Introduction

Why an Anthropology of Disappearance?

A Tentative Introduction

Laura Huttunen and Gerhild Perl

This book is a suggestion for an 'anthropology of disappearance'; it discusses the anthropological dimensions of the disappearance of people in different contexts, in particular geographic locations and at various historical moments. Acknowledging that human absences and presences are intertwined in complex ways, the book sets out to understand the social, political and cultural processes around disappearances: both processes that make people disappear, and processes that follow from disappearances, allowing some of the disappeared to reappear while others remain missing.

People disappear from their families and communities, as well as from the state's bureaucratic gaze. Such diverging modes of going missing may take place simultaneously, but not necessarily. Natural catastrophes, fatal accidents and state violence figure most prominently in public discourse on disappearance, but currently, alarmingly large numbers of people disappear while migrating, often undocumented. And sometimes people disappear voluntarily to escape from unbearable circumstances, and frequently coercion and voluntariness get blurred to the extent that it becomes difficult to distinguish one from the other.

'The disappeared' is a slippery category, and it is challenging to get an analytic grip on it. Disappeared from whom? And for how long should somebody be missing to be counted in this category? Despite its slipperiness, disappeared is also a productive category to think with; it brings us face to face with profound questions about human life: not only about absence and presence, but also about life and

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death, rituals and mourning, liminality and structures, citizenship and personhood, protection and vulnerability, oppression and power, politics and intimacies. Moreover, disappearances have economic implications. Access to the missing person's property might lead to conflict; protracted struggles over compensation to the victims of political violence might be frustrating; and migrant disappearances are entangled in complex ways with growing 'migration industries' (Gammeltoft-Hansen and Nyberg Sørensen 2013).

In their *An Anthropology of Absence* (2010), Bille, Hastrup and Flohr Sørensen discuss the absence of both things and people. They claim that 'sometimes phenomena may have a powerful presence in people's lives precisely because of their absence' (ibid.: 4). In this book, we emphasize the unaccounted-for absence of people, the disappeared or missing persons, and we show that those who have become absent often have a powerful presence in the lives of those left behind exactly because they are missing. In other words, the unaccounted-for absence of people exerts an affective force on the lives of individuals and communities left behind, as several authors in this volume show (Sen; Drotbohm; Katz; Matyska; Tecca; Kivilahti and Huttunen, all this volume).

While we focus on the often-excruciating experience of a human being's disappearance, we take inspiration from Bille and colleagues' discussion (2010) on the various ways in which the absence of objects and practices shapes human conduct and social relations. People's presences and absences in the context of disappearances are mediated through various kinds of things and practices, ranging from photographs and other memorabilia to burial ceremonies arranged in the absence of the body, from life vests and other objects left behind by undocumented migrants (Laakkonen, this volume) to artwork addressing migrant disappearances (Dziuban, this volume), from passports and other official documents, such as a police file containing a missing person's complaint (Sen, this volume), to text, sound and video messages travelling along unofficial routes to the families of the missing (Kivilahti and Huttunen, this volume) and social media (Katz, this volume).

In our time, characterized by heightened mobility of people, we are accustomed to living for varying periods with the absence of family members, friends and colleagues. Communication technologies give us abundant means to keep in touch across distances, and to create presences in the absence, so to speak. When such communication fails, worries emerge. The bearable length of an absent one's silence varies greatly depending on the political, familial and

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biographical circumstances, but, in every context, there is a limit after which failed communication raises deep concern among families and communities. The inexplicable disappearance of a person leaves a void, and if the unaccounted-for absence continues for a long time, not only emotional but also practical issues arise, such as the statuses of family members left behind (Drotbohm, this volume) and access to the property of the missing person. At the same time, the missing are often culturally liminal figures between life and death, who create a disturbing absence in the larger community (Tecca, this volume), and such voids generate what we call 'disturbed intimacies'. Yet these disturbed intimacies may give rise to new relationships (Marre and Leinaweaver, this volume) and serendipitous communities of fictive kinship that are intimately linked in their shared loss, indignation and search for a loved one (Hernández Castillo, this volume).

The socially and culturally liminal character of the category of the disappeared points to the ever-present fear that the missing person is dead. People missing from their families for a protracted period are, of course, not always dead. Some of them may be alive in captivity, or they may have decided not to contact their families for one reason or another. But the protracted absence always raises the possibility of death, and this liminality has been fruitfully approached within the anthropology of death (Robben 2004a, 2004b, 2018). Perhaps more than anyone else, the disappeared indicate the porous boundaries between life and death. While evidenced deaths provide the living with answers, or at least with the certainty of demise, thus allowing them to mourn, disappearances cause great uncertainty among the living. The bereaved are not only robbed of a friend or family member, they are also deprived of knowledge. However, sometimes those left behind do not want to know what happened to the missing person, because the state of not-knowing also allows for the hope of recovery, reunion, reconciliation and, ultimately, life itself. In addition, in post-war contexts survivors might feel pressured to provide evidence for purposes of body identification and war crime investigations and might find solace not only in disclosing but also in withholding information. Others might harbour the desire to close this cruel chapter in their own history and try to direct their attention, feelings and thoughts towards the future. And sometimes the disappeared themselves withhold knowledge about their whereabouts (Matyska, this volume) and intentionally disappear from certain social sites, relationships and networks (Drotbohm, this volume).

To develop an 'anthropology of disappearance', tracing both the causes and consequences of disappearances is crucial. Therefore, we

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put centre stage the analysis of both the conditions and ramifications of disappearances in the intimate lives of those left behind and in the political lives of the communities from which the disappeared are absent. Moreover, the analysis of (missing) state practices related to the search for the disappeared advances our understanding of the disappeared's reappearance in alternative political discourses. Such an analysis sheds light on the emergence of a disparate and discontinuous field of various non-state actors that addresses disappearances (Huttunen forthcoming), and points to the global architecture of such actors, currently in the making.

Conceptualizing Disappearance

How to conceptualize the disappearances of people? How to name them? What are the implications of varying concepts that address human absences? These questions have been tackled not only by scholars, but also by civil society, family members, activists, human rights organizations, political groups and international humanitarian legal professionals around the world. Thus, any existing category of 'missing persons' or 'disappeared persons' is the outcome of interpretive work, and often of contestations with both global and local implications.

The practice of making people disappear has existed throughout history, in one form or another. During colonialism, particularly in the slave trade, and in the context of genocides, ethnic cleansing and population resettlements, countless people have disappeared. Used as a terror tactic, enforced disappearance in the form of arbitrary detention, forced displacement and targeted killing has largely been implemented by military dictatorships and authoritarian regimes. State-sponsored disappearances seek to create submission among citizens by placing some people outside the protection of the law and by refusing to reveal their fate to their families and communities. As such, enforced disappearance is an effective way of creating cultures of fear, targeting political opposition and accomplishing genocidal projects (e.g. Gatti 2014; Huttunen 2016; Robben 2005; Sanford 2003; Wagner 2008).

Historically, the term 'enforced disappearance' refers to the political significance of state terror since the systematic use of state-sponsored disappearances in Latin America, particularly in Argentina, Chile and Uruguay in the 1970s and 1980s (Frey 2009; Gatti 2014; Robben 2005). During the dictatorship in Argentina

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(1976–83), *los desaparecidos* became a new 'ontological condition' as the vanishing of people was the deliberate goal of the military government (Schindel 2020b: 37). The relentless search for the disappeared of Argentina's military dictatorship by the Madres de Plaza de Mayo figures as the most prominent movement of civil protest and political activism that demands truth, justice and accountability from the state. The ways in which enforced disappearance has become defined and codified in international human rights law, from the 1978 UN resolution to the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance in 2006, are based on Latin American experiences, and the active work and international cooperation of Latin American NGOs and activists (Frey 2009; Guest 1990). Yet the violence of disappearances in Latin America and beyond has increasingly become an issue that exceeds direct state violence. Organized crime, such as drug cartels and kidnapping gangs, uses the practice of making people disappear to gain control over territories, migratory movements and natural resources, often with state complicity (González Villarreal 2012; Calveiro 2021; Schwartz-Marin and Cruz-Santiago 2016).

The empirical insights and theoretical considerations of state-sponsored disappearances put forward in Latin American scholarship (e.g. Calveiro 2004; da Silva Catela 2001; Gatti 2014) have informed academic research on disappearances in other world regions (Gatti 2011) and advanced methods of forensic identification (e.g. Fondebrider 2005; Ferrándiz and Robben 2015; Stover and Peress 1998). Scholars who have themselves fallen victim to enforced disappearances, were forced into exile or grew up with the inheritance of these histories have provided critical analysis on the totality and complexity of the regime of disappearances (Calveiro 2004; Gatti 2014), and this work has considerably contributed to the public awareness and legal recognition of enforced disappearances as a state crime. In addition, experiences with the politics of disappearance in one's own family and community are also reflected in participatory research approaches and the merging of activist involvement and anthropological research (Hernández Castillo, this volume). Alongside important explorations of civil society's political engagement, social movements, small acts of resistance in everyday life, and feminist struggles (e.g. Calveiro 2004; Delgado Huertas 2016; Iliná 2020), scholars have produced critical knowledge on the political importance of kinship in the context of enforced disappearances. These insights have influenced research in other world regions such as Kashmir (Zia 2016), Lebanon (Comaty 2019) and Cyprus (Sant

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Cassia 2005) – to name just a few.

Against this backdrop, it does not come as a surprise that disappearance as a translation of *desaparición* is a concept developed in the Global South, and as such challenges the hegemonic division of knowledge production, 'where the South provides the case studies and the North the theories and concepts applied to them' (Schindel 2020b: 33). Today the concept has experienced a transnational, transdisciplinary and trans-scalar journey, and in 2006 it became a legal category in the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (UN 2010) and was codified in international law as a crime against humanity. Taking a cue from Zuzanna Dziuban (2020), we understand disappearance as a 'travelling concept' (cf. Bal 2002) that is always in flux, reworked, changing and multivocal. It is a concept that travels between geographical places, historical periods, social and cultural contexts, political movements and different disciplines (Dziuban 2020: 63–64).

The diverse meaning of the word in different languages expresses its entanglement with local histories and cultural contexts. The untranslatability of vernacular notions into English, or the other way around, shows that there is no single origin of the concept (Rubin 2015), and scholars have explored the term's nuances in a variety of languages such as Spanish, Arabic, Polish and Bosnian (Dziuban 2020; Frey 2009; Matyska 2020; Slyomovics 2005; Wagner 2008). Besides, and as Susan Slyomovics (2005: 51) argues, the cruel practice of making someone disappear also takes place without precise wording. To address the multilayered nature of this concept and to grasp the subtle differences, contextual specificities or generalizable shared dynamics, scholars have coined such terms as the 'original disappeared' (Gatti 2014), 'social disappearances' (Gatti 2020; Schindel and Gatti 2020), 'detained-disappeared' (Gatti 2014), 'mundane disappearances' (Willis 2021), 'disappeared-dead and disappeared-living' (Robben 2014), 'new disappeared' (Gatti 2020), 'individual disappeared' (Huttunen forthcoming), 'accidentalized disappearances' (Feldman 2019) and 'extended disappearances' (as we suggest further below). The shared constitutive element of these context-specific particularities and diverging semantic meanings is the unaccounted-for absence of somebody (Rubin 2015: 15). The multiplicity of concepts also mirrors the anthropological importance of contextualizing the complex politics and practices of disappearances in their specific time and place. Moreover, the variety of both vernacular conceptions and scholarly definitions points to the fact that delineating the category of the missing or disappeared is always an interpretive process.

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In this book, state violence and state complicity in the form of disappearances are discussed in the chapters by Atreyee Sen, Diana Marre and Jessaca Leinaweaver, Stefan Millar, and Anna Matyaska. Sen's chapter shows in painful detail how the disappearance of a young man caused by the Indian state shatters the life of a family in the aftermath of a revolutionary movement. Marre and Leinaweaver's chapter expands our understanding of disappearances by conceptualizing state-sponsored forceful adoptions during the Spanish dictatorship as a specific mode of enforced disappearances. Millar analyses the colonial legacies of enforced disappearance in the context of the governing of present-day refugee populations by the postcolonial Kenyan state. Finally, Matyska's chapter discusses the ways in which civil society challenges the democratic state by demanding that it takes responsibility for protecting all citizens from disappearance.

Absences, however, are not always conceptualized as disappearances. 'Missing person' is another rather widespread category, deployed especially by humanitarian organizations (e.g. ICRC 2013), but also by some scholars (e.g. Wagner 2008; Huttunen 2016). While the term 'enforced disappearance' refers quite clearly to state crime and the intentionality of disappearances, the existence of an identifiable perpetrator and the quest for responsibility, the term 'missing person' foregrounds the void left behind in the social world by someone's disappearance. 'Missing person' as a term is embedded in international humanitarian law (UN 2010) and not in international human rights law, and rather than posing questions of accountability, it foregrounds the need to search for the missing and give information to those left behind. As such, it is safer for humanitarian organizations to use, and it enables their access to conflict zones and their efforts to address immediate needs. However, absences conceptualized as 'missing persons' can also be mobilized successfully in political projects of demanding accountability, as the example of the ex-Yugoslavian territories shows (Nyberg Sørensen and Huttunen 2020; Huttunen forthcoming).

While enforced disappearance as a political strategy targets certain populations and specific individuals considered subversive and dissident citizens, a new category of disappeared has emerged since the 1990s, reflected in the vanishing of lives deemed illegal. To improve their livelihood and in search of a viable future, people migrate and seek refuge in more stable and wealthier countries. Due to visa restrictions and ever more intensified border controls, undocumented migrants and refugees risk their lives during arduous journeys and

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many go missing for an indeterminate period. Therefore, migrant disappearances add a further dimension to the discussion of accountability for disappearances, and of various forms of intentionality and force in making people disappear.

The politics of deterrence, detention, deportation and, increasingly, death lie at the centre of critical migration and border studies (Andersson 2014; Kalir and Wissink 2016; Kalir 2017; de León 2015, Drotbohm and Hasselberg 2015; Follis 2015). With this book, we contribute to this body of knowledge by suggesting that disappearance is a further condition and consequence of the contemporary governance of human mobility. Around the world, migrants and refugees are denied legal pathways to apply for asylum and are thus forced to cross borders without authorization and through ever more remote, depopulated and perilous regions (De León 2015). Deserts and waters are operationalized as 'hostile terrain' where dead bodies and disappeared persons function as deterrence to future migrating people (ibid.: 27). Although migrants know about the dangers such a journey entails, they still take the risks in order to actively modify their and their families' lives and futures (De Genova 2017; Lucht 2011; Perl 2018; Zagaria 2020). In public and political discourse, responsibility for death and disappearance during migration is frequently displaced and deflected to environments, accidents, smugglers and refugees themselves (Perl and Strasser 2018: 510; see also Laakkonen 2022). However, recently migratory disappearances have been incorporated into the studies of the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances (Schindel 2020a; UN Human Rights Council 2017).

To elucidate the role of nation states in migrants' disappearances, we loosely build on Allen Feldman's (2019) notion of 'accidentalized disappearances', which signals the discursive masking of underlying structural violence. Framing migrants' deaths and disappearances as 'desolate accidents, unavoidable tragedies or necessary evils' allows states to exempt themselves from any responsibility for death and disappearance that their rigorous migration policies cause (Perl 2019: 222). Yet, differently to enforced disappearances of citizens as victims of authoritarian regimes, in the context of migratory disappearances, an individualizable and identifiable agent can mostly not be determined. The lack of a single 'disappearing agent' (Gatti 2020: 32) raises severe ethical and practical problems in terms of accountability and compensation. Sometimes, however, the 'disappearing agent' is a person or group who can be named and identified also in migratory contexts, for instance in cases of illegal pushbacks carried out by state

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agencies, or when smugglers detain or kill migrants and hide their bodies (see Duhaime and Thibault 2017).

While scholars have thoroughly discussed the alarming 'politics of letting die' (Basaran 2015; Heller and Pezzani 2017; Perl 2018) performed in the Sonoran Desert, the Mediterranean Sea, the Sahara Desert and the Pacific Ocean, in this book we put the particularities of 'politics of letting disappear' centre stage. The context of migration shows that some people are more 'disappearable' than others. Laakkonen (2022) claims that 'disappearability' is a structural condition that makes some people more vulnerable to disappearance because of their lack of citizenship in countries of settlement, their class position in their countries of origin, their racialized bodies and their place in global hierarchies of wealth and protection. Moreover, many states do not systematically register all their citizens, which necessarily makes them more disappearable. In addition, the need to hide one's identity to get access to the West and to avoid deportation makes people more disappearable if they die en route without identity documents.

In this book, chapters by Victoria Tecca, Ville Laakkonen, Saila Kivilahti and Laura Huttunen, and Zuzanna Dziuban address migrant disappearances in the English Channel and the Mediterranean Sea and the vulnerabilities of undocumented migration from different angles. Tecca's chapter offers an intimate account of the fear and ambiguity in a migrant settlement in France, created by the disappearance of a migrant woman while crossing clandestinely to the UK. Laakkonen's chapter depicts the island of Lesvos as deeply marked by both the presences and absences of undocumented migrants. He argues that the traces of their former presence only become understandable through contextualization in the historical and political structures that make migrants susceptible to death and disappearance. Kivilahti and Huttunen's chapter shows the importance of informal social networks for the families of disappearing migrants in the absence of state protection. Finally, Dziuban's chapter discusses the specific violence of being exposed to death and disappearance on the high seas and analyses artistic projects protesting such violence.

Besides differences, there are important similarities between enforced and migratory disappearances. Whether it is the individual citizen actively abducted, detained and even killed, or the collectivized category of 'illegal migrants' who are abandoned at sea or in deserts, both are ideologically rendered as threats to an imagined nation's security, value system and culture. Antonius Robben argues that the Argentine military dictatorship deemed citizens classified as

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subversive 'unfit to live in Argentina for not embodying Argentine culture and traditional values, and therefore subject to annihilation' (Robben 2014: 147). Such an underlying dynamic of denying cohabitation, not to say existence, also takes place in the Mediterranean Sea and beyond, and so-called 'pushbacks' speak volumes to that. Forcefully removing 'unwanted' bodies from the (imagined) national spaces in the Global North, thereby accepting possible death and disappearance, reveals the lingering colonial and racist ideologies underpinning the contemporary governance of mobility (Perl 2020). Although causes, circumstances and practices of disappearances differ greatly between enforced disappearances in authoritarian regimes and accidentalized disappearances in liberal democracies, they both build on denying certain people the right to cohabit the earth, which for Hannah Arendt is the precondition of political life (Arendt 1963; Butler 2012; Feldman 2019).

These are extreme examples of disappearances that have shaped our world throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. However, there are also other modes of disappearances that fall into neither the category of politically motivated enforced disappearances nor that of the political abandonment reflected in accidentalized disappearances. Some disappearances are connected to individual life courses and idiosyncratic situations, to mental health problems, economic hardships or sometimes criminal situations, to suicide attempts or a will to disappear intentionally – for example by going into hiding and changing one's identity. How to make sense of the hundreds of cases where the disappearing agent is the missing person themselves? Why integrate disappearances that at first glance seem voluntary, intentional and apolitical into an 'anthropology of disappearance' that is concerned with the politics surrounding human vanishing?

Because we understand 'disappearances' as a travelling concept with multiple origins, as mentioned above, we contend that including 'mundane missing' in the discussion allows us to broaden existing conceptualizations. What connects the diverse realities of disappearances is that they all create a ghostly existence between life and death, and they all leave the families and communities to tackle excruciating uncertainties. The disappeared index a spectral existence that is neither dead nor alive. Moreover, all disappearances challenge the governing logics of the modern state, where citizens are categorized as dead or living, and those falling between these categories create problems for the smooth running of the state machinery. Marriage, inheritance and rights to property are codified in laws, customs and state regulations. The disappearance of a person disturbs the

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individual's relationship with the state, and the protracted absence of the disappeared makes many practical things difficult for those left behind. Intimate relations are disturbed by disappearances not only in emotional and cultural but also legal and practical terms (Matyska 2020). In addition, 'mundane disappearances' further reveal the inseparable intertwining of intimacies and politics. As contributions to this book show (see Drotbohm; Katz; Matyska), mundane disappearances are not merely an individual problem but are connected with poverty, class, race, gender and unattained mental care. In addition, mundane disappearances bear a similarity with state-sponsored and accidentalized disappearances, since they disclose the importance of family members as the key actors in the search.

Disturbed Intimacies

Disappearances are often aggressive invasions in people's lives that disconnect experiences, separate worlds and desynchronize times (cf. Feldman 2019). The disappeared, though spatially and physically no longer present, impose themselves through their absence. When people are suddenly gone and nothing is heard from them, those left behind experience great uncertainty. Such 'intimate uncertainties' (Strasser and Piart 2018) disturb the life course and open up to various modes of imagining the whereabouts, causes and reasons for disappearing. Thus, politics of disappearance shape the most intimate relationships. The sudden disappearance of a loved one intrudes subjectivities and leaves families to struggle with unanswerable questions, agonizing fears or nagging feelings of guilt and shame. Yet sometimes feelings of grief and indignation get intertwined, and they enable serendipitous encounters resulting in new political communities that protest state violence and, moreover, restore and reinvent kinship ties in unexpected ways (Hernández Castillo, this volume). Thereby, and as Rosalva Aída Hernández Castillo shows in the case of Mexico and Atreyee Sen in the case of India, kinship relations, especially motherhood, become politicized both on a collective and an individual level.

Ethnography is often grounded in intimate relationships built during fieldwork, and as the contributions to this book show, the complex nature of disturbed intimacies is best approached with ethnographic sensibilities and the analysis of historical legacies (Drotbohm; Hernández Castillo; Kivilahti and Huttunen; Sen; Marre and Leinaweaver, all this volume). Following survivors' and

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families' accounts of disappearances makes the singularity of each story and the incommensurable experience of each person visible (cf. Edkins 2011). Yet, despite the incomparability of individual suffering in the experiential realm, all these stories speak of the devastating impact disappearances have on intimate lives. Thus, the ethnographic approach needs to pay attention to details and nuances by providing carefully textured accounts of disturbed, and also restored and reinvented, relationships and family histories. To substantiate this claim, here we present some ethnographic details to illuminate the long shadows that disturbances throw on intimate relations.

A young woman of Bosnian origin living in Finland, talking to Laura Huttunen some twenty years after her father's disappearance, describes in rather ghostly terms her encounters with relatives and other residents in the village from which she and her mother had escaped during the Bosnian war (1992–95). Invading soldiers abducted her father, and the family never heard from him again. When the woman visits her childhood village now, people greet her, repeating time and again that she looks exactly like her disappeared father. To be seen as the embodiment of the disappeared parent is a deeply ambiguous inheritance for a young person. Through this resemblance, the woman's body has become a reminder of her disappeared father and the devastating war. The ethnically cleansed person and, thus, the terror of genocidal violence are literally inscribed in her body. Another Bosnian woman, whose husband disappeared around the same time, is torn between being the widow or the wife of a missing man – a point showing clearly the difference between the death and the disappearance of a loved one. After the war, she returned to the Srebrenica area, to live in a remote village almost emptied by the genocidal violence, without many social connections or possibilities for a proper livelihood. She now stubbornly inhabits the house built by her disappeared husband, as it is the only tangible thing remaining of him. Leaving the house would mean leaving her husband and accepting that he will never return (Huttunen forthcoming). As these examples show, disappearances do not mark the end of existing relationships; rather the disappeared become an implicit presence in the world of the living, and those left behind maintain, willingly or not, affective and social bonds with them.

In the regime of enforced disappearance, terror does not stop at the targeted individual, but spreads. Therefore, conceptualizing disappearance as 'extended disappearance' allows us to better analyse how the threat and act of making people disappear stretches beyond the individual to entire families, communities and properties, hovering

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over the population and paralysing them with fear (see also Millar, this volume). Kinship ties in particular become dangerous in such contexts, and families of the disappeared might be surveilled and harassed for years and even disappear themselves (Slyomovics 2005: 48). Disappearance can become a 'collective punishment' that engulfs relatives, friends, people living in the same household or simply someone who is in the wrong place at the wrong time (ibid.: 54).

The following example from Morocco during the 'years of lead' – the period between the 1960s and the end of the 1980s, which was marked by oppression and state violence – is particularly telling in this regard. Mohamed Oufkir, close confidant of King Hassan II and feared interior minister responsible for the killing, arbitrary detainment and enforced disappearances of political opponents, participated in an unsuccessful coup d'état in 1972. In retaliation, King Hassan II had him killed, and made Oufkir's wife and six children – the youngest only three years old – and two family friends disappear by sending them to one of Morocco's dreaded secret prisons. Perpetrator in one instance, victim in the other, Mohamed Oufkir was executed and his family came to experience the cruel reality of enforced disappearance, which he played a major role in shaping (Oufkir and Fitoussi 2002; Slyomovics 2005: 54–56). Under almost unbelievable circumstances, they managed to escape fifteen years later.

The Oufkir family's story exemplifies that in authoritarian regimes, no one is immune from disappearance, not even young children. The danger of disappearance affects the entire population and governs them through fear, destroying existences and annihilating subjectivities. What is more, the end of terror regimes does not mean that the terror ends for families. Even after regime change, states such as Morocco and Argentina have used the absence of bodies and the occasional reappearance of a disappeared person as a cover-up strategy. Government authorities have denied their violent practices of eliminating dissidents and their families and claimed that those who went missing are living a normal life in exile (Slyomovics 2005: 45; Robben 2000: 89). Such blatant lies weigh heavily on the families because states thus exempt themselves from any responsibility and deny recognition of what happened to the disappeared and their families. The disappearance itself disappears (Feldman 2019).

This book's strong focus on ethnographic particularities in a variety of field sites allows us to reveal disturbances caused by disappearances in different contexts. Thus, to approach the disturbed intimacies in different political and social settings and to explore the

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voids left by the disappeared, but also the new emerging communities, contributions to this volume (Drotbohm, Hernández Castillo, Katz, Marre and Leinaweaver, Sen) ask how those left behind refashion their mnemonic attachments to the disappeared and modify their affective bonds to pacify disturbed intimacies. How are the disappeared apprehended? How, if at all, can the disappeared be socially and emotionally assimilated? How do the disappeared still exist in the minds of others and how are they embodied? What kinds of practical effects do the disappearances have in the lives of families? And how do they mould the past, present and future?

In her contribution in this volume and through a close reading of an individual story, Atreyee Sen shows how the entire life of an Indian woman whose son disappeared in police custody was changed dramatically; in her analysis, state violence translates into the social death of close family members of the disappeared person. Heike Drotbohm shows that the disappearance of Cape Verdean migrant mothers can become charged with shame and not only leads to social reorganization but also to a 'slow silencing' that conceals the disappearance itself. Stefan Millar's study on enforced disappearances and colonial legacies in the Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya demonstrates how fear and threat penetrate both the intimate and political lives of a whole community. Anna Matyska engages the question of disturbed intimacies by asking whether or not bereaved Polish families have a right to search for their missing kin if they disappeared intentionally. Does kinship justify the quest to know their whereabouts? Whatever the answer to this question, the intimate lives of family members left behind are severely affected by the absence of the disappeared person. Yet, and as we show further below, individuals and collectives who have to cope with absences also enact their agency and contest, intervene and protest political conditions and practices of concealment.

Although we emphasize the affective and emotional dimension of disappearances, and the importance of mourning for those left behind, we do not want to propose a simplified or normative understanding of what such affective engagement should look like. While some people are probably mourned more than others, and, on some occasions, mourning is expressed more strongly than in others, there is no way to measure 'grades' of mourning or anxiety. What we do suggest, however, is that disappearance is always socially and culturally disturbing, and in most cases intimately painful, giving rise to questions, anxieties, insecurities, worries and practical problems in different combinations, but also to resistance.

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The Politics of Reappearance

The disappeared and their families do not keep quiet. The disappeared-living and the disappeared-dead reappear either as surviving witnesses, mortal remains or haunting spectres. They refuse the denial of cohabiting the earth imposed upon them and instead inscribe themselves in history, in one way or another. Survivors' testimonies and accounts from children and grandchildren in the form of novels, films, memoirs and interviews have been crucial for the political recognition and public acknowledgement of both enforced and also accidentalized disappearance (Blejmar 2016; Gatti 2014; Slyomovics 2005). In addition, truth commissions, criminal trials and exhumations have played a major role in prosecuting perpetrators, or at least in the global recognition of disappearance as a crime against humanity (Anstett 2014; Anstett and Dreyfus 2014; Moon 2020; Renshaw 2011; Ferrándiz and Robben 2015; Rosenblatt 2015).

Thus, the disappeared re-enter the social and cultural sphere as political actors in various projects and discourses across the world. The mothers of the disappeared in Argentina and their stubborn protest have become iconic figures in the struggle to make the disappeared reappear, either dead or alive or symbolically. Similar social movements of mothers and other family members have emerged elsewhere as well, for example in Bosnia-Herzegovina (Wagner 2008). In connection with migrant deaths and disappearances as well, families and a concerned public have become key political actors, which is mirrored in the current proliferation of organizations addressing the issue, with differing political agendas. Some of these organizations, such as grass-roots family networks, work to clarify the fate of the missing, while others address the political circumstances that produce disappearances in the first place, such as oppressive state policies or restrictive migration regimes. Sometimes researchers also participate in the struggles to make the disappeared re-appear (Hernández Castillo; Dziuban, both this volume). Some of the projects are very local, tied to context-specific conditions and experiences, while others address larger issues of inequality and power on a global scale. Sometimes the projects succeed in returning the missing – often this means locating and identifying the dead and bringing the bodies of the disappeared back to the families for rituals and mourning. In other cases, the disappeared are not found, but are symbolically present in political discourses and practices.

Many political projects connected with disappearances aim exactly at finding the missing and returning them to families. However, this

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is often not enough. Families keep asking questions about accountability for the deaths and disappearances, and reappearing bodies evoke further political trajectories. The reappeared dead bodies of the disappeared have given rise to political struggles in such places as Argentina, Bosnia, Spain, Rwanda and Cambodia, to name just some of the best-known examples. However, there are some important critiques that probe the connection between burial and closure and question the taken-for-granted assumption of the importance, or even ethics, of excavating and returning the body to families and relatives (Rosenblatt 2015: 125–36). Dead bodies, human remains and identification processes can become sites of bitter political contestations, and the remains are appropriated and manipulated for various ends (Petrović-Šteger 2009; Verdery 1999). Consequently, recovered bodies become evidence of crimes and atrocities only through interpretive work (e.g. Aragüete-Toribio 2022; Moon 2013). It is precisely the polyvocal nature of human remains and the complexities of the interpretive work in politically tense conditions that make processes of addressing past atrocities so susceptible to political manipulation.

Various modes of interpretation and contestation show that the political dimension of human life is implicated in disappearances in many ways. For anthropological analysis, this raises questions both of the politics of disappearance and the politics of reappearance. While the *politics of disappearance* delineates the social and political conditions that make people disappear in the first place and allows an anthropological mapping of oppressive and violent politics, or indifference, extreme poverty and other forms of deprivation, the *politics of reappearance* points to the polyvocal modes in which missing or disappeared persons enter political discourses. The question of how these discourses succeed or fail in mobilizing resources to make the disappeared reappear in real life thereby becomes crucial. Therefore, an 'anthropology of disappearance' needs to address the following questions: When, and by whom, are the missing searched for? Who raises questions about disappearances? Who are the actors and what are the arenas for politicizing disappearances? How are disappearances conceptualized by political actors, and how is accountability addressed?

Instead of understanding (re)appearances and disappearances as strict opposites, the 'anthropology of disappearance' we seek to put forward with this book further asks: at what point in history do the disappeared reappear and why? What are the ethico-political conditions and psychosocial necessities that make the disappeared reappear? And how do they reappear – as persons still alive, as dead

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bodies or human remains, or in more symbolic forms, such as politicized victims in political discourses, as ghosts and legends, or in loved ones' dreams and nightmares? These multiple modes of reappearance also refer to what Susan Slyomovics (2005: 47) has called 'subtle gradations of disappearance': the fact that some disappeared reappear while others remain missing, or the fact that some reappear to be judged, persecuted again or liberated and re-disappear to protect themselves and their families.

In the contributions to this volume, the disappeared reappear in different forms. In Saila Kivilahti and Laura Huttunen's and in Victoria Tecca's work, they reappear in competing stories, narratives and witness accounts. In Ori Katz's research, the missing are present in the actual work of searching, while in Atreyee Sen's chapter a disappeared son materializes in the case file carried for forty years by his mother. In Zuzanna Dziuban's research, the disappeared reappear in various politically motivated art projects, in Ville Laakkonen's chapter as life jackets, shoes, water bottles and other debris left behind by migrants, and in Diana Marre's and Jessaca Leinaweaver's chapter, entangled practices and political projects both hide and reappear disappeared children. The material and discursive, the personal and political, the symbolic and affective are entangled in many ways in the reappearances of the missing, as the examples in this book show.

Knowledge Trouble and Alternative Ways of Knowing

Inevitably, anthropological research on disappearances and the disappeared remains incomplete: although some of the disappeared return alive, many reappear only as spectres unable to give their testimony, and thus, knowledge often remains inaccessible, elusive and contested. As such, disappearance and the disappeared index the limits of empiricism, pose methodological challenges to anthropologists and raise questions about the possibility of knowing.

Disappearances and the disappeared challenge the practice of ethnography inasmuch as they elude the realm of the observable and materialize instead in distorted rumours, disjointed fantasies and competing narratives. Researching disappearances and the disappeared thus calls for an engagement with the voids, hollows, traces and gaps left behind by those who are no longer present. Yael Navaro (2020) recently termed this line of questioning a 'negative methodology' to challenge conventional research approaches and to advocate

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for an anthropologists' methodological position beyond 'evidentiary knowledge making' (ibid.: 162). Navaro turns to the inverse of the observable presence by conceptually engaging erasure, voids, inaccessibility and unavailability, and productively confronts the limits of empiricism, which become especially apparent when researching disappearance and the disappeared.

Tightly interwoven with these methodological considerations is the troubling question of knowing. Intrinsic to disappearances is not only a person's absence but also the absence of knowledge. Unanswered questions regarding the whereabouts and the conditions of the missing person, and about the causes and circumstances of the disappearance, haunt the bereaved, who are left to wonder what the person thought, felt, suffered and maybe said during and after the event of disappearing. To quell such concerns, knowledge often becomes an indispensable good for moving forward in life. However, and as contributions to this book show (Sen; Katz; Kivilahti and Huttunen, all this volume), even if knowledge is only accessible in a 'piecemeal, compromised way' (Navaro 2020: 164), families and communities left behind create alternative ways of knowing in the search for the disappeared.

Centring an 'anthropology of disappearance' in epistemic uncertainties and alternatives allows for a powerful lens to study the absent not through the linearity of a singular history but through an assemblage of different stories, imaginaries and interpretations that all contribute to the production of the category of the disappeared. Inspired by Gatti, who identifies disappearance as 'a powerful category that helps us understand social life when social life is impacted by a strong breakdown of meaning' (2020: 37), we locate disappearances in the realm of political *and* epistemic contestation. Disappearances index the dim edges of human existence and challenge the human capacity for meaning-making. However, confronted with the often senseless event of disappearance, interpretive work by individuals and communities might also open new ways of knowledge production.

The chapters of this book depart from a mode of knowing that goes beyond positivist data, and consider contextualization and interpretation as central paths to knowing. We contend that besides analysing the structural conditions that make people vulnerable to disappearances, the ethnographic task is to contextualize the various traces left behind by the missing, to reveal interconnections and to interpret knowledge fragments, including competing narratives and contradicting imaginations. Hence, instead of patching together scattered information and trying to reconstruct the 'true' and 'whole'

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course of events that cause disappearance and loss, the contributions to this book show that fragile knowledge needs to be approached through a process of contextualization. In other words, disappearances say as much of *what is not* as of *what is* (Laakkonen; Katz; Sen; Matyska, all this volume). Against this backdrop, the chapters initiate reflections on methodological challenges in the study of what is not there (Tecca, this volume) and on the multilayered negotiations of epistemic uncertainties (Kivilahti and Huttunen, this volume), and ask about the intertwinement of knowledge and interpretation in the construction of the category of the disappeared (Katz, this volume).

There exists, however, also positive knowledge about the disappeared, often en masse. One needs only to consider disappearances in the context of natural catastrophes and plane crashes, where often tourists and so-called 'expats' go missing, or the identification of the exhumed scattered mortal remains of the mass graves in the ex-Yugoslavian territories (Wagner 2008). Forensic scientists in particular produce a massive amount of knowledge about the missing (Rosenblatt 2015). Therefore, it is important to ask what knowledge is accessible to whom and address the qualities, sources and transmission of knowledge. The emergence of novel identification technologies and an unprecedented transnational effort to identify human remains have given rise to what Anstett and Dreyfus (2014) call a 'forensic turn': the expectation that exhumations and scientifically grounded identification are the default method of encountering unidentified human remains. A whole humanitarian culture of exhumations, identification and reburials has emerged (Rosenblatt 2015), leading to the commercialization of identification technologies (Smith 2016). It appears that a new forensic industry has been established in the twenty-first century.

In such forensic settings, official identification procedures aim at creating positive knowledge based on scientific identification. However, this does not mean that the knowledge is always made available to the families, leaving closure still out of reach. In the context of migrant disappearances in particular, there is a blatant lack of political will by states to create viable conditions for the identification of deceased migrants, leading to a significant fragmentation of this positive knowledge. As Gerhild Perl observed during her research on death and disappearance during irregular migration in the Western Mediterranean Sea, the Spanish police meticulously collect such forensic data as photographs, (restored) fingerprints and DNA samples about the unidentified bodies found in Spanish waters. This information, however, rarely arrives in the disappeared persons'

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countries of origin, and if it were to, most of these countries lack digitized databases to compare forensic data. There are initiatives to institutionalize and standardize transnational collaboration for DNA comparison in the Mediterranean region,[1] but so far, the outcomes have remained rather vague.

Moreover, if families suspect that a relative has died on the way to Europe, they cannot come and identify the body because European states do not issue visas for this purpose.[2] Since neither the families' knowledge nor their desire to know are taken into account, these identification efforts are half-hearted. Due to visa restrictions and the lack of a successful transnational exchange of forensic data, in most cases the recovered bodies of deceased migrants remain unidentified and end up in anonymous graves in European cemeteries. Thus, although the competent authorities' archives are awash with forensic information on the missing persons, this knowledge remains inaccessible to the bereaved. For them, their loved one remains caught in limbo between life and death, even though they most likely died at sea.

Concealment, manipulation and disinformation about circumstances and whereabouts often go hand in hand with control over narratives, especially in authoritarian regimes. State authorities not only remain indifferent to the information requests of the bereaved, they can also inflict violence on those searching for the disappeared. Inducing fear and silencing people is a form of epistemic violence that restricts 'epistemic agency' (Brunner 2020: 107), since 'a person is violated in their capacity as a knower' (Emerick 2019: 33). Knowing is also governed on a subtler level, as the philosopher Kristie Dotson argues. With the concept of 'testimonial smothering', she denotes suffocating elements set in motion by the affected themselves, leading to self-censorship but enabling self-protection (Dotson 2011: 244). Thus, the epistemic violence in the case of enforced disappearances intrudes on subjectivities and in many ways precludes any positive knowledge about the disappeared person's whereabouts.

The 'anthropology of disappearance', which we propose in this book, ties politics, intimate relations and knowledge production together. The relationships between them are complex and dynamic and need to be analysed in their specific ethnographic contexts. At the heart of the contestations over the fate of the disappeared is the struggle over knowledge. We argue that knowledge does not simply evaporate – rather, it is manipulated, silenced and made inaccessible to specific people and populations. We thus consider the epistemic agency of grass-roots movements, especially the political demand for

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knowledge about missing persons and creative ways to invent new paths to knowledge, as an implicit attempt to shift epistemic power relations.

Last but not least, we understand this book as a writing against the politics of letting disappear and as an effort to further inscribe the disappeared in academic discourse. As anthropologists who have engaged for many years with questions of dying and disappearing in violent contexts, we see it as our responsibility to not let the experiences disappear; thus, dedicating an edited volume to the terror of disappearance is our way of remembering that the disappeared and their families are a fundamental part of our world history.

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Gerhild Perl is an Assistant Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Trier, Germany. She works on death, disappearance and survival during migration; border and deportation regimes; colonial legacies and postcolonial border formations; affect and emotions; and political anthropology. Her work has been published in the *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, *Migration and Society*, and the *Journal of Social and Cultural Anthropology*, among others. Her PhD thesis on death during migration across the Spanish–Moroccan sea was awarded the Maria Ioannis Baganha Award and the Dissertation Prize of the German Anthropological Association.

Notes

1. E.g. the ICMP initiative in 2018; see ICMP (2018).
2. The only way to successfully identify a body is when a relative of the dead person resides legally in the Schengen space and thus can travel in order to identify the body through visual recognition and DNA cross-matching.

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