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Missing bodies. The politics of visibility by Casper, Monica J. and Lisa Jean Moore

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**Casper, Monica J. and Moore, Lisa Jean. 2009. *Missing Bodies. The Politics of Visibility*.
New York and London: New York University Press. 223 pp. Pb: 17.59 € ISBN: 978-
0814716786**

The increasing visibility of the body in the American society is paradoxically concomitant with the invisibility of manifold ‘bodies conspicuously missing in action’ (p.3). This observation constitutes the root of the book’s problematic, a different approach to “corporeity”: ‘exploring how certain places, spaces, policies, and practices in contemporary society [...] exhibit and celebrate some bodies while erasing and denying others’ (p.3): States, not content with making live and letting die, grant social visibility as well.

Chapter 2, the first of six American case studies, depicts the social invisibility of children’s bodies in contemporary society. The strongly socially constructed “innocence” of childhood is the reason put forward by diverse institutions justifying their protection behaviour. It leads to the absence of empowerment of children and lack of interest in their voices: this ‘cultural veil of innocence’ (p.36) silences and obliterates them. Their bodies and sexual experiences are set up as sanctuaries. Academics wanting to focus their research on them thus face manifold difficulties.

Chapter 3 concerns the social invisibility of infant mortality: even if the number of infant deaths is surprising considering the country’s GDP, it has decreased tremendously during the 20th century and has thus been socially “forgotten”. This chapter relevantly shows interactions between demography and biopolitics: demographical statistics construct criteria of normality and contribute to the definition of infant mortality rate as a social clue, an indicator of social troubles. The authors stress the way risk factors for infant death are constructed by epidemiology and demography: every woman is treated as a potential womb

and targeted by preconception care policies, since her body appears as the only “place” where the issue of high infant mortality rate could be resolved.

Drawing on the concept of exposure (‘the degree of coverage and the amount of attention a body receives’ p.79), chapter 4 addresses the recent shift of HIV/AIDS politics from the field of public health to that of national and international security. Even if HIV/AIDS is considered as pandemic, in America, it is supposed to be under control. Therefore, attention and fears target foreign (developing) countries, many of them in Africa, depicted as actual “biological weapons”, potentially endangering social systems. This results in a contrasted picture of nearly invisible American people living with HIV/AIDS along with intensely mediated African sufferers’ bodies, presented as the main reason of their States’ failures.

Chapter 5 deals with biomonitoring: attempts to assess environmental risks through surveillance of human fluids’ pollution. After an account of the American legislative process that led, in some States, to the large scale implementation of biomonitoring, the authors emphasize the lack of applicability of the obtained data. Breast milk, the archetypally mentioned fluid, represents a social commodity, monitored for the sake of the entire society (in contrast with semen, which is not monitored for collective benefits). This status of ‘sentinel fluid’ (p.122), in passing, obliterates women’s bodies and individual interests (women are not provided with an individual exposure assessment), while it assumes an unquestioned link between women and nature and an obvious superiority of breastfeeding over formula. Thus, one can observe a synecdochical process, where women’s very bodies fade away, giving way to breast milk as an isolated pollution-monitoring commodity.

The section ‘Heroes’ deals with social overexposure of certain bodies. Chapter 6 examines the story of Jessica Lynch, an American soldier, wounded, captured and then “rescued” in Iraq in 2003. The authors draw upon her case to address the interactions between

gender and the military. The hiatus between military and media accounts of Lynch's story and her own version is analyzed through the prism of defined gender roles. She is presented as helpless and mistreated, thus emphasizing the key intervention of her fellow male soldiers. Her personal memories and her body have been erased from the social scene. Her defenceless mediatic portrait personifies all her fellow female soldiers, thus hiding their bravery (and deaths).

In contrast, chapter 7 presents Lance Armstrong's cycling career and survival of testicular cancer as the archetype of the American masculine hero. Media portray Armstrong as superhuman, with a famous multicommentated physique. This overexposure embodies the very notion of American masculinity and success (winning several times the Tour de France after cancer treatment) and constitutes a sort of 'screen' dissimulating the actual experience of other cancer patients.

In conclusion, the authors stress again the different invisibilities they tackled: 'innocents' themselves or parts of their bodily experience (dead babies, children's sexuality) are invisible, "conjured away". 'Exposed' bodies are not necessarily visible: 'hidden in plain sight' (p.183) as Americans living with HIV/AIDS dissimulated by their scary African counterparts, or widely biomonitored breast milk, whose assumed statistical relevancy erases women. Bodies of 'heroes' are the trees preventing us from seeing the woods of actual social heroes.

One can notice some facile phrasing — 'demographers perform a type of numerical magic, erasing actual bodies [of dead infants] [...] and replacing them with statistics' (p.66) — and caricatural oppositions — between the dead infants' invisibility and the mediatic visibility of the Emperor penguins through the documentary *March of the Penguin*. Nevertheless, this book is written in a vivid style, endowed with a straightforward and pleasant way of expressing the authors' engaged analysis.

Despite its focus on United States, the book's content — including its theoretical framework — is relevant in other contexts too. It can usefully be part of undergraduate teaching, as example of ethnographies (especially chapters 2 and 6) showing interactions between citizens' bodies and State's power.

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