

Call for papers: Ethics of queer in/visibility

Starting point

Concepts of in/visibility have played an important role in queer activism and gender studies for a long time. Being seen and being heard, having a voice and a place at the table have been manifest political goals but also powerful metaphors of representation through decades of feminist and queer movements and academic debates. A vocabulary of in/visibility informs many ways of talking about gender, from the metaphor of the closet (Sedgwick 1990, Kibbey 2023) with regard to sexual orientation, to the notion of passing (Goffman 1963) for gender presentation and gender identity. Many aspects of feminist and queer practice rely on becoming visible in public space: women's marches and pride parades, trans and lesbian days of visibility, material objects such as rainbow flags and pronoun buttons. And in media-saturated and digital contexts, being visible has become an omnipresent metric of the self.

At the same time, visibility has been identified as an ambivalent mechanism with risky implications (Foucault 1975, Schaffer 2008, Beauchamp 2019). Representation and exposure can lead to gender-based surveillance, discrimination, and violence. The very notion of safe spaces, a topic of ridicule in some public discourses, is borne from the notion that visibility may entail vulnerability. While queer visibility has been marketed and commodified under the guise of visibility politics for a long time (Hennessy 1994), many individuals and communities are not able to become visible in their plurality, e.g. people on the move and undocumented migrants (Luibhéid & Chávez 2020), people in war-ridden parts of the Global South (Puar 2007), or disabled and chronically ill people (Hedva 2022). For queer people of color, being visible can also mean being subjected to a colonial, orientalist or *white* gaze (Ferguson 2003), and visible disabled bodies are often reduced to 'inspiration porn' (Grue 2016). Remaining opaque (Glissant 1990), resisting through invisibility (Alloa 2023), and refusing research (Tuck & Yang 2014) have been put forward as productive objections to the *white* imperative of visibility.

In current political climates, the risk of visibility has become a matter of broad societal attention. Symbols of queer visibility such as pride flags are removed or prohibited; moral panics about gendered access to public bathrooms, gyms and saunas prompt forms of gender surveillance; political initiatives promote name registers of trans individuals; scientific freedom is under threat as DEI mechanisms and queer research paradigms, programs, and individuals become subjected to erasure.

Matters of queer in/visibility thus hold implications for the dignity, identification and well-being of the individual, but they are also embroiled in some of the most conflictive dynamics in ongoing negotiations of our societal fabric. Queer in/visibility is of the highest relevance for ethics in academia—from data and research ethics to teaching and self-expression—and it affects many areas of human development and agency, including education, political participation, job market access, sports, healthcare, and cultural representation.

In this conference, we aim to bring together scholars across disciplines who are interested in the ethics of in/visibility from a queer perspective at a time of societal turbulence and moral backlash against feminist and queer existence. We wish to advance interdisciplinary insight into implications of in/visibility, control, and representation; and to foster interaction across academic disciplines and epistemologies.

Call for contributions

We invite abstracts for paper presentations (20+10min) which address aspects of queer in/visibility from all academic fields and disciplines. We are particularly interested in the following thematic areas:

1. Theories and histories of queer in/visibility;
2. Intersections of queer in/visibility with disability/health, race/ethnicity, age, and faith;
3. Queer in/visibility in mediated and digital contexts;
4. Queer in/visibility and resistance: ethical responses to anti-queer societal backlash;
5. Queer in/visibility as an ethical challenge in and to academia.

Please send your abstract as an anonymized PDF to queerinv@as.uni-heidelberg.de. Abstracts should not exceed 300 words (excluding references).

Abstract deadline: March 31, 2026, 23.59 CET.

For inquiries, please contact Theresa Heyd at theresa.heyd@as.uni-heidelberg.de.

Organizers

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Student assistants: Sam Gaugele, Lea Luhr

Keynote speakers

J Calder (she/they), Linguistics, University of Colorado Boulder

Anna Hájková (she/her), History, University of Warwick

The conference

The conference will take place from September 30 to October 2, 2026 at Marsilius Kolleg, Heidelberg University (Im Neuenheimer Feld 130.1, Heidelberg). The venue is largely wheelchair accessible and has a fully accessible bathroom; the conference language is English. The conference is financially supported by the Camilla and Georg Jellinek Center for Ethics of Heidelberg University.

Early career travel award

We will be able to offer a limited number of travel awards (250 EUR each), aimed in particular at early career researchers and/or participants without academic employment status and/or members of underrepresented minorities (BIPoC, non-EU citizens, trans scholars, disabled/chronically ill researchers, first-generation academics, etc.). If you wish to be considered for a travel award, please indicate this in your email (and not in your abstract).

References

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