rack, and sits down in a straight-backed chair to the left of the keyboard, acknowledging neither the audience nor the applause. Her posture is poised, her gaze ahead, her attention focused. She will maintain this position for the concert's duration, her eyes fixed on the score and following the notation in real time, her ears sharply attuned to the sounds of the piano, her movements limited to those necessary for the job: standing (but not too close to the pianist), reaching (with the left arm, over the top of the score), grasping (the corner of a single page), turning (swiftly, calmly, precisely, at exactly the right moment), smoothing (not all book bindings lay flat), sitting down (without a sound), and then doing it again, over and over, until the concert is finished. And when it is finished, she will not applaud with

the audience, nor will there be any applause for her. Instead, she will slip out as silently and unobtrusively as she entered. Chances are, she will not be paid for her work. Indeed, nobody in the audience will even know her name. Unlike the musicians, the composers, the venue staff, and the sponsors, she is not listed in the program, even though she is as crucial to the concert's success as these more visible agents, as much a part of the "superstructure of the performance business" as they are (Poore, 2019). In fact, most people in the audience will pay no attention to her at all.

Unless, of course, she makes a mistake.

We live in a world full of people like this page turner, whom we are encouraged not to perceive or consider. People who are treated as absent even when present, even when their presence is crucial to the successful performance of an action or an interaction. There is a word that used to denote such people – a word one occasionally still sees in books and hears in conversations. That word is "non-person".

"Non-person" is a term associated with sociologist Erving Goffman. Goffman was an unsurpassed observer and cataloguer of how people manage social collaboration, and his first book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, which appeared in 1956, is a classic examination of interaction and the maintenance or loss of face. The book introduced many of the dramaturgical concepts, such as backstage, audience, and impression management, that made Goffman famous and that have provided frameworks for innumerable subsequent studies in interactional sociology and sociolinguistics.

In a chapter on what he calls "discrepant roles" (discrepant in the sense that the person enacting such a role may disrupt or discredit an ongoing interaction), Goffman introduced a role he dubbed "non-person". His discussion of this role is brief; it consists only of three pages. A non-person, says Goffman, is an individual who does not "take the role either of performer or of audience" in a social interaction. It denotes someone who is "treated in their presence as if they were not there" (1956, p. 96). He offers "the servant" as the "classic type" of "someone who isn't there", and he makes a number of characteristically perceptive observations about how non-persons are not merely passive bystanders: they often subtly influence the behavior of individuals who assume the role of what he, in contrast, calls "those who are fully present" (1956, p. 95).

Crucial to Goffman's characterization is that a non-person is not actually invisible. Non-persons are people who participants in an interaction perceive and actively ignore: "I see you are not there", as sociologist Avery Gordon so fittingly phrases it. Goffman notes that social exclusion, like that accorded a non-person, can be restrictive and even oppressive. But it can also provide certain benefits. He remarks on how non-persons frequently are allowed and even expected "to

enter freely into the back regions" of social interaction, "on the theory that no impression be maintained for them" (p. 96; science writer Philip Ball [2015, p. 6] puts this in more intriguing language: "Invisibility", he observes, "provides access to liminal places tinged with desire, allure, and possibility"). Access to these spaces makes such individuals privy to knowledge and information that might be used to their own advantage, or that of others.

So being seen to not be there can be a source of both segregation and power.

Since Goffman, a few qualitative sociologists and anthropologists have used the term 'non-person' to characterize a variety of professions and people. An early article on cabdrivers, for example, discusses how many people regard taxicabs as a kind of 'backstage' and do things like bitterly argue with each other, negotiate shady business deals, or engage in various degrees of sexual activity in the backseat while the driver is present and driving (Davis, 1959). An article on "panhandlers" (people who solicit money from strangers on the street) details the different strategies that such individuals have developed to "break out of" the non-person treatment they receive from pedestrians who pass them on the street and pretend they are not there "by simply looking down or straight ahead as though the panhandler were an inanimate object, like a tree or statue" (Lankenau, 1998). One especially disturbing article uses the concept 'non-person' to document how some parents of appearance-impaired children in Israel actively deny those children access to spaces, activities, meals, affection, and visibility that they routinely provide for their non-disabled children. The author explains how those parents in effect re-zone their homes so that certain spaces in the homes (unlit corridors, rooms with no paint or electricity) become what she labels "non-homes". It is here where the 'non-person' disabled children are made to spend most of their time, separated from the rest of the family (Weiss, 1994).

Studies like these make it evident that 'non-person' can be a productive concept and can provide insight into how various forms of social exclusion are structured and managed. Despite this potential, though, the concept never really caught on as a broad framework for research.

There are several reasons for the lack of uptake of 'non-person,' and I will discuss them below. But I will do so to make the point that Goffman's concept 'non-person,' in fact, is much more than a mere label. Sociologist Andrew Travers (1999, p. 157) has observed that 'non-person' is a "cunning category". Travers uses "cunning" to denote what he sees as Goffman's sly blurring of Durkheim's concept of social order into what Goffman himself studied, which was interactional order. I will follow Travers in arguing that the idea of non-person is cunning, but for a slightly different reason: although it seems at first sight to be a category label, 'non-person' in fact is an unexpected, powerful fulcrum of analysis into social structures, interactional choreographies, and relations of vulnerability and power. It points to how un-seeing is a dynamic co-constructed

accomplishment, and how 'non-persons' – people who don't seem to matter – in fact play a fundamental role in determining the outer limits of who actually does matter.

A focus on people whom Goffman identified as non-persons invites attention to both the means by which social attention is directed and distributed, and to the social and cultural fields through which individuals may or may not emerge *as* individuals. Looking closely at non-persons directs awareness to boundaries – who counts and who doesn't? Non-persons reveal social processes of foregrounding, hierarchy, selection, and the distribution of what literature scholar Fredric Jameson (2013) has called "protagonicity". Non-persons illuminate the social and interactional strategies that facilitate, obscure, or obstruct access to acknowledgement and recognition. And although social disregard and invisibility frequently are equated with impotence and powerlessness, being disregarded or invisible is not always undesired, or undesirable. Not infrequently, disregard and imperceptibility are actively pursued and enacted by people who, for a variety of reasons, want to remain under the radar and be "treated in their presence as if they were not there".

This paper will discuss non-persons through an account of academic literature and popular representations that focus on invisibility, silencing, and ignorance. I foreground those three topics partly because these are the social processes that produce non-persons, and also because they are processes that have attracted the attention of a variety of scholars in the humanities and social sciences.

Invisibility, silence, and ignorance can be imposed on people (so a person can be invisibilized, silenced, and ignored by others against their volition). But as I just noted, invisibility, silence, and ignorance (which in what follows I frequently will shorthand as "imperceptibility") also can be self-imposed. If a piano page-turner, to return to that example, makes herself visible or audible and "breaks out of" her nonperson treatment, she is not resisting oppression: she is not doing her job properly. A quick Internet search for "page turn disasters" demonstrates some of the consequences that await such an unhappy turn of events.

So imperceptibility can be unwilled, or it can be willed. This is widely recognized, but a look at how people Goffman would call non-persons are represented in academic literature and popular culture reveals a consequential divide.

Academic literature on the topic generally approaches invisibility, silencing, and ignorance as sinister instruments of discipline and disrespect. The focus here tends to be on unwilled invisibility, and imperceptibility is seen as a symptom of

"social suffering", or, when the topic is surveillance, as a mechanism of domination and control.

Popular and mass media representations, on the other hand, frequently focus on people who *want to be imperceptible* – brazen fraudsters such as the "Tinder Swindler" or Frank Abagnale Jr., the real-life inspiration for the chameleon-like character portrayed by actor Leonardo DiCaprio in the film *Catch Me if You Can*. This attention to willed imperceptibility frames questions of imperceptibility less in terms of suffering and resilience, and more in terms of audacity and artfulness.

The different emphases between academic and popular approaches have consequences for the kinds of questions that are asked about non-persons. They each encourage some kinds of questions, and eclipse or block others. This article will examine portrayals of both willed and unwilled imperceptibility together, in order to examine what we might gain by looking carefully at both kinds of imperceptibility together, and by taking seriously what Goffman observed about both *the limits imposed* and *the liberties afforded* by the position of not really being there.

And I will propose that a focus on that position of not really being there can map out an area of study that supplements work currently being done in a number of disciplines, and draws that work together in novel ways that expand our understanding of processes of imperceptibility and how those processes both affect and are affected by individuals and groups in a variety of situations.

The state of the art

Let's begin with a recent example of how the word 'non-person' circulates as a concept today. In his massively-hyped memoir from several years ago, *Spare*, Prince Harry, Duke of Sussex and currently fifth in line to the British throne, refers to himself as a "non-person". This may seem a surprising label to claim for someone who is so famous and wealthy that he doesn't even need a surname, but Harry, in his book, uses the word twice. The first time is in the context of his marital status. "As a confirmed bachelor I was an outsider, a nonperson within my own family," he reports (2023, p. 535). And discussing the abuse he has suffered at the hands of the tabloid press, he remarks, "I was royal and in their minds royal was synonymous with non-person" (p. 106).

Prince Harry's embrace of the term 'non-person' to name his feelings of exclusion and powerlessness highlights the prefix 'non-' in 'non-person'. This prefix unavoidably is freighted with connotations of insufficiency and lack. 'Non-person' foregrounds the point of view that defines a person as such, rather than that individual's self-definition. It is not clear, for example, that the servants Goffman refers to as the epitome of non-persons would accept the designation as a self-descriptor. Prince Harry certainly doesn't: he uses the word to highlight the

perspective from which he claims others saw him, in his view, unjustly. By referring to himself as a non-person, Harry shrewdly draws on a cultural and intellectual climate that, since Goffman, has become saturated by identity politics and concerned with processes of moral and political recognition. In such a climate, being labeled a 'non-person' can seem the epitome of misrecognition, with all the attendant indignities and injustices commonly held to accompany that (Honneth, 1995).

That situation alone seems a sufficient reason to justify the retirement of the concept 'non-person'. At the same time, though, surely the processes that generated Prince Harry's feelings of being disregarded by his family and by the tabloid press are worthy of attention and scrutiny. How might those processes most productively be approached?

To do this, I want to begin by proposing that 'non-persons' be re-labeled as 'people who aren't really there'. This redesignation admittedly is somewhat cumbersome and runs a risk of being compacted into an acronym, PWART, which is ugly and not something I would encourage. But it does several things that retain the power of Goffman's insights about people "for whom no consideration need be taken" (Goffman 1956: 96) without necessarily connoting disrespect.

First, it circumvents the implication that persons so labelled somehow aren't people, which seems latent in a term like 'non-person'.

Second, it signals that people are "there" (i.e., they are present – in real life and in discourse), but not "really" – they are disattended to, ignored, disregarded by others. And/or they want to make themselves unobtrusive and unnoticeable.

Third, 'people who aren't really there' retains a focus on human beings, which is important to the argument I will make about how attending to *people* can facilitate the development of forms of analysis that can illuminate interrelationships between invisibility, silencing, and socially manufactured ignorance.

Fourth, the "there" in the designation also directs attention to context: where exactly is the "there" where the people aren't really? How is that "there" produced both through granular interactional practices and large-scale socio-cultural processes?

And fifth, while the designation unavoidably can be heard as dismissive, it can also be embraced by people who frankly want to remain anonymous and unremarked-upon in particular settings and circumstances. People such as page-tuners, courtroom interpreters, academic peer reviewers, personal assistants to

people with physical disabilities, individuals who want to cross a border surreptitiously or scam someone, and so on.

The literature on invisibility, silence, and ignorance

I mentioned above that the topics of invisibility, silence, and ignorance have begun to flourish in social science and humanities scholarship. Work in these areas is occurring in many fields, such as migration studies, surveillance studies, post- or decolonial studies, feminist and queer studies, visual studies, and studies of science and technology.

Three books that build on material from many of those fields can be taken to summarize the current state of the art.

The first is *Visibility in Social Theory and Social Research* (2010) by social theorist Andrea Brighenti. This book is a wide-ranging catalogue of observations about visibility, which Brighenti insists is importantly different from concepts such as sight, vision, gaze, and visuality. The difference is that visibility is fundamentally, definitionally, social. Visibility, Brighenti explains, is most productively seen as a "territory", an "ecology". It is always organized in a series of "regimes". In Brighenti's view, visibility is

> relational, strategic and eventual: it is relational because it determines subject-making relationships between seeing and being seen or, more generally, between noticing and being noticed, and recognising/being recognised; it is strategic because it can be, and indeed is manipulated by subjects themselves in order to obtain real social effects; it is eventual because it contains intrinsic margins of indeterminacy as to the outcomes of the various compositions of visibility relationships (p. 187).

Note how this characterization of visibility outlines, in a much more articulate way than Goffman ever did, how visibility *works*: how it arranges and distributes both limits and liberties, in addition to always being susceptible to the possibility of oscillations between being visible or invisible. Brighenti's formulation is explicitly indebted to philosophers like Foucault and Deleuze, whose writings on discourses and assemblages enable him to define visibility, in language inspired by theirs, not as a characteristic or trait, but, instead, as an actively fabricated

product of "configurations, connections, events, forces, mechanisms, associations, regimes, strategies, practices, rhythms, and situated activities" (38).

From this perspective, the work of a social scientist is to identify and disassemble those configurations, connections, and so on, and account for how they determine "subject-making relationships", how they are available for manipulation, and how their inherent indeterminacy entails a capability to "swing between an empowering pole (visibility as recognition) and a disempowering pole (visibility as control)" (p. 39).

Brighenti doesn't focus on people; he is interested in visibility as "sites, subjects, events and rhythms" (p. 187). A criticism which might be raised in relation to this expansive scope is that it arguably risks merely replacing Foucauldian "discourse" (which frequently, if inaccurately, is interpreted as "language") with "visibility" as a master framework, making everything about visibility, thereby occluding or absorbing all other modalities of perception. Brighenti does explore particular sites of visibility (such as architecture, mass media, and modes of surveillance), and his discussion of those topics is enormously insightful. But the general focus on "visibility" as an overarching phenomenon results in actually-existing people easily becoming a fungible example of one or several dimensions of visibility that an example about architecture or borders, or mass media might provide just as easily.

A book about visibility that is explicitly about people is *Invisibilization of Suffering: The Moral Grammar of Disrespect* (2020)by sociologist Benno Herzog. Herzog builds on philosopher Axel Honneth's theory of recognition, where recognition means "the visibilization of positive characteristics of the other and the creation of a benevolent relationship" (Herzog, 2020, p. 77), and where misrecognition (the *in*vizibilization or denial of an other's positive characteristics and the consequent refusal of a benevolent relationship) is equivalent to disrespect.

Herzog's reliance on Honneth's recognition framework leads him to regard being rendered invisible as almost always bad – the book's subtitle is *The Moral Grammar of Disrespect*. Herzog does note that some groups of people sometimes actively strive to be invisible to escape control and/or accountability (undocumented migrants, queer people, terrorists, and despotic elites all get a mention; 2020, pp. 120-126). But his book is an extended exploration of invisibility as a condition of "social suffering"; indeed, he declares that "a critical theory of invisibility...must be conceptualized as a critical, normative concept: a concept related to suffering and the overcoming of suffering" (2020, p. viii).

Herzog is concerned with moral experiences and the ethics of invisibilization – in distinction to Brighenti, who focuses on the vicissitudes of visibility as a structuring regime, and their political implications – and he discusses the role that

empathy, compassion, and, of course, suffering play in different configurations of invisibility. His focus on suffering, though, inevitably skews his analysis: he doesn't explore how invisibility can be a power that may allow one to transgress moral boundaries (Herzog's book is one of the few treatises on invisibility that doesn't mention Plato's tale of the ring of Gyges, where a shepherd finds a magic ring that makes him invisible, and uses it to usurp a kingdom), and it is difficult to know how his understanding of invisibilization might handle people like concert page-turners or courtroom interpreters, whose recognition as professionals depends precisely on their remaining invisible. One courtroom interpreter told a researcher, for example, "the best compliment an interpreter can get is, 'it was like you weren't even here'" (Heller, 1995, p. 367). Perhaps Herzog would say that invisibilization, in cases like these, is visibilized (i.e., recognized) *as* invizibilization and accrues recognition later, in acclaim within the profession. This would be true: a skillfully imperceptible interpreter or page-tuner is likely to get more prestigious and better-paying jobs. But phrasing the question solely in terms of recognition (deferred or not) bypasses the social expectations and practices that everyone engages in to not-see the interpreter or page-turner as they work.

Herzog's approach, however, is similar to Brighenti's: encyclopedic, learned, and fruitful. And the main point is also similar: being invisible is not a trait: processes of invisibilization "are always embedded in concrete societies and specific experiences and practices" (2020, p. 139).

The third book that may be taken as a summary of the state of the art on social imperceptibility is *Agnotology: the Making and Unmaking of Ignorance* (2008), an anthology edited by historian Robert Proctor. This book is an elaboration of Foucault's maxim that silence is an integral part of discourse and of literature scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's challenge to understand how ignorances "collude or compete with knowledge in mobilizing the flows of energy, desire, goods, meanings, persons" (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 8).

"Agnotology" is Proctor's neologism for the study of ignorance (he contrasts it to epistemology, the study of knowledge). Like Sedgwick, Proctor notes that ignorance is not merely a question of things people just don't know. Frequently, he points out, ignorance is deliberately engineered. Proctor illustrates the social production of ignorance with the tobacco industry's longstanding efforts to manufacture doubt about the hazards of smoking, and other contributors in the book discuss denials, evasions, omissions, erasures, and selective, deliberate

forgettings that have led to uncertainty and ignorance about things like climate change, traditional abortifacients, female orgasm, and white privilege.

Like Brighenti's book, *Agnotology* focuses more on the circulation of knowledge than on people. It is clear, however, that the mechanisms described by different authors for encouraging not-knowing are also relevant to the production of social roles of people and groups that are routinely not-seen, such as homeless people and undocumented migrants. They are also relevant to understanding how people like scammers and fraudsters can flourish, because such people manipulate the same resources that affirm authenticity to conduct forgery and enact fraud.

Silence and silencing are a major topic in work on ignorance, since the destruction of records (or, indeed, of people), the stifling of voices, the burying of information, and the knowing circulation of lies are reliable strategies that work to produce what Kosofsky Sedgwick called "a plethora of ignorances" (1990, p. 8, italics removed).

Studies that document how groups are silenced complement and extend the work on visibility I have been discussing. Brighenti's work on visibility regimes has almost nothing to say about potential differences between being unseen and unheard. He highlights phenomenology and "haptic forces" (i.e., forces that touch or seize), and he acknowledges that phenomena like surveillance or navigating urban space are not "merely visual regime[s]" (2010, p. 161). But everything he discusses (including baby talk, censorship, propaganda, democracy, and the public domain) ultimately is framed as being about "visibility".

Herzog understands silencing as analogous to invizibilization: invisibilization pertains to what one sees (and then ignores); silencing pertains to access to discourse. So silence is about language, and invisibilization is about wider regimes of (predominantly visual) representation.

The problem of delineating "the visible" is inescapable when scholars want to specifically theorize the visible, and in this literature, differences between being seen and being heard, or smelled, or perceived in some other way are dealt with either by ingesting them all into "visibility", as Brighenti does, or by qualifying them, as Herzog does. Herzog, in his discussion of visibility vs. audibility, interestingly appeals to Goffman, who preferred the term "perceptibility" over "visibility" to emphasize that interactions between people involve multiple modalities of perception, including sight, sound, smell, sometimes touch, as well as the tacit knowledge that draws certain details to attention and backgrounds others (@goffman1963ab, p. 64).

Noting this, Herzog continues to use invizibilization as his key concept, but he adopts Goffman's language of perceptibility whenever he wants to foreground language or other senses of perception.

I suggest doing the opposite: examine (im)perceptibility generally and specifying visibility whenever that is appropriate. An article on homelessness in Denver, Colorado, makes this point empirically: the authors discuss how the people they worked with appreciated being invisible and unremarked on as "homeless" by the majority of people with whom they interacted daily (Langegger & Koester, 2016). But when the city, in 2012, enacted a "camping ban" that effectively made sleeping, preparing food, resting, or storing personal belongings outdoors illegal within city limits, undomiciled residents were forced to relocate far away from the facilities that they until then had relied on to perform daily activities like taking showers, brush their teeth, and do their laundry.

One consequence of this relocation was that the personal hygiene of many homeless people began to lapse. They began to smell. And as a result, they became perceptible *as homeless people*, which impacted their lives in much more detrimental ways than had been the case previously, when many of them were able to maintain jobs, respectability, and a sense of dignity despite living on the street. Here, a focus on visibility is not inappropriate (a reason for body odor, of course, is having unwashed clothing and hair), but looking disheveled and smelling bad can have very different consequences for interaction and classification.

Empirical studies of imperceptibility

People become imperceptible – not seen, not heard, not included in interaction or accorded cultural significance – for many reasons and by many means. As I have noted, however, scholarly depictions and popular representations tend to portray people who are not really there in two different ways.

The first kind of portrayal includes individuals, such as artists, performers, academics, and others who are "canceled" because of their views, their behavior, or their work, and who subsequently lose their livelihood and are made to disappear from public view (Kipnis, 2017; McWhorter, 2021; Redstone & Villasenor, 2020).

More usually, though, this position of being made to be not really there against one's will applies to entire populations. Stateless people, and migrants who have exhausted the legal possibilities for obtaining a residence permit in the country where they live, but who nevertheless remain, without rights or access to many protections or services, are obvious and well-researched examples (Acciaioli et al., 2017; Ambrosini, 2013; Bjarnesen & Turner, 2020; Chin, 2003; Lago & Alessandro, 2009; DeBono, 2025; Genova, 2002; Engblom, 2023; Ferguson, 2021;

Jinnah, 2017; Papadopoulos et al., 2008; Pugh, 2021; Pugliese, 2009; Villegas, 2010). What is emphasized here are the structural, cultural, economic, and technological conditions that render certain groups of people vulnerable to being disregarded – to being "ungrievable" in Judith Butler's compelling formulation (Butler, 2004). These are groups who are made unseen and are unrecognized as citizens and as fellow human beings. They are victims of disregard, disinterest, and oppression.

People like these are the ones Ball (2015, p. 192) has in mind when he observes that "[i]nvisibility is now the stock description for groups and behaviors that pass mostly unnoticed or ignored in society. As such, it implies an absence not just of visibility, but of potency, voice, legitimacy".

The list of people who are portrayed in this framework is long. It includes homeless individuals such as the ones I mentioned earlier, as well as people who beg in public venues, and prison inmates (Breeden, 2021; Lankenau, 1999; Langegger & Koester, 2016; Trammell & Rundle, 2015). Small children are often regarded as being not really there in many societies, as are many people with disabilities, elderly people, women in patriarchal societies, and queer people – a positionality that frequently is framed in terms of vulnerability and precarity (Brekhus, 2003; Caballero, 2023; Camminga, 2020; Funder, 2023; Gormally, 2009; Kulick & Rydström, 2015; Muhammed, 2023; Newton, 2016; Siqueira, 2004; Weiss, 1994; Wong, 2020). War veterans, particularly veterans from unpopular or unsuccessful wars, or female and minority veterans, are frequently not recognised and rendered invisible in multiple ways (Hendricks & Hunter, 2019; McVicker, 1985; Padilla, 2023; Wilson, 2019). Anthropologists newly arrived in their field sites have notably been dubbed "nonpersons", and the entire fieldwork process has been framed as a struggle to transcend that initially insignificant status to gain legitimacy and something approaching full personhood (Geertz, 2005).

Goffman's blanket category "servants", which can be domestic workers (Constable, 2007; Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2002) or personal assistants for people with disabilities (Selander, 2015; Shakespeare et al., 2018), are further examples, and the literature on these people is a vast catalogue of injustices. Service professionals, such as health workers, workers along global supply chains in pre-covid times, or those who work in "unclean" professions, such as contemporary sewage workers in India (Editorial, 2014), are others.

This list can be extended with many victims of abuse – sexual and otherwise – by men with positions in powerful institutions like the Catholic Church, the entertainment industry, the academy, and the circle around Jeffrey Epstein (Brown, 2021; Farrow, 2017; Medeiros, 2021; Vela-McConnell, 2017). It can include non-white people in what scholars call "the white imaginary", which paradoxically renders people who aren't white in-visible through their hyper-

visibility (Ellison 1947; Fanon 1967; Goldberg 1996; hooks 2015; Mills 2007; Morrison 1992; Steyn 2012). And it can include indigenous populations who are rendered not really there by administrative decrees, discursive practices, and mapping exercises designed to conserve the land they live on as nature reserves or tourist sites (Gardner, 2016; Gmelch, 2003; West, 2016).

People like all those just listed exist together with a second category of people who are not really there, that is, much less well-studied.

This group consists of individuals whose profession or livelihood demands that they self-efface so as not to draw attention to themselves.[1] I have already several times mentioned how page-turners for pianists during concerts, who are essential to the performance and to the classical music business more generally, but who "do[] their job best when invisible" (Poore, 2019), are an archetypal example of one such person. Other examples are film dubbers – one professional told the *New York Times* that their job is "to vanish behind the original version, so you don't think about it" (Olsen 2014; also Borges, 1988; Mariano 2016; Thurlow, 2020) – and simultaneous interpreters, who a character in Mario Vargas Llosa's novel *The Bad Girl* tartly but perceptively characterizes as "someone who is only when he isn't, a hominid who exists when he stops being what he is so that what other people think and say can pass through him more easily" (2007, p.102; also Angelelli, 2004; Giustini, 2018; Torikai, 2009). Invisibility is foregrounded when sports referees are discussed, and statements like "I know I have done my job when I am invisible" and "At best, basketball referees are invisible on the floor" recur frequently (Dobel, 2012; Kazlauskas, 2019; Wells, 2024). Actors and models who work in the film and advertising industry as stunt performers, body doubles, or hand models are also there, but not really. "I was like the body they pull out", laughs one body double about her roles in sex scenes that stars didn't want to participate in. "Like the chicken dinner. You know – bring out the breast, bring out the thighs, the legs" (Knight, 2026).

Professional butlers, who should make a room "be even more empty" when they are there than when they are not, are a further example of people who willingly are not really there, as are stagehands who change sets between scenes, linesmen and ball boys and girls during sports matches, gallery attendants in museums, and *erebētā gāru* ("elevator girls") in Japan, who are uniformed and hospitality-trained women who operate elevators in department stores (Miller, 2013; Mréjen & El

1. Actors might be thought to illustrate this, but because everyone is aware that actors are pretending, they are very much the focus of attention *as actors* ("What I do", actor Ian McKellan deadpans in an episode of the television series *Extras*, in which he explains the art of acting, "is I pretend to be the person I am portraying in the film or the play", Hunt 2017:184) .The tension between an actor's real-life persona and the role they portray (Ian McKellan as an actor playing Gandalf the wizard, for example) is a highly salient feature of the craft. The entertainment value of acting depends on the fact that actors don't hide themselves when they work; on the contrary, they offer themselves on display, as spectacle, and invite evaluation and criticism of their impersonation, which also is influenced by other roles they have performed and are known to viewers.

Khatib, 2023; Taylor, 2013; TMZ, 2017; the butler quote is attributed to Cyril Dickman, who served at Buckingham Palace for fifty years).

People who ghostwrite books such as Prince Harry's memoir are another example, even though Harry's ghostwriter, J. R. Moehringer, has attracted significant media attention himself and seems to be the exception that proves the rule of more general anonymity, especially for those who ghostwrite political speeches, term papers, exams, policy documents, and supposedly scholarly articles (Bosch, 2022; Fisher et al., 2016; May, 1953; Scully & van Schendelen, 2023). Academic peer reviewers, whose effacement as identifiable individuals is critical to the entire system on which their work depends, are yet another example of people who are not really there (Biagioli, 2002; Borghi, 2022; Csiszar, 2016; Gennaro et al., 2026).

In his inventory of non-persons, Goffman did not include imposters, but it is clear that fraudsters, Internet trolls, catfishers, undercover policemen, professional spies, and others are bound by many of the same conventions as other people who are not really there, such as reliance on social strategies of un-seeing, the risk of sudden role-realignment (i.e. being exposed as an imposter), and being privy to secrets and having secrets (Abagnale, 1980; Baden-Powell, 2005; de Seta, 2018; Gordon, 1997; Hardaker, 2017; Herzog, 2020, p. 126; Li, 2020; McKinley & Rojas, 2016; Rimes, 2022; Morris, 2021; Vigne, 1982).

What links people in this second category is the fact that their professional success, in the broadest possible sense of that phrase, is measured largely by how well they manage to deflect attention away from themselves in the enactment of their activities. To make a mistake – to draw scrutiny to themselves and suddenly be "there" – would be to perform badly, even dangerously.

How people who aren't really there are represented

There is a vast imbalance in how the two above categories of people who aren't really there – i.e., the difference between unwilled and willed imperceptibility – are represented and understood. Generally speaking, people in the first category are perceived in relation to theories of power. Herzog's book, which frames invisibility primarily as an expression of domination and disrespect, is a good example of this approach. The same might be said about the literature on silencing (e.g., Dotson, 2011; MacKinnon, 1996; Maitra, 2004; Spivak, 1988). Literature on surveillance, even though it has moved away from a reliance on Foucault's analysis of Bentham's panopticon as an instrument of discipline and is debating concepts such as "sousveillance" (surveillance from below; Mann et al., 2003) and "synopticon" (the many watch the few; as in reality television shows; Mathiesen, 1997), continues to highlight imperceptibility predominantly as a

manifestation of power (Browne, 2015; Mirzoeff, 2011; Magnet & Rodgers, 2012; Wood, 2013; Zuboff, 2019).

The flip side of this same coin is imperceptibility as the essence of powerlessness. Being un-seen or silenced if one is a refugee, a domestic worker, a homeless person, or someone who is "subaltern" is framed as a privation: it is "social suffering" (Herzog, 2020) or "epistemic violence" (Spivak, 1988). Attention to such groups focuses on how they manage to navigate their lives under oppressive circumstances and make them more bearable. Concepts like"dissimulation" (Sözer, 2014; also Aljuran 2025), "camouflage" (Robinson, 2012), "subterranean" (Jones, 2012), "passing" (@goffman1963ab), "immersive invisibility" (@hackl2018a), "the invisibility bargain" (Pugh, 2021), "contingent invisibility" (@newton2016a), "politics of invisibility" (Charlton, 2019), and "imperceptible politics" (@papadopoulos2008a) are names researchers give to tactics of resistance. They are "weapons of the weak" (@scott1985a).

The category of people who aren't really there because they *want* to be not really there is much less theorized, perhaps because it is apparent that for many of these individuals, being controlled or being recognized is not necessarily central, or often even relevant, to understanding the social and interactional processes that render them not really there. Being not really there can also be a part of one's profession or one's goals that renders status, dignity, and rewards. It can be invigorating, and it can offer freedom from constraining gender roles, class expectations, and racial exploitation. It can be crucial in facilitating social, geographic, and class mobility.

Fiction is a rich source of material on people like this. Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *The Remains of the Day* is narrated by Stevens, a professional butler who regards his role as remaining unperceived as a supreme act of professionalism, emphatically referring to self-effacement as "a matter of 'dignity'" (1990, p. 39). A classic in the genre, *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison, is both a denunciation of racism and an exploration of how invisibility provides its narrator with a perspective from which to criticize both white society and the Negro intellectual liberals whose goal is to integrate into white society. Ball (2015, p. 190) notes how Ellison's narrator

> is not some meek individual cast aside or trodden over by the strong, but is a man walking always on the verge of bloodshed. He belongs to no tribe, not even of the oppressed, but is an outsider. He is, in fact, a descendant of the magic making juggler, the prestidigitator and trickster, the cunning thief and the mountebank.

Empirical studies are also illuminating and intriguing. I have already noted how many undomiciled people in Denver valued their invisibility as homeless people and became greatly distressed when others began to perceive them as homeless. Anthropologist Laura Miller observes that the self-effacing, personally invisibilizing "predictable scriptedness" of the role as elevator girl in Japan can be experienced by individual elevator girls as "a liberating metamorphosis" (2013, pp. 64-65). A hand and hair model who substituted for a well-known actress in driving scenes told a journalist that she enjoys not being recognized by anyone who sees her onscreen: "It feels like a fun secret", she quipped (Knight, 2026). In *Amar*, a documentary film about Roma pickpockets in Europe, a man who in his prime was known as "the king of thieves in Europe" explains that knowing who to steal from is his "gift from God". Serving a seven year sentence in a Romanian prison, he says that pickpocketing is "a beautiful trade. Why? It's like magic". Most people don't perceive that they have been pickpocketed until later, and no one is physically harmed. Another man remarks that pickpocketing is "an art" (Gavra, 2024).

The Jamaican internet scammers documented in Jovan Scott Lewis's ethnography *Scammer's Yard* are similarly triumphal (Lewis, 2019). The men whom Lewis came to know defrauded elderly Americans of tens of thousands of dollars through a lottery scam – they called up people pretending to work for something they called the U.S. Credit Claims Commission, and told them they had won a lottery. But to claim the winnings, they had to first pay taxes....

Lewis details the scam and summarizes it by noting that its "sheer sophistication" was "overwhelmingly impressive" (2019, p. 65). Using similar language, an article about young men and women in Ghana who masquerade on the internet as dating partners for North American and European men overflows with adjectives like "wily", "cunning", "crafty", "creative", "sly", "irreverent", "shrewd", "imaginative", "calculating", "fruitful", and "thrilling" (Cassiman, 2019).

Contrast this kind of exuberant acknowledgment of adroitness and chutzpah to Herzog's book about invisibilization as "social suffering", where none of those words appear at all.

The dimensions of experience that get highlighted in accounts of people who, for various reasons, actually desire to be not really there are less endurance, coping, and resistance, and more professionalism, virtuosity, pleasure, and achievement. Accounts of such people – especially in media reports and documentaries about fraudsters and impostors – highlight the delicate social, interactional, and psychological choreography that develops across social contexts and over time, and that builds consequential relationships of un-seeing and un-hearing. These accounts always emphasize agency, enterprise, and talent.

Focus on people

The three books I reviewed at the beginning of this essay all advance specific perspectives on seeing, hearing, and perceiving more generally. Andrea Brighenti's book is a proposal to view visibility "as a field of inscription and projection of social action, a field which can be explored as a territory" (p. 186). Benno Herzog's book is an invitation to view invisibilization as a manifestation of social suffering. Robert Proctor's anthology on agnotology is a bid to articulate how ignorance is manufactured and how it circulates and works.

In reading through this literature, it strikes me that the kinds of people that Goffman described as 'non-persons' provide a ready focal point for many of the insights developed by the scholars I have been discussing. Looking carefully at people who aren't really and the social processes that materialize them as such draws together considerations about invisibility, silence, and ignorance that otherwise tend to be discussed separately or in piecemeal fashion. In this sense, people who aren't really there seem to offer what could be made into a coherent field of inquiry and study. Bringing together examples of people who both want to be imperceptible and do not want to be imperceptible reveals crucial dynamics involving power, vulnerability, agency, desire, and subjectivity.

Comparing the strategies of artists who work under the radar (artists like Banksy and anonymous protest artists more generally) with the practices of migrants who strive to evade border controls would prompt careful consideration of creativity, ingenuity, and risk. Examining the practices of un-seeing fostered in courtroom interpreting or sports refereeing in light of the practices that promote the un-seeing of homeless people alerts us to techniques through which attention is selectively distributed, and how individuals can repel it or attract it. Eventual similarities between the processes of concealment that occur in academic peer review and the meat processing industry would invite questions about ethics and accountability in both domains. Comparing the traces left and things created by

people who are not really there (translations, peer evaluations, pork chops, works of art, washed laundry and cleaned houses, burnt passports, bankrupted pensioners) encourages exploration of the materiality and consequences of presence and absence, and the stakes involved in their production or erasure.

Let me propose some topics that a focus on people who aren't really there might congeal and address.

Repercussions for identity

First, there is the question of how invisibility, silence, and ignorance impact identity. What do people who are not really there – either because they want to be or because they are perceived that way by others – think about themselves? In at least one sense, Goffman again arguably got here first: his seminal observation about "spoiled identities" was that stigma operates by denying individuality (@goffman1963aa). By flattening out a stigmatized person into a character delimited entirely in terms of the stigmatized trait, stigma demands a response from the stigmatized person. Goffman's book *Stigma* is an extended discussion of how stigmatized individuals "manage" their stigma: they can attempt to "pass", they can "cover" (as when "the blind sometimes learn to look directly at the speaker even though this looking accomplishes no seeing", 1963a, p. 104), they may seek to placate "normals" and educate them, or they may become militantly politicized.

But there are also other ways of dealing with invisibility. A study of free-lance musicians that uses the term 'non-person' discusses how many free-lancers regard themselves as undervalued and disposable. Sociologists Jon Frederickson and James Rooney (1988, p. 221) note that although freelance musicians are trained to be creative artists

> Most...play supporting music for operas, ballets, and solo performers on stage, or provide background music for dinners or receptions. As a consequence, their technical skills are devalued by audiences; they often play music below their skill level; spontaneity in interpretation is extremely limited or impossible; they are anonymous to the audience and their playing generally receives an impersonal response; performances serve a functional rather than an aesthetic purpose; and players are interchangeable between groups.

These circumstances understandably tend to result in a kind of stigma that generates dissatisfaction and low self-esteem. And when freelancers turn to others in their profession for support and recognition, they encounter a hierarchy of prestige that places chamber music musicians at the top, and musicians who play in musical shows at the bottom. Hence, even among fellow musicians, many

freelance musicians feel invisible and devalued. They deal with this situation, note the sociologists, in several ways: by distancing themselves from their work and viewing freelancing as a peripheral part of their self; by reframing what they do as being a technician rather than performing a creative activity; or, sometimes, by embracing their non-person status and resigning themselves to being someone who "just plays the notes" without ambition or feeling.

Being not really there, however, as we have noted, is far from always a stigma or a privation. It does not necessarily correlate with or undergird a "spoiled identity" or low self-esteem. Quite the contrary, it can bolster and fortify an identity. Scamming American pensioners out of their pensions gave the Jamaican men in Lewis's study a feeling of superiority and revenge over people who, from their perspective, were undeservedly wealthy white oppressors. They referred to the money they had scammed as *their* "retirement check" (Lewis 2019, p. 139). Frank Abagnale Jr. (2002, p. 129) revels in his ability to con people, and in his memoir, *Catch Me If You Can*, he helpfully offers three tips for con artists: personality (be well dressed and exude an air of confidence and authority), observation ("pick up on details and items that the average man overlooks"), and research ("A con artist's only weapon is his brain").

Reviewing material like this, a comparative question presents itself: what is the relative significance for individuals, in a variety of contexts, of being not really there? To what extent is being a person who isn't really there an existential station, a professional obligation, a contextually-dependent status, or a bizarre, affronting aberration (as it seems to have been for Prince Harry)? And what strategies do people employ to either resist, encourage, or embrace the position? What do those strategies have in common, and what do they tell us about personhood, morality, and attention: how it is raised, avoided, deflected, and distributed?

How being not really there both involves and highlights a dispersion of attention

Second, a focus on people who aren't really there directs our attention to, precisely, the topic of attention. Attention is a concern of phenomenological philosophers and, more recently, of social scientists and literary theorists. Sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel, who has written several books on how attention is guided by social and cultural expectations, claims that attention is "arguably the most important organizational feature of our conscious life" (Zerubavel, 2015, p. 1). Discussed from a variety of perspectives – as "orientation" (Ahmed, 2010), the "distribution of the sensible" (Rancière, 2004), or as an "ecology" (Franck,

2019; also Citton, 2017; Pasquini, 2025) – research highlights how attention is not just a matter of perception. It is a terrain of tension and struggle.

When it comes to relations of attention between people, work by writers of fiction and literature scholars is also both pertinent and helpful. Novelist E.M. Forster long ago distinguished between what he called "flat characters" (minor characters without depth constructed around a single quality or idea – characters, in other words, who not unlike people who are not really there, in the eyes of those who regard them as such), and "round characters" (complex protagonists who develop, grow, surprise, and progress; Forster, 1927).

Forster proposed this distinction to explore the devices that novelists use to resolve the problems posed by a novel as a literary form. Flat characters provide a background against which round characters can stand out and emerge. Their flatness and relative insignificance in a narrative constitute a contrast that fuels imagination. Novelist Toni Morrison wrote an entire book about how the imagination of the white writers who founded American literature was lubricated by encounters with socially marginal and culturally invisible characters – she was referring to America's enslaved population. Living in a society where enslaved people were unfree but white writers were free enabled the writers to think about themselves – "as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of history, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny" (Morrison, 1992, p. 52).

In this sense of constituting an implacable backdrop, people who aren't really there are like gravity: imperceptible but felt. Or, put another way: "One mode of existence's deficit may be another's fullness" (Manning & Massumi, 2104, p. 11).

Like Morrison, literature scholar Alex Woloch has suggested that a focus on what he calls minor characters (which, for all intents and purposes, are the same as Forster's 'flat characters') reveals larger narrative and social processes of distributing attention. With clear relevance for understanding social life, Woloch asks, "What is the purpose and significance of a particularly marginal character?" (p. 13). And he also asks, poignantly, "How can a human being enter into a narrative world and *not* disrupt the distribution of attention?" (25, italics in original). In literature studies, this question is approached through technical distinctions between character-space and character-system, between reference and allegory, between personality and presence.

In real life, Goffman would respond that people devote a great deal of effort to disattending others. One way they do this is through what he called "civil inattention". This denotes a relationship, usually between strangers, in which

> one gives to another enough visual notice to demonstrate that one appreciates that the other is present (and that one admits openly to having seen him), while at the next moment withdrawing one's attention from him so as to express that he does not constitute a target of special curiosity or design.
>
> (Goffman, 1963b, p. 84)

Goffman contrasted civil inattention with the non-person treatment, in that he regarded civil inattention as a courtesy rather than as an imposition. As Travers (1999, p. 166) points out, this seems a somewhat arbitrary distinction, but it does raise the empirical question of when polite disattending turns into something else. To glance at another person and then look away is different from refusing to look at them at all, or from "simply looking down or straight ahead", treating the person as though they were "an inanimate object, like a tree or statue" (Lankenau, 1998).

People who aren't really there can be individuals who self-consciously repel attention, or they can be individuals who are persistently denied it. They are both a target and an outcome of what Woloch (2003, p. 2) calls "the dynamic flux of attention and neglect". We should examine the dynamics of exactly how they are (dis)attended to, both discursively and interactionally, and explore that flux, noting how it can be enabling and disabling, sometimes both at the same time.

The critical role that the mistakes and slips play in role re-alignment

A third topic that unavoidably is raised when we focus on people who aren't really there is the crucial role that the risk of failure plays in impression management. Any attempt at impression management can potentially fail, but the social position of being not really there is especially vulnerable to errors, mistakes, glitches, "misfires" (Austin, 1975, p. 16), or what Goffman called "slips" (Goffman, 1963, p. 45) that may occur, either through one's own actions, or through those of others who until that moment had participated in the relationality of un-seeing.

Being not really there raises the stakes of slips. When a slip occurs – when a migrant trying to cross a border with a forged passport is discovered to not speak English (Keshavarz, 2026); when a page-turner lets a page of the musical score fall to the floor in the middle of a performance; when a Chinese-language courtroom interpreter gets reprimanded by the judge for mixing up "he" and "she" in English (spoken Chinese has no third person gender distinction, and even

professional interpreters sometimes get this wrong) – those individuals shift from being diffusely invisible to being glaringly noticeable.

Slips can occur on the part of anyone involved in an interaction involving people who aren't really there, and they can have consequences ranging from the uncomfortable to the disastrous. I did research on people with significant disabilities in the early 2010s, and I worked for a while with a woman with cerebral palsy who sat in a wheelchair and who had full-time personal assistants who helped her with everything. This woman made it clear that her personal assistants were not her friends – they were her prostheses. They were never introduced to anyone, and they were expected to stay in the background always, emerging only to help her eat and drink, dress and groom, hold objects, remain comfortable in her wheelchair, and so on.

At one point, I spent three days with this woman and her assistant traveling by train through Denmark. At no point did I learn the assistant's name. Another time, I went to her apartment for dinner, and as we sat around the kitchen table and her assistant chopped and stirred and fried at the stove, she asked me, seriously, "Doesn't the dinner I'm preparing smell good?". During one lunch, I felt so uncomfortable eating with the woman, who was being fed by her assistant (who was eating nothing herself), that I breached the non-person treatment the assistant habitually received and I asked her, "Aren't you going to eat anything?".

That was a slip. It produced a noticeable tremor of discomfort in the assistant and a rebuke from the woman. "She'll eat later", I was informed tartly.

An example of a disastrous slip is an extended scene in Quentin Tarantino's 2009 film *Inglorious Basterds*, in which an American spy is drinking in a bar with Nazi soldiers. His unfamiliar accent has been queried by a German major but has been validated by a German film actress known to the soldiers (but who also is a spy) as coming from a remote Alpine area. The consequential slip occurs a few minutes later, when the spy orders three glasses from the bartender by holding up his index, middle, and ring fingers, which is the American way to signal three (Germans use the thumb, index, and middle finger). This subtle mistake leads to the spy's unmasking and a gun battle, which leaves almost everybody in the bar dead.

People who aren't really there catalyze anxiety about slips. They either do all they can to avoid them, and have developed ways of managing and mitigating them if they do occur (posing as a doctor in an emergency ward, Frank Abagnale Jr., who knew not the slightest thing about medicine, avoided disaster by letting the interns handle everything. He rapidly gained a glowing reputation as a doctor who trained his interns well by allowing them to get real practice; 1980, pp. 87-97). Or they provoke them, as did the panhandlers mentioned earlier, who "break

out of" the non-person treatment they receive from pedestrians by greeting them directly or harassing them (Lankenau, 1998).

Anthropologists Jason Throop and Alessandro Duranti (2015, p. 1067) remind us that when things go wrong, "we are often given access to cultural interpretations, values, rules, and assumptions that otherwise are taken for granted, unexamined, and unvoiced". Exploring how slips are guarded against, and examining the kinds of role-realignments that occur when they happen in relation to people who aren't really there, illuminates the inconspicuous and usually unremarked on ways through which some people are made to matter, and others made to not matter.

The role of secrecy, concealment, and dissimulation in being not really there

Fourth, examining people who aren't really there will tell us a great deal about the role that secrecy, concealment, and dissimulation play in processes of invisibility, silencing, and ignorance. Writer Elias Canetti has observed that "Secrecy lies at the very core of power" (1960, p. 290). This is an axiom that cuts both ways. On the one hand, studies of surveillance going back to Foucault's analysis of Bentham's prison panopticon all observe that surveillance is often covert; indeed, two defining characteristics of what sociologist Gary T. Marx has called "the new surveillance" are that it has low visibility or is invisible, and it often is involuntary; that is, it is gathered without the knowledge or consent of the people being surveilled (1989, pp. 217-218).

On the other hand, recall Goffman's remark that non-persons, by virtue of the fact that "no impression be maintained for them", often are privy to backstage regions of interaction and therefore have access to information and intelligence that people regarded as full persons are carefully excluded from. Celebrity assistants are an example of such people. In a *New York Times* op-ed article, Rowena Chiu discusses her work as a personal assistant to former film mogul Harvey Weinstein. Chiu notes that as Weinstein's assistant, she was "considered to be less than a person". "My job was to be both invisible and everywhere all at once", she explains (Chiu, 2024). This non-person status led her to see and hear things that she later used to testify against Weinstein in his trials for sexual assault.

But multiple vulnerabilities are produced here. An important part of a job as a celebrity assistant is that "you not only will look the other way when necessary but will also facilitate their indiscretions" (Chiu, 2024). When those indiscretions turn out to be illegal, the assistant's position as a non-person ceases to matter: Chiu wrote her op-ed to comment on the prosecution of Kenneth Iwamasa, the live-in assistant to the actor Matthew Perry. Iwamasa pleaded guilty to procuring the drug, ketamine, that Perry overdosed on. Perry's death transformed Iwamasa

from an invisible non-person into a highly visible and prosecutable criminal person.

Secrecy and concealment are not just impositions, however; many people who aren't really there frequently rely on them. Anthropologist Hande Sözer discusses how ethnic minorities may pretend to be assimilated, using tactics of dissimulation to "simulate the majority groups' beliefs and practices in order to protect the group members, the group and the group identity against hostile outsiders" (2014, p. 43). Anthropologist Andreas Hackl distinguishes this tactic of concealment from what he calls "immersive invisibility". Whereas dissimulation applies to groups, immersive invisibility, in his view, is an individual project. It is used by many of the middle-class Palestinians in Tel Aviv Hackl came to know, who are Israeli citizens. Many of these men and women strive to achieve "dual nonrecognition: unrecognized in Tel Aviv as Palestinians, they are also unrecognized among Palestinians because they have blended into Tel Aviv" (Hackl, 2018, p. 344). Immersive invisibility consists of habits like screening one's Facebook profile, scaling back political activities, strategically removing a necklace that spells "Palestine" in Arabic letters, and avoiding speaking Arabic in public places.

This kind of concealment is a desirable resource because it allows Palestinians freedom to access the city, gain employment, and, for Palestinians who are gay, to be gay. But it also is a burden, because it limits the freedom to visibly express one's identity, and it is always at risk. The invisibility that different people cultivate can also be exposed at any moment, for example, by nonchalantly being addressed at one's workplace by an acquaintance as "Ahmed" when everyone thinks one's name is "Adam".

Imposters and frauds are utterly dependent on secrecy and concealment, and therefore, they reveal the social strategies that foster belief, participation, and investment (both emotional and economic) in relationships generally. The three women who dissect their relationship with Shimon Hayut, the man better known as the "Tinder Swindler" and who bankrupted each of them, all recount how they came to fall for him (Morris, 2021). Hayut clearly had a playbook, one that consisted of lavish attention, expensive gifts, and luxurious dinners and trips. What is particularly compelling about scammers like Hayut is how they demonstrate the ways in which imperceptibility of their true identity and intentions is fundamentally dependent on others. Imperceptibility is a co-achievement; it occurs with the active – the enthusiastic, even – participation of other people. Comparing the tactics of people like the Tinder Swindler to how

people like the Israeli Palestinians described by Hackl maintain secrets shows both the force of intentionality, and its limits.

The role of authenticity and interchangeability in relationships involving people who are not really there

Finally, people who aren't really there compel questions about authenticity and interchangeability. We know that many people who are not really there seem to evoke powerful anxieties about authenticity itself. Authenticity is demanded as part of making them legible as subjects of oppression and/or of compassion. People who solicit money from others on the street are routinely met with the suspicion that they might be faking homelessness or disability, and journalists and Internet vigilantes delight in exposing fakes. People who claim Blackness or Indigeneity are equally vulnerable to suspicion, as is made clear in the outrage prompted by women like Rachel Doležal and Jessica Krug (prominent white women who led others to believe they were Black), or Elizabeth Hoover, a white professor who falsely claimed to be Native American. To be revealed to have "passed" as a racial or ethnic minority is like being what used to be called a "sham cripple" (Schweik, 2009) – it scandalizes because the action of deliberately moving down in social hierarchy makes people aware of social relations of inequality and power that "remain invisible, so long as their presumed naturalism goes unchallenged" (Goldberg, p. 183).

In his discussion of impostors, Goffman observed that "a competent performance by someone who proves to be an impostor may weaken in our minds the sacred connection between legitimate authorization to play a part and the capacity to play it" (1956, pp. 38-39). It is precisely the weakness of that supposedly "sacred connection" that ought to be of interest to social scientists, because the fake alerts us to the workings of the system that produces the authentic (Goffman, 1971; Derrida, 1972).

Authenticity can also be refigured, rejected, or refused. Rachel Doležal repeatedly attempted (unsuccessfully) to shift the terrain of what counted as racial authenticity by insisting that although she wasn't African-American, she *was*Black (Doležal, 2017; Samuels, 2015). Roma beggars in Paris claim that people who give them money don't know who they really are – thereby challenging the notion of authenticity as something people sacrifice in order to 'pass'. Here, being able to pass makes one *more*, not less, authentic, because the Roma in this group view their ability to dupe ingenuous non-Roma people as "proof of a typically Rom aptitude" of cunning (Williams et al., 1982, p. 323).

Historian Saidiya Hartman writes about how many marginalized American Black women at the turn of the twentieth century "refused the terms of visibility imposed on them" (2019, p. 18). Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, likewise, repudiates the terms of legibility as a Black man offered him by both white and

Negro society. Sociologists Dimitris Papadoupolous and Vassilis Tsianos discuss undocumented West-African migrants called *herraguas* (burners), who torch their identity documents to make it more difficult to deport them to their country of origin (which, by their actions, becomes uncertain). Papadoupolous and Tsianos interpret this act as a refusal "to become a subject at all" (Papadoupolous & Tsianos, 2007, p. 229; also Papadoupolous et al., 2008, pp. 215-216). Burners, the scholars maintain, prefer to be "imperceptible", undiscernible, de-individualized, and, in some senses, de-humanized.

An exploration of the relationship between (im)perceptibility and (in)authenticity in different contexts can alert us to the circumstances in which displays of authenticity are required, called into question, or overlooked in situated contexts; and the different consequences that result from demanding authenticity, disputing it, imitating it, or rejecting it.

Related to authenticity is the question of replaceability. We might ask what the link is between not really being there and the risk that one can be abolished or replaced. We know that page-turners are increasingly being supplanted by iPads, for example, that can be programmed in time to the piece of music being performed, and which allow players to "turn" their own pages using a foot pedal. Interpreters are vulnerable to developments currently underway in AI translation tools. Sports referees are being demoted in authority and replaced by AI software such as Video Assisted Referees (VAR) in soccer (Pulis, 2025) and the Automated Ball-Strike (ABS) System, which calls strikes in baseball and which is touted as an advance that will allow "player protest with ball or strike [to] be handled with something other than ineffectual arguing" (Castrovince, 2026; Lee et al., 2025). Academic peer reviewing is increasingly being done by AI. People who beg for money on the street in many places have to adapt to the fact that many people no longer carry cash. Largely unseen workers in industries such as abattoirs are increasingly being replaced by machines.

And so on. Philosopher David Theo Goldberg (1996, p. 191) has observed that "once invisible, it becomes much easier in moments of structural transformation, restructuration or socioeconomic rationalization, to take advantage of a more or less invisible group... to satisfy structural imperatives like cutting welfare programs or slashing education...". We should examine the link between imperceptibility and replaceability in order to try to better understand the relationship between correlation and causality, and consider how imperceptibility can delay replaceability (as in the case of Joaquín García, a Spanish civil servant

who managed to not show up to work for six years before anybody noticed; Henley, 2016), or hasten it.

A mnemonic for exploring people who aren't really there

I have two interrelated goals with this essay. The first is to show how literature on visibility, silencing, and ignorance makes it clear that imperceptibility is not a characteristic or a state. It is an achievement. Imperceptibility is discursively organized. It is co-created, and actively managed. It is a social accomplishment that frequently involves both purposeful action and highly implicit conventions that guide perception, affect, and demeanor. It is not just one thing (for example, social suffering), and it is contextual, in the sense that the interactions and symbols that shape imperceptibility also are recursively *shaped by imperceptibility*, fabricating and reconfiguring it in ways that are risky, and sometimes difficult to predict or control (Duranti & Goodwin, 1992).

My second goal is to suggest that people who aren't really there present an empirically delineable but largely overlooked topic or field that could focus understandings of visibility, silencing, and ignorance in ways that make them concrete and comparable. I have argued that the separation of people who aren't really there into categories analyzed largely in terms of power (unwilled imperceptibility) and those who are portrayed as clever tricksters and artful dodgers (willed imperceptibility) obscures important similarities (such as pleasure, cunning, and gratification in being imperceptible) and hinders our perception of the kinds of blurring and oscillation that occur between these two modalities of imperceptibility. A focus on *people* crystallizes how imperceptibility works and what it is for. In doing so, it can expand our understanding of the scope and the limits of regimes of visibility, modalities of silence, and the production and use of ignorance.

Two final examples can illustrate these points. The first is from an article by sociologist Melissa Steyn on what she calls the "ignorance contract" that reigned in apartheid-era South Africa (Steyn, 2012). The "ignorance contract" was a tacitly agreed-upon way of viewing the world, among white South Africans, that consisted partly of a denial of relationality between white people and non-white people, but also, importantly, of a "meta-rule" that disavowed any awareness of that denial.

Steyn quotes a white woman who told The Apartheid Archives project a story about when she was a girl and was instructed to go give the non-white African men working in her garden something to drink. The woman recalled, "I had

watched my mother and our nanny setting our trays with drinks or tea countless times before."

> So I put on the kettle, found the tray, a tray cloth, the cups and saucers, the silver teaspoons and sugar bowl, the teapot and milk jug covered in a pattern of delicate roses. At this point my mother came into the kitchen, I could see her becoming inexplicably angry as she looked at the tea tray, laden with the 'best' china. 'Don't be ridiculous!' she may have said – or words to this effect. (N29)

In her discussion of this story, Steyn points out that the mother's anger, at least in part, was surely due to the fact that she had to make explicit what she assumed her daughter already knew: don't use fine crockery with people who should remain outside your regard. The mother's reprimand explicitly alerts her daughter to that (non)relationship, and socializes an attitude of disregard. Such moments, Steyn notes, "not only educate the child into shame for not having performed her whiteness appropriately, but also teach anaesthetizing the sense of shame one brings on oneself when one degrades another. The numbing enables not feeling relationship, not desiring to know" (Steyn, 2012, pp. 15-16).

An example like this shows how people who aren't really there coalesce numerous themes discussed in the literature on imperceptibility: politics, representation, materiality, affect, and more.

To show this more clearly, and before I get to my final example, I want to wind down by proposing a guide that can frame a focused exploration of those themes in relation to those people.

In the early 1970s, sociolinguist Dell Hymes proposed a field of study that he named "Ethnography of Speaking". At the time, this was a novel approach to language. It was sparked by linguist Noam Chomsky's insistence that the essence of language was what he called "linguistic competence", by which he meant a native speaker's ability to produce, understand, and discriminate any and all of the grammatical sentences of a language.

Hymes pointed out that anyone who just produced grammatical sentences randomly, with no attention to setting, participants, appropriateness, or context, would be regarded as crazy, as "a social monster" (1974, p. 75). He insisted that just as important as grammatical knowledge for language was social knowledge, and he suggested that scholars investigate and document what he called

"communicative competence", which was the ability of people not just to speak, but also to communicate.

To do this, scholars needed to be able to describe things like speech acts (requests, demands, promises, threats, and so on) and speech events (the conventions that organize speech acts into segmented, recognizable activities). Hymes suggested a mnemonic to guide those descriptions: speaking. This stood for the following characteristics:

S Setting and scene

P Participants

E Ends (i.e., the purposes and goals of a speech event)

A Act sequence

K Key (the tone or manner of the event)

I Instrumentalities (is the event spoken, written, sung, etc.)

N Norms (social expectations about what the event is for and how it should proceed)

G Genre (type of event: prayer, oratory, conversation, argument, etc.)

This mnemonic was offered as a kind of grid that invited scholars to organize their observations about communication practices into frameworks that could be compared across contexts and cultures. It isn't an analysis; it is a map for seeing and listening and arranging that seeing and listening. You record men orating during a *fono*, a public meeting, in Samoa (Duranti, 1984). How do you structure your account? You watch a Brazilian *travesti* sex worker heap vituperative abuse on a man who has just paid her for sex (Kulick 1996). How do you organize your observations of that event?

The speaking mnemonic is a prompt to notice; it is a way to see. Taking account of features like setting, participants, key, and so on, allows you to delineate what you are observing, which in turn allows you to proceed with analysis – which can consist of anything from a breakdown of the morphology of commands, to a consideration of how funerary laments are changing in the wake of colonialism – and to compare the speech events you describe and analyze to other similarly structured events in other places and other communities, in order to see how language both constitutes and is constituted by things like politics, gender, class, race, age, prestige, and status.

The speaking framework has proven remarkably productive, and with various minor adjustments, it is still used today in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology as a kind of baseline for identifying, demarcating, analyzing, and

comparing different kinds of communicative events in communities around the world.

In this spirit, I propose a similar kind of mnemonic for organizing material around people who aren't really there. The idea, as I have been suggesting throughout this paper, is that people who aren't really there constitute a focal point that allows us to draw together insights about imperceptibility in ways that can enrich those insights and extend them to understand *how* visibility, silencing, and ignorance are produced in situated contexts, and also document how they both arise in and affect social interaction and social roles.

Just as Hymes's mnemonic relates to language, so does the one I propose relate to people. It is primate, and it stands for the following features:

P Politics

What are the political ramifications and possibilities of being not really there?

R Representation

How are people who are not really there represented (or not) in law, media, art, fiction, and policy? Who represents them? How and with what effects?

I Interaction, Identity, Infrastructure

If being not really there is not so much a condition or position as it is a relationship among individuals and social institutions, how is that relationship enacted? *Where* is it enacted? How do space and place influence context and interaction? How do participants in situated contexts establish and co-ordinate their roles, and how do they, together, accomplish "doing being not really there"? (cf. Sachs, 1984). What are the repercussions for subjective understandings of self as a result of these interactions? And to what extent, and in what ways, do people who aren't really there constitute a kind of human infrastructure that facilitate activities without being perceived to do so? (Larkin, 2013; Simone, 2004; Starr, 1999, p. 386)

M Materiality

What are the traces left and things created by and constitutive of people who are not really there? How do those marks and effects signify social relations, and mediate them? How are they employed to intensify or redefine them?

A Affect

Which narrative, visual, sartorial, and bodily strategies most effectively make people not really there? Which ones fail? How do people present or style themselves so as to remain not really there? What affects and emotions attach to making oneself or others not really there?
(This 'A' can also signal '[non-human] Animals'. Animals figure prominently in various manifestations of imperceptibility: the industrial slaughter of animals is *the* reason for the efforts of the meat-processing industry and everyone involved in it, to stay as far under the radar as possible, for example (McLoughlin, 2025; Pachirat, 2011; Vialles. 1994). And animals can also facilitate otherwise imperceptible people becoming visible and individualized, as any busker or street person with a cup and a cute animal companion can testify, and which at least one has written a best-selling book describing [Bowen, 2013]).

T Technology and Temporality

How do different technologies offer affordances for being (or being made to be) not really there? How do they instigate, facilitate, or prevent self-exposure? How are people who not really there more or less liable to being *replaced* by technological innovations. And how are relationships of unseeing and not-hearing established? How do they unfold over time? What is their history?

E Ethics

How does being not really there encourage or demand particular behaviors and treatment, and discourage or block others? We know a lot about the negative ethical dimensions of being not really there. But in what respect do relationships of un-seeing and silencing also offer opportunities for reflection on the very categories people use to classify others, and for and ethical engagement, for example as advocates, or witnesses (Agamben, 1999; Oliver, 2001)?

Returning for a moment to the story that the South African woman recounted to Steyn, we can see how the features to which this grid draws attention can provide a useful lens for analysis and comparison.

First, it is obvious how the production of people who aren't really there (in this case, non-white workers, but really non-white people generally) affects both the

people so produced and the people like the little girl and her mother who work hard to produce them as such. The *political* dimension of this relationship in apartheid-era South Africa is so glaring that it needs no further comment. By being *represented* as people for whom no regard should be taken, and in this case by being situated outside the house working and not invited into the house, and by being interacted with not as guests, but with stiffness, formality, and brevity (one can be fairly certain that the girl was not expected to remain in the company of the workers once she served the drinks, and try to converse them and get to know them better), relations of invisibility are materialized and reinforced. The consequences for *identities* of *interactions* like these for everyone involved are consequential, and hinted at in Steyn's analysis.

The flashpoint for the girl's mother's anger – tableware – highlights the role that *material* objects play in the constitution of social relationships of unseeing. Likewise, the *affect* of shame to which Steyn so perceptively draws attention. *Technology* in this case could involve fences and doors that mark boundaries between inside and outside. It could involve guard dogs or security cameras that separate and monitor racially coded-spaces. *Temporality* invites reflection on the long history of apartheid in South Africa and the laws, conventions, and interactional patterns that kept it invigorated and seemingly immutable for so long, and also on the way in which relations of perceptibility between white and non-white individuals changed over time. The *ethical* dimension of these relationships is also glaring in a case like this, and engages us to consider questions of fairness and justice.

Let's now turn again, as a final example, to the vignette with which I began this article: the concert page-turner. This is a very different kind of person who isn't really there than the African workers whom Steyn discusses. In the page-turner case, the *political* dimension of being not really there is much less prominent, but there is the fact that page-turners frequently are not remunerated for their services. They are never employees; they are either volunteers or freelancers. In addition, there is a politics of musical performance that invests heavily in presenting solo pianists as prodigies who do everything themselves. The page turner, one observer has noted, "disturbs our illusion of musical command [and threatens] to shatter the audience's suspension of artistic belief, where we disaggregate the magic of the sounds we experience from their more mundane physical and material realities" (Poore, 2019).

As for *representation*, page-turners aren't. Their names do not appear in the concert program, nor do they physically appear on stage at the end, as does everyone else who has been on stage – sometimes including stagehands – during a performance, to be awarded with applause. The multiple *interactions* that facilitate their not being seen could be documented through how they are not applauded, lit, or acknowledged in the program or by anybody on stage or in the

audience. Eyes are averted, notice is demonstrably not taken, attention is elsewhere. The extent to which doing page turning work affects the *identities* of page-turners as musicians or professionals is not really known except through a few articles and blog posts (Dias, 2023; Evan Thomas, 2009; and see Crosier, 2014 for more examples). But this topic could easily be investigated in ways similar to how sociologists Frederickson and Rooney worked with free-lance musicians.

The *materiality* of page-turners' presence: their dark clothing, their short or pulled-back hair and discreteness or absence of jewelry, the fact that they are discouraged from wearing perfume, which could disturb the pianist, and that men with long arms are desired and women with ample breasts are discouraged from page-turning because of the risk that their bosom inadvertently may get in the way of their page-turning actions (Schonberg, 1965; Neumann, p.c.). *Affect*: page-turners are careful to display none, and the only affect they predictably incite in players is anger and frustration if something goes wrong, or humor: a sketch by the comedian and pianist Victor Borge that can be seen on YouTube puts a page-turner in a central role in his performance to prompt laughter at the many things that can go wrong.[2](Which raises another point about people who aren't really there: when they do get visibilized in popular culture, the point of making them visible seems often to be to either evoke pity, or humor – characteristics that E.M. Forster identified as ones that epitomize flat characters).

Technology looms as a threat to page-turners, as I mentioned above, and questions of *temporality* point us to the origins of the role in classical music performance, its gendered dimensions, and its future. Finally, page-turners as people who aren't really there invite us to ask questions about the *ethics* of not recognizing people who have been instrumental for the successful performance of concerts for the past five hundred years, since the invention of keyboard instruments like the organ and the harpsichord in the 14^th^ and 15^th^ centuries.

What is gained by comparing these two seemingly vastly dissimilar cases of social imperceptibility? We can ask what the differences might be between being represented by racist stereotypes and not being represented at all. Questions of comportment arise: both the comportment of white South Africans in relation to non-white South Africans and the comportment of audiences and players in relation to page-turners. How is imperceptibility in both cases accomplished? What kinds of gratification does it give different people? What is the role of tacit knowledge in fabricating imperceptibility, and when does it become necessary to make that tacit knowledge explicit? Both cases provoke anger if a slip occurs. How does anger (and other emotions, like shame, or fear, or laughter) police boundaries of perceptibility? We know what happened politically as a result of apartheid. What would happen if page-turners decided to unionize? Go on strike?

2. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LWqFaGwNCMU

How is the political intertwined with and materialized in relations that produce the imperceptibility of different people in different contexts? The role of silence, and breaking silence. The "plethora of ignorances" that facilitate both not-seeing and not being seen. Socialization, both to not perceive and not be perceived. The role of politeness in accomplishing imperceptibility. The consequences of role re-alignment. The stakes involved for everyone.

These are all questions raised implicitly or explicitly whenever people who aren't really there are discussed in academic literature and popular and fictional representations. My suggestion is to see those questions as constituting a coherent field of study, and using a focus on people who aren't really there to articulate them, refine them, and answer them in ways that can mobilize complexities and comparisons. And in doing so, to reveal something fundamental about social life.

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