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Not-so-subtle subtleties: undocumented migrant (in)visibility, (im)mobility and Dutch public spaces as sites of embodied racialization

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ABSTRACT

We explore the nuances of living while undocumented in the Netherlands, focusing on the processes of (in)visibility and (im)mobility in the public sphere. We conceptualize (in)visibility as dialectical and multilayered, with relational, political, strategic and processual dimensions. (Im)mobility is conceptualized as a resource and is interlinked with (in)visibility. Both concepts are understood to be defined by social relations, which necessitate the analytical centering of ‘race’. In order to investigate the subtleties of undocumented migrants’ public experiences, we examine how racialization is (1) embodied in prejudiced surveillance, (2) experienced by undocumented migrants as racialized individuals, and (3) resisted through the exercise of strategic (in)visibility. We argue that strategic invisibility can result in self-inflicted immobilization due to an amplified perception of risk. Instances of strategic visibility are explored, showing the creation of discursive spaces and informal cooperation between migrant-led collectives and street-level actors. We conclude by stating that asymmetries in visibility create a different urban landscape for undocumented migrants, specifically one that is limited and mined with risks.

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Introduction

The migration studies field has consistently been the site of theoretical and paradigmatic shifts that produced contrasting perspectives on the field’s orientation, domain, and the analytical relevance of particular issues. One such shift is the postcolonial turn, which underlines the necessity of situating the study of migration within colonial histories since they continue to be ‘fundamental to contemporary migrations, mobilities, immobilities, receptions, and social dynamics’ (Mayblin and Turner 2020, 24). The academic engagement with postcolonial perspectives is simultaneous with current public discourses on race and colonial relations, which have arguably yielded progress. Recent instances include the Dutch Government’s 2022 apology for the Netherlands’ role in slavery

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and the Dutch Central Bureau of Statistics dropping of the ‘western/non-western migration background’ census classification in 2022 (CBS 2022). This came after the 2021 resignation of the Dutch Government over a scandal that revealed the Tax and Customs Authority used a model that designated some beneficiaries of a migratory background as ‘high-risk’ of fraud (Twee Kamer 2020). While these developments are in the positive direction in the confrontation of racism, both public and academic debates face critiques over the absence of or unnuanced engagement with contemporary forms of coloniality. The postcolonial turn has inquired into the field’s approach to racialization, criticizing approaches that obscure the analytical importance of factors, such as race, and uncritically engage with social relations. Such reductionism risks reinforcing the very structures that engender undocumented migrants’ precarious conditions.

This paper examines the nuances of undocumented migrants’ daily lives in the Netherlands. Focusing on (in)visibility and (im)mobility in Dutch public spaces, we argue that a nuanced understanding requires critically engaging with the social relations that define their experiences. Social relations, often racialized, influence the perception of migrants in public spaces. In turn, they also affect how migrants navigate these spaces, being aware of the meanings attached to some perceptions. We examine the workings of the racialized gaze, its impact on surveillance, mobility control and undocumented migrants’ experiences, highlighting migrants’ agency in their instrumentalization of (in)visibility and (im)mobility. We use ‘strategies’ to describe migrants’ calculated decisions to in/visibilize or im/mobilize themselves based on their evaluations of opportunities and perceived risks. Based on a conceptualization of (in)visibility and (im)mobility as socially-defined multilayered concepts, we contribute to the field by proposing a synthesized conceptualization of (in)visibility that encompasses the forced invisibility, hypervisibility, strategic instrumentalization of in/visibility, and the convergence with (im)mobility. Analyses of strategic (in)visibility in European contexts are minimal and (in)visibility and (im)mobility are usually presented separately.

We start by conceptualizing (in)visibility and discussing its convergence with racialization and (im)mobility. We explore how this racialized gaze is embodied, experienced, and resisted: embodied through the functioning of surveillance and prejudiced mobility control, experienced by undocumented migrants affecting their public presence, and resisted through undocumented migrants’ strategic exercise (in)visibility – or the strategies of instrumentalizing of (in)visibility and (im)mobility. Next, we explain the significance of race’s analytical value in specific contexts, such as the one examined in this article, as it represents a contextual constraint for participants. Following the discussion of the methodological approach, the article presents the main results demonstrating the convergence of race, visibility, and mobility in the public sphere, the use of strategic (in)visibility and consequences for (im)mobility, followed by exploring instances of strategic visibility and interactions with street-level authorities.

**Conceptualizing (in)visibility: the racialized gaze embodied, experienced, and resisted**

**Public visibility, surveillance, and the gaze embodied:**

‘Going out in public’ is an aspect of daily life that entails entering public spaces, engaging with the environment, seeing and being seen, and moving and staying still. Focusing on
the spatial dimension, the public sphere is where (in)visibility and (im)mobility occur. As Wittenberg (2002) explains, venturing ‘out in public’ entails being subjected to ‘conditions of visibility’ in which ‘we make ourselves into visible bodies’ (428). As visible bodies, individuals become objects of social perception and institutional gazes, linking both ‘bodies’ and ‘spaces’ to contextual social relations and discursive practices. There is increased interest in the analytical value of (in)visibility in social sciences, with scholars like Brighenti (2007) calling for its recognition as a primary sociological category. Scholars broadly accept that visibility extends beyond the empirical dichotomy of what is ‘seen’ or ‘concealed.’ We base our conceptualization of (in)visibility on Brighenti’s (2010) comprehensive work, in which he defines visibility as ‘inherently ambiguous, highly dependent upon contexts and complex social, technical and political arrangements which could be termed ‘regimes of visibility’ (3). We conceptualize (in)visibility as multilayered, with relational, political, strategic, and processual dimensions. (In)visibility is relational as social relations define it. It is political because power dynamics and institutional practices influence it. It can be instrumentalized by individuals and governments as a tool, making it strategic. Finally, it is processual because of its dynamic production through social practices.

The migration field had traditionally been informed primarily by a Foucauldian approach to (in)visibility, in which visibility is a tool of control that, enabled by surveillance, facilitates governmentality through increased knowledge of a population (Tazzioli and Walters 2016). Surveillance expands the state’s ability to ‘visibilize’ subjects, allowing it to exert control (Brighenti 2010). Surveilling institutions’ power stems from their ability to subdue anonymity, reducing the ‘anonymous bystander’ to an ‘embodied object of the gaze’ (Wittenberg 2002). Public surveillance can be technological, such as using security cameras, or rely on law enforcement, who can ‘examine and identify’ individuals (Brighenti 2010). The resulting ‘surveillance gaze’ is sufficient to influence behaviour, exemplifying Foucault’s concept of the panopticon, in which visibility is described as a trap (Foucault 1977). As Brighenti (2007) explains, awareness of ‘one’s visibility status’ essentially ‘influences one’s behavior’, making it disempowering (336). Surveillance does not need ubiquitous control to function as it depends on awareness of its existence (Brighenti 2007). Deanonymization through identification can be detrimental for undocumented migrants, possibly leading to imprisonment or deportation, making awareness of the surveillance gaze analytically important.

Disproportionately targeting specific communities by surveillance mechanisms contributes to undocumented migrants’ vulnerability. The state’s control hinges upon its ability to identify, sort, and dissect bodies (Brighenti 2007). Visible physical attributes can be the basis for ‘sorting’ individuals based on constructed categories that receive differential treatment. Biases are apparent in the functioning of these mechanisms, where perceptions are associated with identities such as class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, (dis)ability, or race (Villegas and Simmons 2010). These perceived associations are often subjective, attaching discursive values to certain attributes (Leinonen and Toivanen 2014). Targeting and exclusion manifest overlapping systems of oppression that produce and reinforce adverse meanings attached to certain characteristics (Møller 2014). In the specific context of migrants, the racialized perception of physical characteristics, such as skin colour, is usually a primary reason for targeting (Villegas and Simmons 2010). This entangles race with the workings of the gaze and intertwines
control mechanisms with processes of othering, basing exclusion on discursive constructions of the ‘other’. Such racialized constructions assume ‘whiteness’ to be the ‘norm’ and those who visually deviate from it are perceived as foreign (Guðjónsdóttir 2014). While contextually contingent, the majority’s racialized gaze often associates the ‘other’ with foreignness, being working class, inassimilability, unskillfulness and illegality (Bonnet and Caillault 2015; De Genova 2018; Guðjónsdóttir 2014; Leinonen and Toivanen 2014; Møller 2014). The association with illegality is relevant to the study’s context, as Tudor (2018) explains: “illegal” immigrants are commonly assumed to be non-white, and typically only non-white immigrants are suspected of being “illegal” (877). The assumption of convergence between racialized migrants and illegality can materialize in the form of racial prejudice, with physical attributes serving as grounds for suspicion of illegality, warranting further investigation.

**(In)visibility’s convergence with (im)mobility and the gaze experienced:**

We discussed how the public sphere constitutes a site of converging dynamics, where (racialized) public visibility, surveillance, and control mechanisms intersect. Analysis of how undocumented migrants experience racialization in public spaces requires unpacking the relationship between (in)visibility and (im)mobility. Both concepts are interlinked, are influenced by the same social relations, and their spatial dimensions often co-occur. The public sphere is where movement, in its most rudimentary form, occurs through bodies’ actual movement from point A to point B. Spatial movement and visibility are often mutually occurring, where individuals are visible as they move through public spaces or invisible if they are immobilized or confined to a private place. Bodies are objectified by the surveillance gaze when moving and visible. Mobility, however, is not only limited to empirical movement. Based on Cresswell (2010), we conceptualize (im)mobility as a resource, with unequal degrees of access determined by power relations. Societal hierarchies define the ability and freedom to exercise mobility and its nature, varying in comfort, speed, and ease (Cresswell 2010).

The state has authority over regulating access to mobility, which it enforces through ‘mobility frictions’ that control, curtail, and stop mobility (Cresswell 2010). Stopping movement can also be more indefinite in the form of detention (Ahmed 2007). Surveillance capabilities enable the erection of physical frictions, such as border checks or traffic stops, which aim to sort individuals and identify ‘incorrect’ or ‘suspicious’ mobilities (Cresswell 2010). Migrants can encounter state representatives, such as police officers, in mobility frictions. These representatives, or ‘street-level bureaucrats’, are responsible for enforcement and have the autonomy to exercise a wide degree of discretion (Keiser 2010). Decisions made concerning the individuals they encounter can be influenced by prejudicial inclinations, ideologies, personal beliefs, and sociocultural constructions (Keiser 2010). Since what is deemed ‘suspicious’ can be motivated by racial prejudices, frictions can pose a risk for migrants racialized as non-white.

Policing of public spaces is regulated by Dutch law, including when officials are allowed to ask for identification. Carrying identification is compulsory in the Netherlands and can be requested by police officers, public transport ticket inspectors, and special enforcement in situations of traffic management, public order maintenance, and criminal investigations (Ministerie van Algemene Zaken 2022a). Undocumented
migrants can reduce the risk of being questioned by avoiding these ‘high-risk’ situations. However, there are also risks posed by municipalities’ designation of areas as ‘security risk zones’, where police can ‘stop and search’ individuals without needing grounds for suspicion (Van der Leun and van der Woude 2011). These often occur on public roads and in underprivileged areas with higher migrant populations. The Aliens Act, which criminalizes all illegal stay in the Netherlands and subjects violators to possible deportation, also authorizes police to stop and check individuals’ identities if there is ‘a reasonable suspicion’ that they illegally reside in the Netherlands (Aliens Act 2000). Prejudices based on conflating physical appearances and illegality contribute to racialized immigration enforcement within this legal framework. Bonnet & Caillault (2015) found that Dutch police respondents explicitly associated crime with (presumed) Moroccans – a label they loosely assign to North African and Middle Eastern individuals. A Dutch Court ruled against the Koninklijke Marechaussee (Royal Netherlands Marechaussee) for using racialized characteristics, such as skin colour, as indicators for border stops to check residency status, which it deemed discriminatory (De Rechtspraak 2023).

The convergence of visibility and mobility and the intersection of surveillance, racialization, and control mechanisms create a specific context that shapes migrants’ public experiences. Brighenti (2010) argues that visibility is located at a point of intersecting relations of perception and power. This is evident in the interaction of state surveillance, control mechanisms, and racialized public perception. While ‘race’ is socially constructed, racialization is the process through which racial categories are constructed as real and meaningful (Guðjónsdóttir 2014). Whiteness is an embodiment of racialization, which positions ‘whiteness’ as an orientation for bodies (Ahmed 2007). Essentially, ‘whiteness’ is centralised as a reference point and bodies are situated in relation to it, framing ‘white’ as normal and ‘non-white’ as the ‘other.’ Bodies’ orientations within this framework determine what they ‘can do’ and how they ‘take up’ space, becoming lived experiences through their continued reproduction (Ahmed 2007). Whiteness and racialization create a context where those racialized as white ‘blend in’ and others, who are racialized as non-white, are more ‘noticeable’ (Ahmed 2007). This increased noticeability – or ‘hypervisibility’ – is experienced by individuals who are racialized non-white as their presence is excessively observed in public (Leinonen and Toivanen 2014). This can result in an amplified self-awareness of the values attached to their physical attributes, carrying the burden of the ‘majority’s gaze.’

Public spaces are where the processes of visibility and mobility control intersect, shaping the experiences of the bodies that occupy them and providing the context in which the corporeal dimension of racialization is observed. Examining the interaction of these public processes reveals the not-so-subtle subtleties of bodies’ racialized experiences. Hypervisible bodies’ navigation of public spaces constitutes a different experience than bodies that are not. Visibility is characterised by asymmetry that reflects multiple dimensions of power. The first is an asymmetry between those who watch and those who are watched, and the second is the asymmetry between those who are aware of their visibility and those who are oblivious to it, making racialization essential to the dynamics of public visibility (Brighenti 2007). The unobstructed movement of some bodies is not necessarily indicative of ability or competence but rather an expression of the privilege to ‘flow into space.’ In contrast, others are met with relatively more frictions in their movement (Ahmed 2007). The power relations that define the
asymmetries of visibility are embodied in differential mobility experiences with varying freedom, speed, modes, and comfort. This culminates in subjectively negotiated and unequal urban experiences specific to certain groups.

**Strategic (in)visibility and the gaze resisted:**

The analysis of the relationship between (in)visibility and power/lessness can provide an illuminating understanding of colonial relations (Villegas and Simmons 2010). The race-space relations discussed thus far demonstrate how ‘policing involves a differential economy of stopping: some bodies more than others are ‘stopped’, by being the subject of the policeman’s address’ (Ahmed 2007, 161). However, focusing only on governmentality excludes other analytically important forms of visibility and strategic resistance. The Foucauldian understanding of (in)visibility explains migrant invisibility as a forced condition of an antagonistic system, ascribing a negative connotation to invisibility. This is not consistently the case since migrants can strategically use their (in)visibility to avoid surveillance, advance their goals, or achieve a political agenda (Villegas and Simmons 2010). Frantz Fanon explored the concept of strategic (in)visibility, specifically how Algerians had used their invisibility strategically while resisting French colonial forces, such as using veils to conceal their identities (Villegas and Simmons 2010). Villegas and Simmons (2010) recontextualized Fanon’s conceptualization of strategic (in)visibility to contemporary contexts. We build on Brighenti’s (2010) approach by highlighting migrants’ agency in strategically utilizing invisibility as a form of resistance. Increased visibility through surveillance can enhance governments’ knowledge of populations, facilitating control. Conceptualizing visibility as multidirectional strategic knowledge demonstrates how subjects can also utilize visibility. ‘Subjects’ can utilize their knowledge of surveillance methods and how they are subjectively perceived to evade control measures by presenting different degrees of (in)visibility (Villegas and Simmons 2010). This expanded conceptualization is more relevant to the participants’ lives, who rely on the accumulated knowledge of their environments to determine the degree of their (in)visibility, deciding to visibilize/invisibilize themselves or personal identifiers, such as their immigration statuses, accordingly.

Conceptualizing marginalized communities’ visibility as a form of strategic resistance is becoming prevalent in critical literature, where public visualization of their bodies, issues, and experiences is seen as affirmation (Tazzioli and Walters 2016). Strategic visibility is demonstrated when undocumented migrants choose to visibilize their identities or legal statuses to pursue a politically-oriented objective (Tazzioli and Walters 2016; Villegas and Simmons 2010). *We Zijn Hier* (We Are Here) is an example of a migrant-led collective that advocates for undocumented migrants’ rights in the Netherlands. Even the name of the collective asserts the presence of individuals who would have otherwise remained invisible. Due to the contextual challenges, undocumented migrants mostly invisibilize their bodies and identities to avoid frictions that can escalate to questioning and deportation by authorities (Villegas and Simmons 2010). They do so in areas they designate as ‘high risk’ due to increased surveillance or police presence. Strategic invisibility is an exercise of agency, where decisions are based on their perceptions of surroundings and evaluations of associated risks, which are constructed through the accumulation of situational knowledge. Knowing which contexts carry a
higher risk or the situations in which police officers are legally allowed to request identification enables strategic invisibility through an improved ability to assess risk, allowing migrants to further their goals. It mitigates the incessant insecurity created by the omnipresent surveillance gaze, making it possible to navigate public spaces with a degree of normalcy.

In addition to (in)visibilizing their bodies, migrants also (in)visibilize other racialized identifiers, such as languages and accents. Leinonen and Toivanen (2014) discuss how the ‘audible visibility’ of languages and accents that carry discursive values may lead migrants to avoid, accentuate, or downplay them. This also highlights a temporal layer of (in)visibility since situational knowledge is accumulated through continued presence in a place. Spending more time allows for learning local languages or improving the ability to accurately ‘read’ public spaces. Risk assessment not only depends on knowledge, but also on subjective interpretations of contexts. Previous experiences, personal identities, and meanings constitute a lens through which individuals perceive their environments, and feel insecurity in anticipation of an imminent threat. We can better understand subjective risk perception by situating it within a context defined by the processes discussed earlier, where risk perception is influenced by awareness of one’s public visibility and the racialization of one’s body. Since surveillance and mobility control constitute a possibility of subjection to racialized prejudices, they are deemed as high-risk and guide strategic decisions to invisibilize.

We argue that undocumented migrants’ strategic invisibilization demonstrates agentic resistance to an inhospitable system in pursuit of their goals. At the same time, we argue that based on Cresswell’s (2010) definition of friction as ‘the stopping or limiting of movement,’ undocumented migrants’ limiting or shifting of their movement in anticipation of a potential threat is a self-imposed form of mobility friction. Decisions to shift movement, avoid routes, or refrain from using modes of transportation are based on a subjective assessment of risk shaped by migrants’ awareness of their bodies as objects of racialization.

‘The calls are coming from within the house’: race as a structuring factor

Our conceptualization of (in)visibility and (im)mobility emphasizes the defining role of social relations. Race is constructed as meaningful through racialized prejudices experienced and internalized by migrants, giving it particular analytical relevance due to its structuring role in shaping the power dynamics in the context of undocumented migrants in the Netherlands. Race is a historically-contingent social construct. It is continually reinforced as a marker of difference through discursive practices that translate into tangible effects on bodies, defining their activities, opportunities, constraints, and trajectories (Dick and Wirtz 2011). The analytical centering of race is inductive, based on the participants’ experiences, and deductive, in response to growing calls from within the field to acknowledge its structuring weight in European societies.

Critical social science scholars have called for engagement with the politics of race and racialization when studying specific contexts. Dick and Wirtz (2011) argue that the lived material effects of race are consequences of its covert construction as a category of difference in contemporary discourses, which makes it more salient in specific contexts such as (post/neo)colonialism and migration. Focusing on migration, Mayblin and Turner
premise that contemporary power relations that define migration are legacies of the racializing practices of European coloniality, which have taken on new forms of imposing inequality. This is evident in the continued construction of ‘whiteness’ as a normative orientation (Ahmed 2007) and the racialized ascription of ‘migration’ to certain bodies (Tudor 2018). These relations lead to the racial specificity of terms like ‘migrant’ (De Genova 2018) produced and reinforced by institutional processes that conceive migrant illegality and attribute it primarily to individuals racialized as non-white (Møller 2014). These processes are embodied on the street-level in the form of racial prejudices experienced by migrants.

Despite calls for acknowledging its analytical value in the migration context, race either receives minimal attention or is considered equivalent to other categories in migration studies (Mayblin and Turner 2020). Then why has its structuring weight been obscured in the field? One of the reasons discussed is the unnuanced co-optation of intersectionality by some academics, policymakers, and authorities (Mayblin and Turner 2020). It is essential to clarify that this is not a critique of intersectionality as an analytical framework, but rather of the consequences of its co-optation. Intersectionality is a ‘traveling theory,’ enabling its virality and variation in its interpretation and application (Riad and Jones 2022). Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, intersectionality aimed to provide a framework that explains the violence experienced by black women as the splits between race/gender and racism/sexism made their experiences invisible (Riad and Jones 2022). The concept’s rootedness in black feminist thought emphasized the mutually reinforcing nature of race, colonialism, and slavery. The term’s co-optation by (white) individuals who do not experience the adverse effects of racialization and those within the ‘imperial core’ has contributed to unnuanced interpretations of intersectionality that often diminish the importance it attributes to race. Arising complications include ahistorical interpretations, which sever connections to coloniality, and ‘colorblind’ interpretations, which treat different forms of oppression as equivalences (Mayblin and Turner 2020). Essentially, unnuanced interpretations result from – to use the terms loosely – the deterritorialization and reterritorialization of intersectionality, where its components were uncritically given new discursive meaning in different contexts.

Our focus on highlighting a single-lined form of oppression does not deny its overlap with other forms. Class, gender, sexuality, disability, and other identities are subject to the same processes of exclusion (Møller 2014). The focus on one power relation is inherently simplistic, but as Tudor (2018) aptly phrased it, ‘differentiations are necessary to be able to define and deconstruct specific oppressions, ascriptions, exclusions and abjectifications and to formulate the precise and ever-shifting forms of resistance’ (1070). Asymmetries in visibility are situational and contextual. In the wider societal context, the imbalance between ‘seeing’ and ‘being seen’ affects other marginalized groups such as women, queer-presenting individuals, and racialized minorities, demonstrating the power dynamics between those aware of their visibility and those who are not. For instance, a gendered focus highlights how the masculine gaze abjectifies women (Brighenti 2010). The specific context of this study examines an area of intersection between the domains of migration, policing, visibility, and mobility frictions, where racialization has been shown to be evident, making a focus on race particularly relevant.
Methodology

The study is based on a qualitative research design that aimed to gain a nuanced understanding of participant experiences by emphasizing induction and observation. The data were derived from \( n = 10 \) semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted with undocumented participants between March 2021 and July 2021. Recruitment relied on snowball sampling and initial participants led the interviewer to the Huiskamer in Eindhoven’s city center. Huiskamer – living room in Dutch – is an NGO that provides undocumented migrants with a space to ‘relax and develop’. It is open during the day and volunteer-run. Visitors were predominantly non-white male young adults whose visiting frequencies varied. Some visited regularly and could speak Dutch fluently, but new visitors always came in every week. There were fewer older and female visitors. Nationalities were mainly from Africa, Southeast Asia and the Middle East. The interviewer conducted weekly visits to the Huiskamer during the data collection period, allowing for participatory observation and frequent informal conversations with the visitors. Data collection coincided with COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, resulting in a relatively small sample size with ‘rich’ data. The study is based on an ethnographic approach that used interviews as personal narratives to illustrate broader sociopolitical processes. We therefore cannot generate representative findings. The findings were triangulated with those of other studies.

Semi-structured interviews in English and Arabic allowed for flexibility in discussing sensitive issues. Participants were asked about their experiences in the Netherlands, the nature of their presence in public spaces, mobility, frictions, interactions with authorities, and links with migrant collectives. A cyclical data collection process allowed the analytical focus on (in)visibility to develop during the study based on the participants’ discussions of vigilance and anonymity in public spaces. With the participants’ consent, interviews were recorded and analyzed on NVIVO. To protect participants’ identities, pseudonyms were used and traceable information was omitted. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point. The sample has an almost equal gender representation of six men and four women and includes multiple nationalities from the Middle East, Africa, and Southeast Asia. The term ‘undocumented’ describes individuals without the right to remain in the Netherlands. The variation of legal statuses is an asset since it demonstrates the differences between individuals who are grouped under the same category, complementing a point of analysis. The interviews were rich in data and allowed for a case-oriented analysis of the participants’ situations. The authors also acknowledge that some interviews, like Marilyn’s, are cited more often. While we drew on all data for the analysis, the semi-structured setting allowed Marilyn to delve into her activist work and her insightful personal experiences.

As the interviewer, I reflected on my position as a brown male researcher from the Global South and a new resident in the Netherlands. My identity constituted a focus on marginalization as a starting point, being interested in the nuances of racialized migrants’ experiences. My identity allowed me to ‘blend in’ at the Huiskamer, allowing me to build rapport and facilitate in-depth discussions. The ability to conduct some interviews in some participants’ mother tongues was also an asset. The study was explorative and inductive, which has informed me with a nuanced understanding of the workings of race in the Netherlands, having only lived there for months at the time.
Aspirations of normality, racialized actuality: public visibility

Being in public involves being visible, meaning that one is a subject of both social perception and surveillance. For undocumented migrants, this can come with risks, to which they react by strategically navigating these spaces with vigilance. The first risk is that posed by authorities who, enabled by their surveillance capacity and authority to request identification, have the power to deanonymize and identify individuals (Wittenberg 2002). While Dutch laws define the instances in which police are allowed to request identification, participants cited this as the main risk they face while navigating public spaces. Their risk aversion is due to insecurity caused by fear of potential apprehension and the unpredictability of being implicated in risky situations. Accordingly, these subjective factors guide their decisions regarding their movement.

The second risk is that of racialized perception. Migrants’ perception of their surroundings is influenced by their awareness of the majority’s racialized gaze and constructed assumptions attached to personal observable attributes. They recognize that certain personal characteristics can be identity markers with discursive values and take that into consideration. In other words, their perception of risk and, ultimately, the exercise of strategic invisibility, are impacted by their assessment of the likelihood of being subjected to racialized prejudices. Their heightened perception of risk triggers hypervigilance in public spaces and shifiting of movement. Race was a recurrent theme in participant interviews, discussed while narrating experiences in public spaces. Awareness of one’s ‘otherness’, with otherness being non-whiteness, was discussed as a factor they perceive to increase the possibility of being stopped and asked for identification.

Participants discussed how ‘race’ is relevant when dealing with authorities. Undocumented white migrants overstaying their visas were particularly mentioned as an exemplary case to show inequalities. Marilyn elaborates:

‘I have never seen an undocumented white person. Sometimes I don’t really want to raise this racial card, but as a person of color, (...) the truth is that racism here is systematic, but no one really talks about it’.

As Ahmed (2007) explains, ‘Whiteness becomes worldly through the noticeability of the arrival of some bodies more than others’ (150). Undocumented migrants racialized as white are less likely to be ‘visible’ due to their ability to ‘blend in’. As a result, they are less likely to be stopped and requested to show identification because of suspicions about their residency status. The concept of an ‘invisible migrant’ has been discussed by Leinonen and Toivanen (2014) and Guðjónsdóttir (2014), where white migrants ‘melted into’ their new host societies. This contrasts the processes of othering faced by non-white migrants. Møller (2014) argues that the seemingly neutral term ‘migrant’ is ‘conferred on people racialized as non-white’ by institutions and practices (877). Marilyn elaborates, ‘Why is there profiling of people (...) oh you’re Asian, oh you’re black (...) what about those white people that doesn’t have any work permit to stay here? Like the Canadians and the Americans?’. Mahmoud also identifies systematic racism as the central issue in the Netherlands; he explains: ‘The government racism is the problem, it is more dangerous than someone yelling ‘go back to your country’ at me’.
Awareness of the processes of racialized perception in public causes some undocumented participants to attempt to ‘blend in’. Marilyn says that she would try to blend in with her surroundings and invisibilize her legal status; she explains:

‘I am kind of lucky in that situation (...) No I haven’t been asked for any identification, maybe it is also the way I carry myself. Especially when there was still a lot of tourists, when I see a police officer I act like I am a lost tourist (...) when there is a big number of police in a certain place I just act like a lost tourist, if they are [coming] towards me I just say ‘where is the direction going to bla bla bla (...) maybe also because of my accent I think, they don’t think like I’m a Filipino brown short woman, I just sound like a lost American.’

Marilyn’s experience demonstrates how racialized visibility can influence public behaviour. Undocumented migrants are hypervigilant and alert to their surroundings, acting in anticipation of possible racially-motivated biases. Awareness of discourses allows participants to evade suspicions by utilizing them. Emulating a tourist demonstrates strategic (in)visibility, where migrants leverage their understanding of ‘the ways in which they can be perceived’ to determine the degree of their (in)visibility (Villegas and Simmons 2010, 148). In Marilyn’s case, she accentuated the audible visibility of her accent, assumed to sound American, to conceal her undocumented status. Her action is based on the presumption that if perceived as a tourist, police would be inclined to provide assistance not question her legal status. Awareness of such asymmetries in interacting with authorities was mentioned by Moussa (30), discussing the differential treatment of migrants and tourists. He explains, ‘you know when they say ‘innocent until proven guilty’? It is the other way around, you start with being guilty.’ he said in reference to being questioned. ‘Ok, just because one or two from the refugees were lying then all of them are lying? What about the tourists? Are all of the tourists that come are innocent? Of course not.’ he added.

The performance of ‘acting like a tourist’ and the asymmetry in police reactions are particularly interesting when examining the nuances of racialized experiences. The distinction between ‘migrant’ and ‘tourist’ signifies a class difference. However, the premise of this interaction is racialized; this strategic action is driven by Marilyn’s anticipation of prejudice based on her visibility as, in her articulation, a ‘Filipino brown short woman.’ In other words, it is her ‘race’ that was noticeable, not her ‘class.’ One could argue that the legality of her residency would not be questioned if she is perceived to be white. While the interactions between race and class are complex, the term ‘illegal migrant’ is primarily racially coded, assigned to racialized subjects who are also classed (Møller 2014), where race appears to override class when coinciding in European migratory contexts (Tudor 2018). Non-white highly-skilled migrants inhabiting more class privilege are subject to the same racialized biases as classed migrants (Tudor 2018). Recognizing that different oppressive forces, like racism and classism, intersect but are not equivalences allows for examining the racialized subtleties in such experiences. These ‘subtle’ nuances represent a commonality between those who experience them. Marilyn is aware of this and tackles it through her collective:

‘We tell the undocumented to carry their passport even if it is expired. We tell them to ask the officer ‘What have I done’ if he insists on seeing the passport ask, ‘is this racial profiling?’, especially if they are white (...) they are allergic to that word (...) because a lot of the time it is racial profiling.’
Being aware of these discourses, undocumented migrants assess the potential risks associated with interactions to determine their (in)visibility. They cautiously maneuver around unexpected conversations, careful not to induce suspicions about their residency statuses. When approaching presumed undocumented individuals for her collective, Marilyn explains the nuances of the interaction:

‘I would know if an undocumented person is undocumented, but it is not like a direct question, because people are scared. I approach a nanny or someone in the park and ask where they are from, they say they’re from a third world country and the conversation would evolve from there (...) I ask ‘where are you planning to go on vacation this summer’ ‘oh I just stay here’ (...) so there are these kinds of hints but never direct because it is scary for them’.

Villegas and Simmons (2010) discuss how status can be strategically invisibilized by using believable rationalizations that explain why undocumented migrants are not participating in an activity they are excluded from. Such rationalizations are devised to dismiss potential suspicions about residency status.

Race is an essential element of public visibility, produced and reinforced through ‘seeing’ and ‘being seen,’ with the public sphere being where ‘seeing’ occurs (Brahinsky 2011). Urban spaces can be sites of embodied racialization, where racialized imaginaries, such as ‘illegal’ and ‘migrant,’ are affirmed through the reproduction of social relations, creating unequal access to presence, visibility, and mobility. Racialized migrants’ hypervisibility and awareness of racial biases influence the nature of their presence and interactions in public. There is a ‘stark asymmetry’ between those aware of their visibility and those not (Brighenti 2007), culminating in different urban experiences. For undocumented migrants, the risk is not only posed by surveillance infrastructure and police checkpoints, but also by subjection to racist discourses that are assumed to be the pretext for interactions.

A different mapping of the same city: strategic invisibility and (im)mobility:

Participants were asked about the nature of their mobility in Dutch public spaces and whether they faced impediments. Participants regularly moved by train between Amsterdam and Eindhoven, depending on (domestic) work opportunities, availability of temporary accommodation, or to pursue activities and services from migrant collectives. Their narrations included experiences that occurred in both cities. While both cities are distinct, they share similar urban landscapes, such as extensive cycling lane networks, and their police forces operate within the framework of the national police force. It is important to note that issues pertinent to immigration and non-nationals, such as legal residency and the Aliens Police, fall within the scope of the central government. Most participants reported limited interceptions thus far and moved with relative ease, which they attribute to ‘on the lookout’ for frictions. They exercised caution and avoided certain areas or modes of transportation they consider unsafe due to the perceived risk of questioning by authorities. Hypervigilance in public spaces was also discussed with some participants, who cited a heightened alertness of surroundings but it became more normalized over time as they were familiarized with the Netherlands. Potential risks were avoided or mitigated by exercising strategic invisibility, affecting their presence and movement.
Dutch cities are almost entirely bike-centric, shaped by years of urban planning that centralised cycling as the fastest, cheapest, and most convenient mode of urban transport. For the participants, cycling is associated with the risk of encountering police, who can stop cyclists and ask for identification in traffic violation cases or checkpoints to ensure working bike lights, bells, and brakes. This has led some participants to avoid cycling to minimize the risk of being stopped. When asked about limitations to her mobility, Marilyn initially said that she moves around freely and has not been asked for identification. However, she later added: ‘I avoided biking altogether (…) I tend to avoid any possible means that I would be asked for ID.’ Moussa, Maria and Jamal also noted this. Jamal recalls that ‘police stopped me once while I was on my bike to check my light, this was the only time I was stopped and I did not need to show an ID.’ Another participant, Amin, notes:

‘I used to sometimes avoid the bicycle at first but now the police is sometimes stop me for the bicycle to check the bicycle and they say ‘do you have ID card’ and I say ‘I don’t have ID card’ and they say ok go (…) I wish police would come and arrest me, because then I would have place to sleep at night.’

Amin’s recent interactions with the police were in Dutch, which he has become proficient in after living in the Netherlands for a decade, demonstrating the temporal aspect of strategic (in)visibility. Audible visibility, specifically language proficiency, can be a decisive factor in such interactions since it allows him to invisibilize his immigration status. Marilyn and Moussa, however, do not speak Dutch. This highlights police officers’ discretion during interactions, deciding whether or not an arrest for not carrying identification is necessary. Amin’s homelessness also highlights the lack of a public/private dichotomy for undocumented migrants, who do not have regular access to safe private spaces. However, private space safety is contested as the Aliens Act gives authorities the power to ‘enter a dwelling without the consent of the occupant’ upon suspicion of an illegal resident staying there (Aliens Act 2000), contributing to the omnipresent feeling of insecurity.

The participants’ absence – or invisibility – from Dutch cycling paths results from their strategic decisions to avoid them because they perceive them to be high-risk. This excludes the participants from the primary transportation method in Dutch cities – a form of self-inflicted immobilization. The diminished freedom to cycle illustrates the variance in accessing freedom of mobility. Participants who avoid cycling must resort to slower and more expensive transportation methods. The likely alternative is public transport, which is costly and cashless. This is constraining as undocumented migrants cannot access bank accounts without a citizen service number. Transportation credit can only be purchased in cash at specific locations. Public transport is also not risk-free; ticket inspectors can legally ask for identification, usually only to issue a fine. The Aliens Act gives police the authority to stop and search any means of transport with suspected illegal residents, as documented by Kubal (2014). When asked, Maria said she avoids cycling and feels more comfortable taking the bus but is cautious because ‘a friend told [her] once they check ID at some bus stops but it did not happen with me, so just in case I keep my eye out before I walk to the station.’

Visibility in such situations can be considered a strategic avenue of knowledge (Tazzioli and Walters 2016). Undocumented migrants strategically utilize knowledge of the
situations in which they must show identification to navigate public spaces. Such information was found to be accumulated through firsthand experiences or relayed by other migrants and migrant collectives through physical and digital channels. Jamal discussed a WhatsApp group where undocumented migrants warn each other about potential police checks. While Maria avoids cycling, she has learned to avoid protest areas due to increased police surveillance; she explains: ‘I usually know the situation, for example, if there is a rally in the area. Protest means that there is police and I just avoid that situation.’ Maria acquired this knowledge through her continued presence in the Netherlands.

The interviews demonstrate participants self-imposing ‘frictions’ that obstruct their mobility. Self-inflicted immobilization is an intangible form of friction that often results from strategic decisions to invisibilize themselves due to perceived risks of being stopped by police. Their perception of risk is amplified, exemplified by their increased vigilance in public spaces. They are risk-averse due to the potentially detrimental consequences of questioning and awareness of their hypervisibility, which can elicit racialized prejudices. Their perception of risk, while amplified, is not unfounded. Racial profiling is prevalent in the Netherlands (Bonnet and Caillault 2015; De Rechtspraak 2023) and undocumented migrants have been targeted in preventative searches (Van der Leun and van der Woude 2011).

**Exercising (strategic) visibility: migrant collectives**

Undocumented migrants exercise agency in instances of strategic visibility, usually collectively and in pursuit of a political objective, under the auspices of migrant-led collectives advocating for the recognition of undocumented migrants. For instance, Marilyn is a leading member of a collective that lobbies to protect undocumented houseworkers in the Netherlands. It launched publicized campaigns promoting the adoption of the International Labor Organization’s recommendation (ILO 2010) to recognize domestic work as legal, potentially offering a route to legalization. Marilyn has discussed the matter openly with government representatives, members of parliament, and the municipal authorities. She notes: ‘I talk to politicians, I appeared on TV, I am interviewed by researchers (...) I even work with the municipality.’ While undocumented, Marilyn exercises strategic visibility by publicly discussing issues related to her legal status in her advocacy work, however, she avoids cycling in fear of being stopped. This paradoxical situation shows the fluid and dialectical nature of strategic (in)visibility.

Spaces can be ‘sites of resistance’ and sanctuaries for counter-discourses (Lefebvre and Nicholson-Smith 1991), acting as spaces of ‘otherness’. Migrant collectives provide spaces where undocumented migrants can create a ‘parallel’ public sphere and openly visibilize their identities (Tazzioli and Walters 2016). These spaces are centered on communal solidarity and a shared need for strategic (in)visibility. An example is the Huiskamer, where several participant interviews were conducted. It is a space where undocumented migrants can ‘lay down their guards,’ demonstrating the creation of a ‘discursive space’ where undocumented migrants are welcomed and can exchange knowledge. Visitors openly discuss their legal statuses, trajectories, and past experiences while cooking meals or playing games. Advice about living while undocumented or tips on navigating the legal system and asylum processes are frequently shared. The COVID-19 pandemic 2021 restrictions in the Netherlands have impacted these spaces. Bella
explains: ‘We have not been meeting since COVID broke which has affected me a lot (...) because we used to get together, I know that I am not alone, there are people who are going through the same thing with me’ referring one such group. The absence of these discursive spaces risks further excluding undocumented migrants.

Some instances of strategic visibility have yielded results, demonstrated in the informal coordination between collectives and some state representatives that choose to cooperate. Providing government-funded health services to undocumented individuals is outlawed but the Linking Act of 1998 permits healthcare workers to offer treatment in ‘imperative cases’ (Van der Leun 2006). This creates room for potential cooperation that can mitigate undocumented migrants’ exclusion. One participant recounts her collective’s cooperation with the GGD1, the body responsible for vaccinations, to attempt vaccinating over 300 undocumented migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic. She explains:

‘The problem is that the undocumented [migrants] are scared, they are scared to say something because they are illegal (...) After a lot of passing the ball ‘no you have to talk to the regional GGD bla bla bla, I was later able to speak with the team leader of GGD.’

Another paradoxical example is one collective’s informal coordination with select police officers to protect undocumented houseworkers from abuse or exploitation after it received multiple reports of sexual abuse. Undocumented migrants are less likely to report such incidents to the police. Marilyn, through the collective, cooperates with one municipality’s police department on that matter. Marilyn elaborates on the situation:

‘Currently, I am very proud and thankful for the [redacted] police (...) of course they are still racist there for other issues (...) but I mean at least we are coordinating with some police officers in [redacted] that whenever an undocumented is in trouble we tell them that ‘look for this police officer at that station, he knows what to do’.

However, she adds that this unofficial cooperation with officers cannot be made official because ‘they would also be put in hot water.’ She believes that some police officers choose to cooperate because ‘you know (...) there’s a lot of crimes to be solved in [redacted] and they [police officers] say ‘these law-abiding undocumented immigrants are not our business, it is the IND2’s business to, you know, contact them if they want that, but not us.’ Both examples demonstrate how participants strategically visibilized themselves through collectives in coordination with some bureaucrats. This informal cooperation helps maintain a status quo of tacit acceptance. Street-level bureaucrats’ relative autonomy in enforcement explains the paradoxical situation where one police department is accused of both racially profiling and protecting undocumented migrants.

**Conclusion**

Undocumented migrants’ (in)visibility and (im)mobility in Dutch public spaces reflect a societal hierarchy shaped by social power relations. Disempowered by an antagonistic legal structure, the participants are burdened by racialized processes that are internalized, influencing self-perception and the nature of their presence and movement in public. The surveillance gaze creates a perception of an omnipresent risk of apprehension in public spaces. That perception is amplified due to participants’ awareness of a racialized gaze embodied in subjective biases and prejudices, making encounters with material frictions,
such as police checkpoints, highly risky. Accordingly, undocumented migrants instrumentalize their accumulated situational knowledge to strategically visibilize/invisibilize themselves or aspects of their identities. The convergence of strategic invisibility with immobility materializes through the participants’ avoidance of moving through certain areas or using modes of transport, such as cycling. Based on a conceptualization of mobility frictions as obstructions that control, curtail, or stop mobility, we argue that self-inflicted immobilization resulting from an amplified perception of risk is an intangible form of friction. Being internalized, its impact is more far-reaching than material frictions, as it is more difficult to ‘circumvent.’ While it results from undocumented migrants’ agentic decision-making, self-inflicted immobilization also illustrates the objectifying power of the gaze, where awareness of one’s visibility can influence behaviour (Brighenti 2007). Undocumented migrants also exercise strategic visibility under the auspices of migrant collectives, observed in the creation of discursive spaces and public advocacy. The exercise of strategic visibility led to informal cooperation with some street-level bureaucrats, which helps maintain a legally ambiguous lifeline.

The focus on the structuring weight of race in the studied context showed asymmetries consistent with power relations, such as the asymmetry between those who are aware of their visibility and those who are not. This revealed subtleties specific to racialized bodies’ experiences in public spaces. Inequalities are (re)produced by positioning ‘whiteness,’ an embodiment of racialization, as a normative reference point for bodies, rendering some bodies more visible. This power relation shapes experiences that are subjectively negotiated and unequal, recreating a racialized hierarchy in the spatial order of public spaces. Bodies situated on different points on the visibility spectrum experience different realities in the same city. Lying on the ‘hypervisible’ end of the spectrum, the participants experience mappings of cities that are limited and mined with risks, requiring increased vigilance.

Our analysis demonstrates the need for more in-depth studies of the impact of (internalized) racialization that contribute to the growing literature investigating its pervasive impacts on migrants’ lives. In doing so, a more open discussion of race and racialization in European societies is possible. The construction of a racialized ‘other’ is reinforced by the aversion to its discussion and the ahistorical interpretation of its colonial origins. This can only be overcome by employing approaches conscious of its historical and contemporary structuring weight.

Notes

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