Introduction
The Bodies We See, and
Some That Are Not Here

Gloria liked the idea that there were cameras watching everyone everywhere. Last year Graham had installed a new state-of-the-art security system in the house—cameras and infrared sensors and panic buttons and goodness knows what else. Gloria was fond of the helpful little robots that patrolled her garden with their spying eyes. Once, the eye of God watched people, now it was the camera lens.

Kate Atkinson, One Good Turn (2006)

We live in an age of proliferating human bodies, both literally and figuratively. The world’s population is more than six and a half billion, a staggering number by any measure—and perhaps too many people for one fragile, embattled planet and current allocations of resources. Representations of these omnipresent, multiplying bodies are both enhanced and amplified via new biomedical, digital, and representational technologies, like MRIs and sonograms. Bodies are made visible and seen—or watched, to embrace the conspiratorial—via a range of globalized practices. Indeed, the human body has never been more visible and rapidly mobile (and mobilized) than it is in the first decade of the 21st century. It should not surprise anyone that the U.S. National Library of Medicine sponsors an ambitious digital image library of adult anatomy called the Visible Human Project or that the exhibit Body Worlds, featuring plastinated, posed human cadavers, has been both wildly successful and intensely controversial.

From a very young age, human beings are trained to visually process and meticulously read bodies—our own and others—for social cues about love, beauty, status, and identity. Bodies are socially constructed within
social orders, including patterns of dominance and submission along lines of race, ethnicity, gender, age, and physiological normativity. Accurately reading the body of another, beginning with our mothers and other caregivers immediately after birth, can sometimes mean the difference between survival and death. As such, the visualized body is powerfully symbolic in a multitude of ways and across often quite-contested domains. Increasingly, too, our bodies are under surveillance, digitized and processed for analysis. In a suspicious post-9/11 world, a marked hysteria accompanies the quest for visual proof of human beings’ whereabouts, activities, interactions, purchases, conversations, and migrations.

Cameras perch on lampposts and rooftops in towns and cities across the United States and in other countries, monitoring all sorts of public interactions, movements, and activities. Community activists in New York City, including the Surveillance Camera Players, estimate that there are at least 10,000 security cameras in Manhattan alone, while a European group estimates that London has some 500,000 public cameras. The Scripps Howard News Service reports there are about 5 million video surveillance cameras in use in the United States today and that the number of government-funded cameras has grown exponentially, courtesy of dollars earmarked for “homeland security” needs. The security and private protection industry is worth about $9 billion annually and is expected to grow to a $20 billion industry by 2010.

Recent congressional debate in the United States centered on H.R. 418, the Real ID Act, which mandates the creation of a national identification card with multiple data storage points. In conjunction with the Departments of Motor Vehicles, all states will be required to comply with provisions of the act by December 31, 2009. These may include the Combined DNA Indexing System (CODIS) of the FBI, Medicare and Medicaid records, military records, criminal records, immigration status, employment information, credit reports, and so on. The Real ID Act and other government and private surveillance efforts, coupled with the explosion of visual and biometric technologies, are making human bodies partially and wholly legible with limited to no public discussion and shockingly little regulation. In the name of national security, it seems, the neoliberal state is watching all of us—and it is marking the bodies of citizens and especially noncitizens at an unprecedented level and with as yet largely unknown consequences.

This surveillance by our paternal uncle, let’s call him Sam, and his cronies is taking place in a culture that seems obsessed with, and made
almost frantic by, “real” bodies doing “real” things in “real” time. It sometimes seems as if we are more attuned to the daily activities of America’s Top Model, Paris Hilton, college football players, and al-Qaeda than we are to those of our own teenage children or our neighbors in gated communities whose names we may not even know. And yet, despite this escalating Orwellian practice by which the government and corporations visually locate and define bodies so as to regulate (and perhaps punish) them, some bodies are conspicuously missing in action.

Not all bodies are equally visible to the cameras, the watchers, or the analysts; indeed, some bodies may not necessarily want to be seen at all. Nor do all of the discursive, visual, and geographic sites show the full panoply of human bodies that might be present. Certainly there are bodies that we see so routinely that they appear in our dreams; we ourselves may be watched regularly, skin crawling, at every turn. But there are some bodies that are invisible, that have disappeared, or whose absence is unaccounted for and not remarked on in popular culture or by government agencies such as, to name just one example, FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency).

In Missing Bodies, we are interested in exploring how certain places, spaces, policies, and practices in contemporary society, particularly in the United States, exhibit and celebrate some bodies while erasing and denying others. What can account for the fact that certain bodies are hyperexposed, brightly visible, and magnified, while others are hidden, missing, and vanished? We believe there are dimensions of corporeal visibility and erasure that need to be charted and interpreted, for intellectual and political reasons, and we attempt to do so here. Interested in social processes and conditions of local and global stratification, or the many ways in which the world’s people are unequal, we investigate in this book the traffic between and among visible, invisible, and missing bodies.

At the same time, we strategically deploy the multiple uses of the term “missing” to interrogate the ways in which we are affectively missing certain bodies. For to be missing means that something or someone was once visible and is now lost. Thus “missing” is a kind of invisibility, one usually characterized by a high degree of emotion, as with missing children or soldiers M.I.A. (missing in action). As feminist sociologists of the body committed to ethical practices and social justice, we find ourselves longing for these missing bodies and for stories about them. For example, why did it take so long for the U.S. media to begin telling stories about the “falling bodies” of 9/11, those tragic figures who leaped from the burning,
crambling towers rather than be obliterated by flames (Flynn and Dw-
yer 2004)? Why has the U.S. government refused to allow photographs 
or filming of flag-draped coffins carrying the bodies of soldiers who are 
fighting and dying in Iraq and Afghanistan?

In addition, as mothers of young children—we each have two daugh-
ters—we have been outraged by the media erasure of women and children 
devastated by recent “natural” disasters along the American Gulf Coast 
and in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, we are incensed that even though 
the United Nations estimate for the Iraqi death toll exceeded 34,000 in 
2006, there is almost complete lack of media coverage of, and government 
accounting for, the men, women, and children of all nationalities killed by 
American troops and their allies in Iraq or caught in the fatal crosshairs 
of ethnic and religious intolerance. We wonder: Where are the “missing 
girls” of China and India and other patriarchal cultures, these young vic-
tims of “sex-selective” abortion and female infanticide? And we lament 
the massive incarceration of our own nation’s young Black men, and in-
creasingly Black women, hundreds of thousands of them warehoused be-
hind bars and out of sight.

In short, because we care deeply about missing bodies in both a prag-
matist and a humanist sense, we have turned our analytical lens to ques-
tions of corporeal presence and absence. Following scholars of the visible, 
whose work we highlight below, we suggest here that the visible and invis-
ible dimensions of human life, including representations of bodies, work 
together to create social order as we know it. In this book, through a series 
of empirical case studies, we investigate the mechanisms by which some 
bodies can be found with varying degrees of ease in American popular 
culture, policy, and social theory, while others cannot. While seeking to 
develop new intellectual understandings of bodily visibility and erasure, 
we are also deeply committed to the redistribution of political and theo-
retical attention to missing bodies and to revealing the consequences of 
chronic inattention and inaction by scholars and others. This book, then, 
is a recovery project, forged with equal parts hope and fury.

Bodies in and of Social Theory

At the dawning of the 20th century, sociology emerged as a method of 
inquiry aimed at explaining the social causes and effects of seemingly 
personal acts. Importantly, sociology offered an alternative to the biologi-
cal, psychological, and individualistic definitions of human action. If one
conceives of the intellectual history of sociology as different strands of thought, one tendency is to treat the individual as a rational, disembodied, decision-making agent, a kind of talking head with no recognizable body. In many ways, this line of inquiry against the biologically determined notions of social order meant that corporeality—or the flesh, bone, functions, physiology, sensations, and materiality of the body—was for over a century ignored or merely taken for granted. But within the past three decades, social science, spurred by feminist theory and practice, has contributed robust analyses to academic explorations and explanations of the human body and its representations.

Because we are medical sociologists and feminist scholars, we work in a tradition of material social constructionism and thus ground our analysis in the historical sociocultural forces that have shaped and created bodies. We consider these bodies as shifting and plural, alive with multiple potentials. Conversely, essentialists believe that a pre-social natural body exists (Connell and Dowssett 1993), an idea that is anathema to our project here. Although corporeality must be acknowledged and integrated into social theory, corporeality itself is not static; it changes as our interpretations of it are modified over time (Clarke 1995), and it also changes in response to the physical world. Social scientists must resist the temptation to see corporeality as sui generis, even though bodies might appear to have obdurate and consistent physical characteristics. For at the same moment that actual physical bodies exist, our understandings of these bodies, our interpretations and explanations of bodily processes, give meaning to their materiality.

Sociologist Bryan Turner (1987, 1992) suggests four key social developments that contributed to growth in the sociological and cultural investigation of bodies:

1. The growth of consumer culture. Shifts in mass consumption from the 1920s led to the availability of cheap, durable goods, such as cosmetics, health aides, and fashion accessories, which helped to secularize the body into a vehicle of identity display. Further, Mike Featherstone, Mike Hepworth, and Bryan Turner’s (1991) analysis of “the body in consumer culture” is helpful in understanding the Western cultural imperative of maintaining bodies in late capitalism. They argue, “self preservation depends upon the preservation of the body within a culture in which the body is the passport to all that is good in life. Health, youth, beauty, sex, fitness are the positive attributes which body care can achieve and preserve” (1991:186).
2. The development of postmodern themes in the arts, architecture, and the humanities. Postmodernist theorists problematize subject/object distinctions prevalent in modernist representations. The human body is not distinct from the self, they argue, but is deeply interrelated to identity and self-expression. Postmodern scholarship and methods of inquiry provide tools to read and "deconstruct" the human body.

3. The feminist movement. Although Turner cites the feminist movement in a broad sense, the women's health movement especially challenged predominant biomedical ways of constructing bodies (Ruzek 1978, Lewin and Olesen 1985). As both consumers and scholars, many women rebelled against the hegemonic medical establishment's strategies of medicalization and mystification of female bodily functions. These challenges to "thinking as usual" within medical settings encouraged many women to wage feminist critiques against the standardization of male bodies as the model for individualism and better health. As Moira Gatens (1992) argues, women are often forced to "elide" or suppress their own "corporeal specificity" to participate in liberal democracies.

4. The impact of Michel Foucault's scholarship in the social sciences and humanities. Foucault's work brought forth a rich anthropological, sociological, and historical analysis of the social production of individual bodies and populations through his understanding of discipline and surveillance. He argued that disciplinary power, focused on individuals, operates through institutions and discourses to make docile subjects and productive bodies. When these bodies are considered in aggregate—in other words, defined as a population—a new but related form of power emerges. In his genealogies, Foucault establishes biopower emerging at the beginning of the 19th century in the West. This power led to the proliferation of new regimes, each participating in the social production of distinctive populations: incarcerated bodies, homosexual bodies, insane bodies, reproductive bodies.

As Foucault argued, sovereign rule under a monarchy was displaced and replaced by democratic systems of rules and regulations. The juridical competition of experts (legal, psychoanalytic, medical), the development of discourses of rights, and the concerted effort of disciplines to standardize and normalize the body have together enabled the construction of
modernist knowledge of and about human bodies. On a broader scale, biopolitics is defined as the social practices and institutions established to regulate a population’s quality (and quantity) of life. Disciplinary power and biopower, which together can be understood as biopolitics, operate together to normalize individuals by coercing them, often by subtle mechanisms, to conform to standards and, in so doing, to create self-regulating pliant bodies and populations (e.g., Inda 2005, Rose 2007).

Further, Foucault uses the notion of the panopticon to illustrate the key role of surveillance and normalization in societies. Building on the work of 18th-century English philosopher Jeremy Bentham, Foucault expanded the theoretical scope of the panopticon outside of the prison industrial complex to everyday life. The metaphor of a circular prison, which enables an inspector to be an omnipotent functionary, explains how subjects learn to self-regulate their behavior. The panopticon model, when implemented in public settings, is virtually unnoticed. Briefly applied to contemporary life, we live in a panoptic society constantly inspected by regulatory agencies (like public health departments, the police, the fashion industry) that make the human body an object of the normalizing gaze. That is, bodies are objectified. And since we don’t know when we are being watched, we learn to police ourselves.

Certainly, we are quick to note, we each have the potential to be meaning-making agents, so we can and do resist these forces of normalization. Many of us are often participating in or resisting health precautions, legal standards, and physical enhancements. Self-help health movements, such as HIV/AIDS activism and the women’s health movement, provide just two examples of individuals resisting the dominant discourses of biomedicine (Clarke and Olesen 1999).

Inspired by Foucault and political theory, Judith Butler (1993) proposes a theory of materialization in order to confront the fear that certain social constructionists exhibit regarding physicality of bodies. She argues that it is how some bodies and parts of bodies come to matter that should be the focus of social constructionist analyses. Butler sees constructionism not as a one-shot fixed phenomenon but as “processes of reiteration”: no singular power acts; rather, a persistent yet unstable repetition process itself is powerful. Matter is “a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity and surface” (3). It is Butler’s contention that constructionists, even the most radical, must at some point concede to the materiality of the body. Instead of beginning these inquiries from the point that bodies exist, Butler asserts that we must ask what
are the regulatory norms through which bodies are materialized. How, in other words, are bodies erected?

One of Butler’s most compelling arguments insists that agency must be reworked to avoid embracing the Enlightenment notions of voluntarism and free will while still retaining a theory of subversive performance. This free-willed agent is a regulatory myth. That is, to paraphrase Butler, the subject who resists these regulatory norms is also produced by these norms. Further, she argues that in order to understand the multiple forces of materialization, investigations should include looking at which bodies fail to matter: “How bodies which fail to materialize provide the necessary ‘outside,’ if not the necessary support, for the bodies which, in materializing the norm, qualify as bodies that matter” (Butler 1993:16).

Also highly influenced by Foucault, post-9/11 “security studies” is an emergent, interdisciplinary field that examines the intensifying of social control through the use of techniques of visibility directed at bodies and people’s internalization of such control. State-sanctioned institutions refine techniques to see and observe the movements and behaviors of bodies through biometrics (methods for uniquely recognizing humans based on physical properties) and biotelemetrics (implantable devices for transmission of biological data). Surveillance cameras exercise extraordinary power by monitoring criminal activity, maintaining security, and controlling anything deemed to be deviant according to the ideology of those in power (Currah and Moore 2009). Although contemporary security and surveillance activities may be experienced as unprecedented, states have a long history of making bodies legible, both individually and in the aggregate. Social scientists Jane Caplan and John Torpey track “the nineteenth-century development of documentary practices through which every citizen, not just the delinquent or deviant, was to be made visible to the state: not by physical marks on the body, but by the indirect means of registrations, passes, censuses, and the like” (2001:8).

These emergent identification procedures drew on a repertoire of physical signs and measurements but represented them in written and visual records, both individually portable and centrally filed. Examples include birth certificates, passports, and medical records. Caplan and Torpey further argue:

The elaboration of systematic regimes of representation disclosed a central tension in the project of identification, as opposed to mere classification. The identity document purports to be a record of uniqueness, but
also has to be an element in a classifying series that reduces individuality to a unit in a series, and that is thus simultaneously deindividualizing. This discloses the fundamental instability of the concept of the “individual” as such, and helps to explain the uneasy sense that we never fully own or control our identity, that the identity document carries a threat of expropriation at the same time as it claims to represent who we “are.” (8)

As sociologist David Lyon has written, from modernity onward “the body achieved new prominence as a site of surveillance. Bodies could be rationally ordered through classification in order to socialize them within the emerging nation-state. Bodies were distrusted as sensual, irrational, and thus in need of taming, subject to disciplinary shaping toward new purposes. By associating a name, or later, a number with the body, each person could be distinguished from the next” (2001:292). One chilling example of this is concentration camp tattoos.

As methods of accounting for and watching bodies as they live, consume, get sick, and die have become more sophisticated and highly valuable to the corporate state, we believe that certain academic and applied fields of study have missed opportunities for critical intervention. (For an exception, see art historian Barbara Marie Stafford’s 1991 masterpiece, Body Criticism.) As we discuss in the pages that follow, demography, epidemiology, and economics often lack critical grounding and instead reduce the understanding of human bodies and experiences to auditing operations. Establishing the rates, odds, ratios, and cost/benefit breakdown of bodies erases personhood and subjectivity in the name of the aggregate.

In short, social scientists and humanists have attended to bodies, producing a growing corpus of material on embodiment, embodied experiences, body regulation, bodywork, representations of bodies, and cultural exposures of the body. Yet there has been limited sociological or other attention to the visibility of bodies, including their deliberate erasure, their unanticipated disappearances and elisions, and their celebratory objectification. It is our contention here that bodies are omnipresent; as Butler argues, the materialization of bodies is part and parcel of the creation of social and political life. All discourses and practices rely on the actions, regulations, interactions, and positioning of human bodies and the agents inhabiting them. But because society is stratified along lines of gender, race, class, sexuality, age, disability status, citizenship, geography, and other cleavages, some bodies are public and visually dissected while others are vulnerable to erasure and marginalization.
A Sociology of That Which Is Not Always Observable

In Missing Bodies, we investigate several provocative discursive and visual sites in which bodies are essential to the shape and functioning of the site and are socially present but culturally are missing in action or assume a spectral form. Borrowing most obviously from Avery Gordon’s (1996) astute and beautifully written analysis of “ghostly matters,” we explore the ways in which the sites under discussion here are haunted by these translucent, potent bodies. We attend to the cultural politics at work in corporeal disappearance, as well as the social and economic consequences of visibility and invisibility as they relate to the privileges and benefits of citizenship. By bringing bodies back into the frame and making them socio-logically visible, just as historians Robert Proctor and Londa Schiebinger (2008) have shown regarding “the making and unmaking of ignorance,” we illuminate the complicated processes that render some bodies and relationships imperceptible to the naked eye. Yet we are also fully aware that we do not have the capacity to find all the bodies that need to be seen. We must acknowledge that there are some bodies that may be unknowable.

Gordon’s eloquent work is about haunting as “a constituent element of modern social life.” A sociology of haunting, in her view, is a method for pulling the “seething presence” of ghosts “out of the shadows” and into our analytic frame. To investigate haunting is to write a history of the present—sociology’s special province, as Gordon names it, echoing Foucault. While acknowledging that ghosts are an odd topic for sociologists, she presents a compelling argument for why we should take them seriously. Drawing on three cases or “ghost stories”—the role of Sabrina Spielren in the history of psychoanalysis, the story of Argentina’s disappeared as fictionalized by Luisa Valenzuela, and slavery in the United States as embodied in Toni Morrison’s Beloved—Gordon shows how the visible and the “barely present” are intimately related. She writes, “Visibility is a complex system of permission and prohibitions, of presence and absence, punctuated alternately by apparitions and hysterical blindness” (1996:15; emphasis in original).

According to Gordon, ghost stories and their revelation allow us to more fully comprehend the complexities of social life. She argues that it is so axiomatic as to be banal that sociologists recognize domination and resistance as “basic and intertwined facts of modernity” (Gordon 1996:193). Yet this recognition masks the deeper implications of how power operates, as well as “the always unsettled relationship between what we see
and what we know” (194). By pursuing a sociology of “not only the footprints but the water too,” or that which is not always observable, Gordon offers a valuable tool for understanding “the spellbinding material relations of exchange between the defined and the inarticulate, the seen and the invisible, the known and the unknown” (200). She suggests that not only should we attempt to recognize ghosts, to bring them into the light, but we should also engage with them, speak to them, in order to find out what they can tell us about “the degraded present”—a present that is marked by their disappearance and our longing for them. To be haunted, then, is to contend seriously with the ghosts among us, with “the very tangled way people sense, intuit, and experience the complexities of modern power and personhood.” (194).

Renowned feminist science studies scholar Donna Haraway, too, has significant things to say about visibility. In a discussion about “the statistics of freedom projects”—those projects aimed at directing knowledge toward social change and justice—Haraway interrogates the work of the “invisible fetus” in the politics of reproduction, which she asserts are “at the heart of questions about citizenship, liberty, family, and nation” (1997:189). She suggests that the fetuses and babies we do not see are as significant as the ones we do. Referring to Nancy Scheper-Hughes’s (1992) eloquent analysis of infant mortality in a sugar-plantation region of the Brazilian Nordeste, Haraway raises provocative questions that have, in part, inspired our project: “In a world replete with images and representations, whom can we not see or grasp, and what are the consequences of such selective blindness. . . . How is visibility possible? For whom, by whom, and of whom? What remains invisible, to whom, and why?” (202). Like Gordon, Haraway urges us to focus our attention on the missing images in representations of reality and truth, considering these crucial to the quest for justice and freedom.

Sociologists who consider themselves symbolic interactionists, meaning that they focus on the ways people act toward the objects and situations that have meaning for them and on the interpretive and interactional bases of social organization, have also been interested in invisibility, specifically with the work that connects the visible to the invisible. Sociologist Susan Leigh Star, writing about Anselm Strauss’s legacy, suggests, “the visible things are actions, stuff, bodies, machines, buildings. In social science, as elsewhere, we are constantly wrestling with the properties of visible things: they are many, they are resistant to our attempts to change them, they clutter our landscape everywhere. In facing the tyranny of
blind empiricism, however, we temper the clutter of the visible by creating invisibles: abstractions that will stand quietly, cleanly, and docilely for the noisome, messy actions and materials” (1991:265). She argues that the central insight of Strauss’s sociological research is that the visible and the invisible are “dialectically inseparable.” They are held together by the glue of social action in the form of work. Presaging Gordon’s analysis, Star argues that “to do a sociology of the invisible means to take on the erasing process as the central human behavior of concern, and then to track that comparatively across domains. This is, in the end, a profoundly political process, since so many modern forms of social control rely on the erasure or silencing of various workers, on deleting their work from representations of their work” (281).

Computer scientist Bonnie Nardi and communications scholar Yrjö Engeström (1999) present very similar ideas in their introduction to a special journal issue focused on structures of invisible work. They address the valuable and somewhat vexing question of when the invisible needs to be made visible. As they argue, “Visibility and invisibility are neither good nor bad in themselves. There may be costs to revealing or concealing expertise and work. . . . Visibility and invisibility are not monolithic quantities; they are relative to various perspectives within an organization” (3). Star and Strauss echo this point in an article in which they suggest, “On the one hand, visibility can mean legitimacy, rescue from obscurity or other aspects of exploitation. On the other, visibility can create reification of work, opportunities for surveillance, or come to increase group communication and process burdens” (1999:10). In other words, the concern is not necessarily to increase visibility for the sake of greater clarity alone, without attention to the costs and consequences. Rather, it is to recognize, as Star and Strauss suggest, that “the relation between invisible and visible work is a complex matrix, with an ecology of its own. It is relational, that is, there is no absolute visibility, and illuminating one corner may throw another into darkness. For every gain in granularity of description, there may be increased risk of surveillance” (24).

And with surveillance often comes danger for those bodies caught up in silent, sometimes secretive aggregates. Historian Achille Mbembe, building on Foucault’s notion of biopower, defines sovereignty as “the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not” (2003:27; emphasis in original). He suggests that late-modern colonial occupation combines “the disciplinary, the biopolitical, and the necropolitical,” with states congealing around specific “terror formations”
Human beings become subjects not merely through self-care and biopolitics but also, and most consequentially, in the struggles through which they confront death. Mbembe’s concern is not with sovereign powers whose project is autonomy but with “the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations” (27; emphasis in original). Modernity and terror go hand in hand: sovereignty is the power to kill or let live, and he who has the biggest weapons—including the weapons of representation—rules.

Cultural studies scholar Henry A. Giroux (2006), writing about Hurricane Katrina, proposes the term “biopolitics of disposability” to describe necropolitical phenomena. Echoing theorists such as Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben who contend that the regime of the detention camp is the definitive—and dangerous—biopolitical framework of our time, he writes, “The dialectics of life and death, visibility and invisibility, and privilege and lack in social existence that now constitute the biopolitics of modernity have to be understood in terms of their complexities, specificities, and diverse social formations” (181). Indeed, such a project is what we are doing in this book. Giroux suggests that images of the devastation brought by the hurricane peeled open the façade of the American dream, revealing
the viscera of poverty, racism, and disadvantage at the core. In breaking through “the visual blackout” of social stratification, the Katrina images told us something about the hidden communities and corners into which the forgotten, abandoned, lost, and “wasted” humans have been shunted.

As the ideas of Mbembe, Giroux, and others indicate, race, in particular, is crucial to an articulation of necropolitics, with racism historically functioning to regulate the distribution of death—and, we would add, disease. Discussing slavery as a historical instance of “biopolitical experimentation” and the origins of modern terror, Mbembe argues that slaves were kept alive “in a phantom-like world of horrors and intense cruelty and profanity” (2003:21). Life is subjugated to the power of death, marking necropower and necropolitics as necessary concepts to grasp changes in the contemporary world of terror formations. As Mbembe writes, “Weapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons and the creation of death-worlds, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead” (40; emphasis in original).

These living dead, to borrow from Gordon, inhabit a kind of ghost world. And their presence haunts us.

**Tracking the Ghosts: An Overview of the Book**

Our theoretical project in this book, the recuperation of missing bodies and the circumstances of their erasure, presents a certain methodological quandary: How do we enable bodies that are muted in or by public discourse to speak in their own terms? In other words, how do we as scholars come to understand the missing if their lives and indeed their very corporeal essence are systematically ignored, erased, unseen, or missing in action? How do we “measure” the absent subject? And how do we “operationalize” invisibility? These are more than strictly methodological questions. These are political questions, ones that are deeply interconnected with our theoretical project of innovating an ocular ethic. What such an ocular ethic might enable us to do is to forge a new legacy of looking: one that refuses to assign political value to some bodies at the expense of others, one that treats “human subjects” in the fullness of their lived, embodied experiences.

The ethnographically grounded ocular ethic we propose is a strategy and perspective employed throughout this book. This ethic combines our feminist politics with our unique vantage points as sociologists of science,
The dimensions of the ocular ethic include focusing, magnification, and visualizing. By focusing, we mean the process of drawing our attention and analytic gaze to the often-marginalized bodies, individuals, and groups in social life. While we are attentive to the biopolitical mechanisms that erase their voices and bodies, we also argue that children, dead babies, women, and people with diseases must be seen in situ and on their own terms. The act of seeing them, of focusing on them in a critical way, is an ethical responsibility. The ocular ethic uses techniques of magnification, including ethnography, to reveal, resituate, and recuperate. Ocular lenses are devices that can magnify the image formed by the “objective” lens, and this then can focus our vision on a particular aspect of images in a photograph or tableau. Just as the power of the microscope can be enhanced by turning a dial to increase the degree of magnification of an object, we practice an ocular ethic of magnifying bodies and body parts that are hidden or concealed, sometimes deliberately so.

We are not, of course, unaware that the 1980s and 1990s witnessed a proliferation of studies of representation in U.S. academia. Indeed, we were trained during these years in new theories and methods of the visible by Adele Clarke, Virginia Olesen, Donna Haraway, and other feminist scholars. The so-called postmodern turn in feminism and emergent politics of visibility led to fruitful reconsiderations of gender, race, embodiment, and power. Yet ultimately, the American cultural studies project, dominated by literary scholars and unmoored from its sociological and political roots in British cultural studies of the Birmingham School, fell out of academic vogue. Privileging vision as a dominant way of knowing was seen as hegemonic by postcolonial feminists such as Trinh Minh-Ha (1989), while many social scientists and materialist feminists argued that seeing did not necessarily lead to social change. For example, feminist theorist Nancy Fraser’s (1989, 1997) articulations of redistribution in place of representation stem from this decisive historical moment. We assert here that, although our project attends to visibility and representational politics, our approach is more akin to British cultural studies with its emphasis on empirical grounding of data and obdurate material realities. Even more, we propose that a lack of empirical exactitude likely helped to doom earlier, more abstract theoretical studies of representation.

As sociologists schooled in traditions characterized by a rich history of empirical investigation, including symbolic interaction, medical sociology, and feminist studies, we are not offering a free-floating theory of bodies.
What we offer instead is a grounded, ethnographic, discursive analysis of particular social patterns and practices related to embodiment. In our view, bodies are not merely or only texts or performances but flesh and bone, histories and entanglements, suffering and illness, capabilities and desires, life and death—in short, bodies are material and not just materialized. As social objects (Mead 1934) imbued with a kind of thingness (Merleau-Ponty 1962), bodies are enacted in and through social relations while also retaining corporeal agendas of their own.

Addressing these complicated theoretical and methodological issues requires an innovative approach. We use multisited ethnography here to locate, collect, organize, and analyze data on embodiment (Rapp 1999, Marcus 1995). Note that we are not offering a collection of discrete ethnographies of each category of “the missing” in our project. Rather, we deploy this comparative method strategically to reveal social processes of bodily erasure and exposure. Data sources include children’s books, documentaries, clinical and scientific studies, popular media, policy papers, government documents, autobiographies, scholarly literature, Internet sites, nonprofit materials, fieldwork, interviews, and statistics.

Our six case studies are organized into three thematic sections: Innocents (chapters 2 and 3), which takes up the assemblage of contested meanings that accrue to babies and children; Exposed (chapters 4 and 5), which interrogates the attributable risk of vulnerable populations in biological catastrophes; and Heroes (chapters 6 and 7), which explores the gendered relationships among heroism, capitalism, and nationalism. Taken together, these empirical case studies reveal interconnections among invisibility, vulnerability, risk, and power.

Part I, “Innocents,” begins with chapter 2, a critique of how information about childhood sexuality is socially (re)produced. Sex education in the United States—that particular constellation of discourses, practices, and images—is designed to teach children about “the birds and the bees.” As a society, we have gained insight into children’s sexual identity and the eroticism of children’s bodies largely through psychiatry, based primarily on now-outdated Freudian ideas. The imagined libidos of children, and perceived risk to children and adults (think Lolita here), have shaped this body of knowledge and policy responses to it. One unfortunate consequence of this attitude is that social scientists have tremendous difficulty gaining access to children as research subjects to investigate the emergence of sexual selves. We explore what sexuality education might look like if policymakers, parents, and teachers recognized that “sex ed” has
a great deal to do with youthful bodies engaged in actual erotic activity, from masturbation to intercourse. Why is it, we ask, that we repressively terminate the inquiry by allegedly claiming it to be, as Judith Levine (2002) argues, “harmful to minors”? We argue here that erasing the erotic bodies of children and replacing them with psychiatric abstractions and moral pronouncements, in part, has led not only to a dearth of valuable data about children’s erotic lives but also to underground traffic in visual images of children’s bodies. Such traffic, consumed by “predators” and others, obviously does not foster children’s safety and health.

Continuing our theme of tracking threats to innocents, we turn in chapter 3 to configurations of infant mortality. When this issue is discussed in the United States, it is typically framed in demographic terms in which the problem is about a specific kind of mortality or measure—in this case, “infant”—that often marks or stands in for another problem such as “race” or “class” or “health disparities.” Using statistical measures, we report on the rates of infant mortality, or the incidence and prevalence of child death in the first year. But, it is disturbing to note, the demographic register is almost never about actual dead babies or the terrible grief and pain of child loss. Thus, public conversations about infant mortality are hollow, disembodied, and abstract and so of course fail to generate passion and social movement. What is at stake, we ask, when American discourse about reproductive health and the future of the species avoids the reality of dead babies by instead highlighting infant mortality statistics?

In part II, “Exposed,” we direct our attention to issues of embodiment and vulnerability in the context of “human security” threats. We begin in chapter 4 with an analysis of the HIV/AIDS pandemic as a “biodisaster” of epic scale. Critically analyzing the creation of epidemiological knowledge, we show how quantification is used to represent individual episodes of suffering and disease. Numbers come to represent and to predict aggregate risks, and can be transported across social settings in which the actuarial becomes central to state formation and action. We chart the shift in U.S. policy about HIV/AIDS from an emphasis on public health to one focused on national security, particularly in the post-9/11 era. In this new framing, unlike a previous era in which people with AIDS were considered dangerous vectors of transmission, in the contemporary moment the object of geopolitical concern is the “failed state.” The security interests of those in the developed world hinge on the stability, or lack thereof, of nations devastated by the HIV/AIDS pandemic. In place of public health infrastructure concerned with the sick and abject, we get an intensively
capitalized biosecurity apparatus concerned with the “terrorist” and his or her disintegrating nation of origin.

Resembling the dramatic, overblown flair of FOX News, promoters of the U.S. security apparatus would have us believe that terrorist cells are devilishly plotting to infect the nation-state through deployment of biological and chemical warfare. Of course, exaggerating certain spectacular risks can detract attention from other stealthy and insidious risks that are not widely marketed. For example, our bodies are vulnerable to a consistent but seemingly ordinary, often invisible threat: environmental toxins. These are less-thrilling hazards than bioweapons, yet they may thoroughly devastate organic life. Every day, human bodies are bombarded with harmful synthetic chemicals that degrade our biological integrity. Historically, this toxicity was measured through sampling the environmental agents of absorption—soil, air, or water. More recently, measuring this toxicity can be accomplished through extracting body fluids from human bodies. Human biomonitoring, the scientific enterprise of using biological data to determine toxic load and forecast population exposure rates, is a 20th-century innovation, retooled for the 21st century, which relies on data mining of human bodies. As we examine in chapter 5, different meanings are attached to the use of body fluids, specifically breast milk and semen, which offer a map of gendered power relations.

In part III, “Heroes,” we explore connections among the visible and the obscure, the triumphant and the vulnerable, and masculinity and femininity in relation to the nation-state. In particular, we ask what types of bodies become iconic of a certain kind of American national identity, and how is this produced? Using the figures of über-athlete Lance Armstrong and rescued American soldier Jessica Lynch, we discuss what it means to inhabit a gendered, heroic body in a post-9/11 world. At the same time, we ask what bodies are displaced by the relentless focus on these photogenic heroes.

Popular stories about POW Jessica Lynch represent a familiar and compelling narrative. In the “wag the dog” orchestration and coverage of her rescue, she was portrayed as a kind of fragile, feminine national treasure in need of liberation by tough (male) American troops. As a combatant in the Gulf War, by most definitions she is a genuine hero; she won the Purple Heart, a Bronze Star, and a Prisoner of War medal. Yet Lynch’s story, narrated in chapter 6, is complicated by the fact that she is simultaneously cast as a highly visible hero and as the princess unable to rescue herself. Her heroism is deeply compromised by her femininity and further
unsettled by her refusal before Congress to allow her image to be manipulated in the service of war. Understood within the context of “women in the military,” we juxtapose Lynch’s tale with the invisibility of women soldiers’ lives and deaths. For example, we unravel the intricate mechanisms of power at play in the revelations that women soldiers in Iraq died due to dehydration because they would not drink enough liquids; they were frightened of being sexually assaulted by male soldiers while using latrines at night.

Unlike Lynch, who is portrayed as weak and ultimately traitorous for rejecting the military’s fairy tale about her, champion cyclist Lance Armstrong is rewarded for embracing his own manufactured mythology. Armstrong represents a highly visible specimen of red-blooded American masculinity (and, allegedly, of technical enhancement through “doping”), despite—or perhaps because of—his successful battle against testicular cancer. His “balls” operate as a symbol of recovered manhood, just as his multiple victories in the Tour de France offered redemption and hope to an embattled American public reeling from 9/11. As we show in chapter 7, Armstrong is victory embodied, and his image is reproduced over and over again on magazine covers, merchandise, and the Internet as an example of red, white, and blue heroism. Author of his own narrative, he has catapulted his fame into fortune, as well as being a significant presence in the anti-cancer world. Through his foundation and the LiveStrong Campaign, Armstrong has become the (white) face of testicular cancer—potentially obscuring the mundane lives, daily struggles, and profound suffering of ordinary people with cancer.

In chapter 8, the conclusions, we further articulate our notion of the ocular ethic and offer a working theory of corporeal visibility and invisibility. Our analysis of each substantive area presented here provides a framework within which to consider recurring patterns of erasure and magnification of certain human bodies, revealing sediments of gender, race, class, sexuality, and other configurations of power as they operate in society and popular culture. We offer this book both as an invitation to consider these issues and as a provocation to join us in more ably seeing and theorizing human bodies, their varied and consequential social and political spaces, and the implications of embodiment in the 21st century.

We want to offer a final introductory remark. As scholars of the biopolitical, we are acutely aware that we do not exist outside of these practices but are perpetually caught up within them. For example, we both birthed our children in hospitals and have used pharmaceuticals for a variety of
purposes. Indeed, our very scholarship could be used in ways that extend the scope of biopolitics. What if, for example, in the process of making visible certain bodies, new rationalized practices are developed to control and monitor these bodies? We aim here to foster intellectual and political engagement that does not stand outside of the biopolitical, for this is impossible, but rather carves out creative spaces for alternative and resistant discourses. Alongside critique, we seek to uncover new ways of knowing and living in the 21st century.