10

Negotiating Epistemic Uncertainties

Coming to Terms with Migrant Disappearances in the Western Mediterranean

Saila Kivilahti and Laura Huttunen

Introduction

Since the turn of the millennium, the EU has increasingly militarized its external borders, pushing migrants and refugees onto irregular and extremely dangerous routes and forcing them to travel in undocumented modes. Consequently, the Mediterranean has become the deadliest border region in the world (Albahari 2016), and 23,568 migrants have been reported missing since 2014, with a significantly higher number of unreported cases (IOM 2022). The sea routes in the Western Mediterranean, especially those between Spain and Morocco, are among the most frequent channels of such undocumented migration, and death and disappearance are common tragedies among migrants on this route (Perl 2019). When a person disappears at sea, it is often extremely difficult to discover their fate if the body is not recovered and identified, and even if a body is found, transnational identification procedures rarely take place. Rather, unidentified bodies disappear in unmarked graves without families ever knowing about the death and final resting place of their loved ones. Death and disappearance get intertwined, creating haunting uncertainties among those left behind. The Mediterranean has become a landscape of death, disappearance and ever-present uncertainty for migrants and their families, as well as for communities in the countries of origin and destination.

This chapter is from 'An Anthropology of Disappearance', edited by Laura Huttunen and Gerhild Perl. https://doi.org/10.3167/9781805390725. It is available open access under a CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license thanks to the support of Tampere University. Not for resale.

Many countries around the world have established procedures for family members to make national and international search requests through police authorities, and to express their worries about the prolonged absence of their loved ones (Parr, Stevenson and Woolnough 2016; Shalev Greene and Alys 2017). However, most families of disappearing undocumented migrants do not use these routes for several reasons. Because of the undocumented status of the disappeared person (and sometimes of the family members as well), the families are often hesitant to contact the authorities, in countries of both origin and destination. In several countries from which undocumented migrants originate, the families are reluctant to contact the local authorities because they suspect that they themselves are involved in the disappearances. The state, in the countries of both origin and destination, often lacks the interest and political will to invest in searching for undocumented migrants (see this book's introduction), and in the empirical material we analyse below, both the Spanish and Moroccan states are visibly absent from the production and sharing of information. As a result, the families of the disappeared mostly rely for information on informal social networks, such as engaged citizens (Perl 2018), co-travellers, and family members and neighbours already living in the destination country (Dearden, Last and Spencer 2020: 56; IOM 2021: xii, 9, 11–12).

Today, Spain is characterized by the presence of several sometimes overlapping actors that engage with migrant-related issues, including deaths and disappearances. Spanish law enforcement[1] is responsible for investigating the deaths of people whose bodies are found on Spanish territory, but it is not very efficient in this, and the identification of undocumented migrants is a rare occurrence (e.g. Perl 2016). This situation has created space for NGOs and other unofficial actors to come onto the scene. Even though several international organizations are currently working with migrant disappearances, including the ICRC,[2] IOM[3] and ICMP,[4] they have not been successful in establishing efficient procedures that are widely known about and trusted among migrant communities. Sometimes families do contact one of these organizations, or one of the more locally operating ones, but in general the landscape of actors and procedures is scattered and unclear. Moreover, in many of the countries of northern and sub-Saharan Africa, searching via the police authorities or other organizations is not considered the most viable option in the first place, because of a widespread mistrust of authorities and an experience-based conviction regarding their ineffectuality. In these countries, many families have experience of migration over generations and,

This open access edition has been made available under a CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license thanks to the support of Tampere University. https://doi.org/10.3167/9781805390725. Not for resale.

consequently, there is a lot of tacit knowledge about the 'crossing' (e.g. Zagaria 2020). For many people, informal social networks and personal connections have proven to be the best channels both for obtaining information and carrying out searches. Therefore, if the relatives do not know anyone in the supposed country of disappearance, they might not necessarily know where to start or how to proceed with the search.

In this chapter we touch on the theme of 'disturbed intimacies' discussed in this volume's introduction and focus on these informal social networks and the ways in which the families left behind negotiate the deep uncertainties they face when a loved one disappears en route. In the absence of evidence, families live for a long time with pressing questions: How to understand what has happened to the disappeared person? How to make sense of the blurred line between life, death and disappearance? When and how to become convinced of the death of the absent relative when there is no body to be buried? To explore these questions, we focus on the significance of witness accounts provided by co-travellers and other eyewitnesses. Although people sometimes witness the deaths of their co-travellers during their journey, in the accounts we analyse in this chapter they have, rather, witnessed events that suggest mortal danger, such as capsized or empty and damaged boats on the high seas. We investigate when and how this information becomes trustworthy evidence for those left behind. Moreover, we pay attention to the temporal aspect of disappearance, as the passing of time often changes the way in which relatives think about a disappearance.

While the introduction to this book discusses the methodological challenges faced by those doing research on 'what is not there', in this chapter we engage with the epistemic uncertainties faced by families and other close ones when someone disappears. We follow the clues in the empirical material that enable us to analyse the significance of the evidence provided by witnesses, as well as the challenges presented by information concerning disappearances. The epistemic uncertainties in this context concern not only the production of knowledge but also its mediation and transmission, as we will argue below.

Methodologically, this chapter relies on ethnographic fieldwork that Saila Kivilahti (hereafter SK) conducted in Spain and Morocco in 2019. Her fieldwork concentrated mainly on southern Spain, especially Andalusia, as this is the area to which many of the migrant boats trying to reach Spain are heading. SK's other key area was the neighbourhood of El Besòs i el Maresme (hereafter Besòs) in Barcelona, where a variety of people with migrant backgrounds have

This open access edition has been made available under a CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license thanks to the support of Tampere University. https://doi.org/10.3167/9781805390725. Not for resale.

settled, including a community of Senegalese migrants. She also followed the work of several NGOs[5] focusing on disappearances, and interviewed relatives of disappeared persons, NGO workers, morticians and forensic scientists engaging with disappearances in Spain. Moreover, she participated in the First World Summit of the Mothers of Disappeared Migrants in Mexico and the annual caravan for open borders (Caravana Abriendo Fronteras), as well as other events concerning migrant disappearances in Spain. Since migratory disappearances are a global phenomenon, her attempt to understand the disappearances of undocumented migrants led SK to various places and sites, and to conversations with people diversely connected to disappearances.

In this chapter, we analyse encounters with five young and middle-aged men[6] who have all made it into Spain irregularly. They have experienced the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean, some of them witnessing serious distress encountered by their co-travellers en route. Moreover, they have found themselves in a situation of having to decide what to do with the evidence they have. SK talked with them about their experiences of the crossing, and of the disappearances they witnessed or encountered. Some of these five research participants were also related to recently disappeared individuals, and were the ones expected to carry out the search for them because of their residence status in Spain.

Conceptual Frame: Witnessing, Time and Uncertainty

The transition from life to death is culturally important and ritually marked in all cultural contexts (Metcalf and Huntington 1991; Robben 2004). A person's disappearance disturbs this cultural frame, leaves the process of transition unfinished and begs for closure (Huttunen 2016). Disappearances in all contexts are marked by uncertainty and difficulties in gaining knowledge, but the difficulties are differently structured in each case. In the context of undocumented migration, the stories told by co-travellers become particularly important, as access to official information and official routes of investigation is limited due to the irregular and illegalized position of the traveller, and sometimes also of the family member looking for them. To understand the significance of the accounts of co-travellers and other actors in the informal networks that the families of migrants rely on, engagement with theoretical approaches to witnessing, testimony and evidence is particularly insightful.

This open access edition has been made available under a CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license thanks to the support of Tampere University. https://doi.org/10.3167/9781805390725. Not for resale.

Witnessing and testimonies have been discussed in the context of the accountability of violent regimes, for example in Argentina and Cyprus (e.g. Crenzel 2011; Jelin 2003; Robben 2005a, 2005b; Sant Cassia 2007; Taylor 1997). In this chapter, however, witnessing takes place in informal networks, and evidence travels through these networks and is evaluated by families of the missing. We begin by considering the significance of witnessing in various contexts.

Witnessing has a particular meaning in legal contexts, and its meaning in the legal process varies between systems (Rouland 1994). When applied to practices outside of the courtroom, witnessing still carries social connotations of conveying important information and of convincing others of the factuality or trustworthiness of one's account. In the context of undocumented migration, the stories of co-travellers become witness accounts for families left behind who are trying to understand what has happened to their disappeared loved one, and to come to terms with the possibility of death in the absence of a body to be buried. Co-travellers as witnesses become the 'surrogate sense organs of the absent' (Durham Peters 2001: 709) for the families left behind.

Inspired by Elizabeth Jelin's (2003) work on witnessing and memory in repressive regimes, we suggest that co-travellers use both their own experiences and their observations of what happened to others as material for their testimonies. According to Jelin, a witness is firstly someone who has 'lived through an experience or event and can, at a later moment, narrate it or give testimony' (witness-as-participant). Secondly, the term refers to the person as an observer, 'someone who was present at the moment of an event as an onlooker, who saw something but who did not participate directly or was not directly involved in the event', whose testimony nevertheless can be used to confirm that the event actually happened (witness-as-observer). The survivors of the event then 'bear testimony as observers of what happened to the others and, at the same time, bear witness of their own experiences and of the events in which they participated' (ibid.: 61–62). In the context of migrant disappearances, co-travellers both experience the dangerous journeys at first hand and bear witness to moments when something drastic happens to the person who disappears.

'Evidence' as a concept is closely connected with witnessing and giving testimonies. In legal contexts, the credibility and trustworthiness of witness accounts and the witnesses themselves are evaluated and assessed (Pospíšil 1971: 236–37). However, outside of the legal realm, this trustworthiness is always also assessed. As Steward and

This open access edition has been made available under a CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license thanks to the support of Tampere University. https://doi.org/10.3167/9781805390725. Not for resale.

Strathern (2004: 30) suggest, every society has its everyday way of evaluating evidence – the truthfulness of a story or a given piece of evidence is always assessed in relation to the person who is talking. In the context of migrant disappearances, witness accounts given by co-travellers become crucially important when there is no forensic evidence. However, narrative evidence is ambiguous and fragile, and the families of the missing need to assess both the trustworthiness of the account and the credibility of the witnessing person. In addition, and as we suggest below, temporality becomes an important ingredient in the evaluation of co-travellers' accounts (cf. Katz, this volume).

When discussing the disappeared victims of the Srebrenica genocide, Sarah Wagner (2008) suggests that when a person goes missing and their fate is unknown, family members fill the void of knowledge with imagination. According to Wagner, the relatives 'attempt to "take possession" of the missing person's fate, wresting it from the vacuum of knowledge forced on them by his absence'. The relatives of the disappeared then complete the story of the disappeared person without their bodily presence (ibid.: 14, 173–74).

Witnesses at Sea: Empty Boats and Other Fragile Evidence

An eyewitness with a first-hand account of what has happened is important in many judicial processes. Sometimes migrants end up as eyewitnesses to dramatic events connected with the disappearance of somebody while travelling. This puts them in a position in which they not only need to assess what they have seen but also convince others and pass their account on further, to the friends and families. In some interviews during SK's fieldwork, the interlocutors described how co-travellers died on board while crossing the sea, or while crossing the desert on their way to Morocco (see also Lucht 2012). Such deaths may have been caused, for example, by dehydration, drowning, hypothermia or an accident,[7] and if the identity of the dead person was known to them, their co-travellers tried to find ways to communicate the news to the families. On other occasions, co-travellers did not see the actual dying, but the dangerous circumstances at sea convinced them that the disappeared person must be dead. However, even though they believed this to be the case, in the absence of a body it was not always easy to convince the families. It is worth noting in this context that migrants move mostly in groups, and within such groups some people know each other while others

This open access edition has been made available under a CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license thanks to the support of Tampere University. https://doi.org/10.3167/9781805390725. Not for resale.

travel with false identities, with nobody in the group knowing their 'real' identity (see Le Courant 2019). This affects the ability to inform families if something happens.

Momar is a young man of Senegalese background living in Spain, who lost his friend Lamine while crossing the Mediterranean in 2019. Momar and Lamine had left Morocco for Spain with a large group that was divided into three boats for the crossing. The two friends were put on different boats, with Momar in the one that was leading the group. At some point during the crossing, he and the others in his boat looked back, and he saw that his friend's boat was empty: 'The boat was destroyed, everybody died … The wind turned the boat over.'

Many of the crossers carry with them the telephone numbers of NGOs working at the border. One of these possible contacts is the Spanish human rights activist Helena Maleno, who uses her networks to raise alerts, search for boats at sea and facilitate sea rescue operations. Momar had been told that in order to make the passage safer they could send the location of the boat to Helena Maleno when they arrived in international waters:

> I was the one who sent the location to Helena … Then Helena called the Red Cross and two hours later they arrived. But the boat was empty … It is evidence when you find a boat and it is empty. [Later on the Spanish shore] I saw when the Red Cross came with the empty boat, they were dragging it [behind their boat].

The bodies of the travellers on the damaged boat were never found. Seeing an empty, capsized boat on the high seas was convincing evidence of deadly danger for Momar. Being an eyewitness often brings with it the obligation to tell others what has happened. Momar informed Lamine's family:

> I called his family. It was really difficult, really difficult for the family … When I called the family, they did not believe me. The family of my friend thought that maybe they changed the boat, but after one year they knew it was the end … But they believed when they did not get any news from him in one year. Also another friend [of ours] told the family that he is dead.

When further asked how the family knew that Lamine was dead, Momar said: 'If you arrive, you are happy and you call your family that "I am here!", but if your son does not call …' The theme of losing contact as evidence of death was repeated in most of the interviews. However, in a landscape where some disappeared people turn

This open access edition has been made available under a CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license thanks to the support of Tampere University. https://doi.org/10.3167/9781805390725. Not for resale.

up a little later – as we elaborate below – families are often reluctant to give up hope. For Momar, who lived through the dangerous sea journey and saw the empty boat with his own eyes, the death of the disappeared traveller was more apparent. For the family, it was only the passage of time that convinced them that their disappeared loved one was dead. This difficulty of family members accepting the news of death is another repeated theme in the accounts, and is further elaborated in the last section of the chapter.

After a year, Lamine's family arranged a funeral even though they had not received his body. Momar also knew other families of disappeared persons who had arranged a funeral without a body after a certain time had passed – sometimes a year, sometimes two – in order to bring closure. Such substitute funerals are sometimes organized in the sending communities when the families become convinced of the death of the disappeared person (e.g. Lucht 2012: 217–23), but families often find it impossible to have a funeral without the body (e.g. Perl 2019). The question of ritual closure remains contested and agonized when there is no body or other tangible evidence of death.

Momar became an eyewitness to his friend's ordeal, and later, the messenger who conveyed the news to his family. For Momar himself, the overturned boat and his friend's absence was evidence that was corroborated by the lack of contact and the passage of time. For Lamine's family, Momar's account was not enough; only the protracted silence of their absent son finally convinced them of the possibility of Lamine's death, and they then came to accept Momar's evidential story.

When to Get Worried: Alarming Loss of Connection

As discussed above, the lack of contact and the length of the silence are evaluated by those left behind when trying to make sense of the absence of a migrant friend or family member. This theme is elaborated by Alain, who came from the Congo to Spain ten years ago. At the time of the interview, he was working at a migration NGO in southern Spain and had witnessed both successful and unsuccessful crossings over the Mediterranean. Building on his own experiences as an undocumented traveller, and on the experiences of other travellers he had encountered while living in Spain and working for the NGO, he depicted a landscape of constant uncertainty. He starts from the point of view of travel companions in Morocco waiting for news of a person who has departed for Spain:

This open access edition has been made available under a CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license thanks to the support of Tampere University. https://doi.org/10.3167/9781805390725. Not for resale.

> If you have travelled with someone, if he [the disappeared person] doesn't call in one month, you start to think that he is dead. Often, if you know the family, you call them so that they would know that he is dead. Sometimes we are mistaken because people who get to Europe are not always in touch. [Sometimes it may happen that] when you have called the family that the missing person is dead, after months, [suddenly], he will call 'I am alive'. When they arrive and they don't call … when they don't confirm [that they have arrived safely], they are thought to be dead. When I arrived in Ceuta, I was caught by the [Spanish] Civil Guard. So in four days I could not use my cell phone and I could not confirm that I had arrived. My friends in the forest outside Ceuta tried to call me and thought that I was dead. They did not know how to call my aunt. Luckily, I was released by the police in four days. There was a moment when nobody knew.

In Alain's description, every irregular border crossing is marked by the possibility of death and disappearance. Because of that, it is of utmost importance for migrants to inform those left behind on arriving successfully in Spain. Sometimes it is the families who are waiting for a message, and at other times it is the travel companions who stayed behind in Morocco, waiting for their turn to take the boat. In the latter case, the travel companions often act as a link to the families, transmitting the news. However, as Alain pointed out, sometimes the person crossing the sea does not contact their travel companions even if they are successful, and there may be several reasons for that.[8]

What Alain describes is a condition marked by constant fear, anticipation and doubt; by criss-crossing information and misinformation; by assumptions presented as news and later proved to be false; and by assumed deaths that later turn out to be disappearances, with the disappeared person turning up and re-establishing contact. This is a social condition marked by ever-present uncertainty – it is hard for those left behind to know which news to believe. Under these conditions, every loss of contact or delayed phone call may be interpreted as a sign of distress and potential death.

James, a man of Senegalese background living in Barcelona's Besòs neighbourhood, also talked about the crucial importance of keeping in touch, as well as of loss of contact as evidence of distress – and in this case, death. He talked with SK about the drowning of his friend Oumar in 2018. At the time of Oumar's crossing, James was already in Spain, but he emphasized that they were very close friends in Senegal. Once in Morocco, Oumar had started to prepare for the crossing with a group of nine young men from the same

This open access edition has been made available under a CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license thanks to the support of Tampere University. https://doi.org/10.3167/9781805390725. Not for resale.

neighbourhood, including his own brother. They made preparations for a month, and then, when they thought that the weather was good, they departed. And after that, nothing was heard from them. They did not contact James or their families, nor did they answer any calls.

In the present day, when almost everybody carries a mobile phone, keeping in touch more intensely than previously has become possible, and is also expected by those left behind. In these circumstances, loss of contact, especially if protracted, is interpreted as a sign of distress. James described how the families of all nine of the disappeared young men tried to contact their disappeared ones at the same time: 'Just imagine when nine persons have their families trying to call them!' he exclaimed. He created an image of desperate families left behind calling frantically, but in vain. In this case, the fact that there was not just one person who did not answer the calls, but a group of nine, confirmed the fear that something was seriously wrong. Despite their bodies never being found, James was convinced that they were dead – he used the words 'drowned' and 'dead', and not 'disappeared', throughout the interview. The fact that nine people from the same boat stopped answering their phones built up convincing evidence. This, together with both the ever-present knowledge that crossing always means the possibility of death and the accumulating history of dead migrants, led to the conviction that Oumar is dead, not disappeared.

Another depiction of disappearance, doubt and temporality was recounted by Ndeye, a Senegalese man living with his wife in a small town in Catalunya. He spoke about the violent disappearance of his younger brother Malik while heading from Senegal to Spain via Morocco in 2019. Malik had travelled with a friend to Morocco, where they waited for an opportunity to cross the sea. Ndeye had pleaded with his brother to wait until Ndeye had enough money to help him to cross safely, but Malik did not have the patience. Ndeye recounted:

> Malik and the friend had left at four in the morning to the boat. When they were preparing [at the beach] for the departure from the Moroccan coast, the police came with their dogs. Everybody started to run and Malik ran to the sea … this is how his accident happened … He was so scared that he thought that it is better to go to the sea than to the police. Even if someone would shout and cry in the sea, nobody helps. Malik was in the water and called his friend's name. The police only looked at him and laughed. The friend did not go to help him because he did not know how to swim. And if he would help, he could be returned to his country, this is why he ran.

This open access edition has been made available under a CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license thanks to the support of Tampere University. https://doi.org/10.3167/9781805390725. Not for resale.

This scene of his younger brother escaping the police into the sea and never returning to the shore was recounted to Ndeye by Malik's friend who witnessed what happened. Both Malik and the friend were trying to avoid the Moroccan authorities. This description embodies many of the elements of the structural violence that makes undocumented migrants vulnerable and disappearable (Laakkonen 2022). It also shows the violence of the Moroccan state and its compliance with the European border security project (see also Andersson 2014). The Moroccan state is thus present in Ndeye's account as a violent actor pushing the disappeared young man to his death, as opposed to an actor that might help in sea rescue.

Ndeye had difficulty believing that Malik had died and, like so many other family members, he needed to do his own search:

> Malik spoke to me every day [before his disappearance] but then he did not answer in one week. After three weeks I was already sure that he [was] dead, and I called our mother … I called my friend who has lived for ten years in Tétouan, that he would investigate the thing. He went to Tangier to ask questions around. And he said to me that the body [of Malik] is there.

Disbelief regarding the news could in this instance be considered a mode of emotional resistance and a strategy of keeping up hope. In Malik's case, finding the body became the conclusive evidence that forced Ndeye and the family to accept the death. In protracted cases of disappearance, hope and despair often follow one another, and become intertwined if there is no clear closure (Huttunen forthcoming).

Both Momar's and Ndeye's stories show how observations by eyewitnesses are interpreted in relation to the circumstances. An empty boat on the high seas points to mortal danger, and the same boat being dragged empty to the shore is just further evidence. A scared youngster escaping angry police dogs for the sea, with ruthless police officers showing no signs of mercy, builds up another moment of deadly circumstances. In both disappearances, other pieces of evidence piled up and the protracted lack of contact became an important factor. One eyewitness account was apparently not enough in such volatile circumstances, and in both cases families searched for additional evidence before they became convinced of the deaths of their absent loved ones.

This open access edition has been made available under a CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license thanks to the support of Tampere University. https://doi.org/10.3167/9781805390725. Not for resale.

Disbelief, Time and Acceptance

In the stories of Momar, Alain, James and Ndeye above, the passage of time was a crucial factor in convincing those left behind of the death of the disappeared person. Temporality is important also in the account of Mbaye, a Senegalese middle-aged man who has faced migrant deaths and disappearances both in his personal life and as an employee of an NGO working with migrant issues in southern Spain. Resonating with the stories discussed above, he argues that the most common evidence of death is the boat that does not arrive, or a person who does not arrive on a particular boat that other travellers on the Moroccan side knew they had boarded – or, as in the stories above, phone calls that do not arrive.

Mbaye's account of the disappearance of his nephew's friend Amadou weaves together most of the themes discussed above, including uncertainty, competing possible explanations for the lack of communication, disbelief, difficulty in accepting the death, and the passage of time:

> I will tell a case that took place some years ago to a person who was my nephew's friend. They were in Morocco together and took the boat to Spain the same day. They were put into different boats, but on the same day … And my nephew arrived, but the other boy … the boat did not arrive … they didn't arrive … they stayed at the sea. The boy disappeared. And the father [who already lived in Spain] did not accept the news that this boy had died. The father thought that the boy had arrived in Spain and that he was in the prison or in some other place and that he does not want to communicate with the relatives. And my nephew said that no, the boy took the boat, but this boat did not arrive. And in addition, some people who were with him knew that he had died. They had seen his body.
>
> But the father did not acknowledge this, he did not want to accept it. Neither did the mother believe that he was dead. The father went to Morocco to search for him. He came here to talk with me because he was already here in Spain. The father came here to the association to talk to me. He called the police, searched the hospitals, searched, they did everything, did not find the boy. Almost everyone knew that the boy had died, but the father did not want to accept it. Until, I don't know, four, six, seven months passed, then they said that there is no need to search any more and that the boy is dead. After that the father finally acknowledged that he was dead.

This description of Amadou's parents' frantic search for their son shows how they exhausted the possibilities of finding him alive,

This open access edition has been made available under a CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license thanks to the support of Tampere University. https://doi.org/10.3167/9781805390725. Not for resale.

or of finding his body to be buried, before accepting his death in the absence of the body. It is a story of doubting the information provided, with hope fading and disbelief turning into acceptance with the passage of time. This account is not, however, the most common kind: not all disappeared persons have relatives already living in Spain. The families left behind in the countries of origin are seldom able to travel to Spain to search themselves; many do not have the financial means to travel or the opportunity to obtain visas. In the depiction above, the careful search, combined with the witness accounts from Mbaye's nephew and other travellers, and the passage of time, finally convinced Amadou's parents that their son was dead.

Discussion

In this chapter we have followed the ways in which people try to come to terms with the disappearance of a person during an undocumented journey, and how they assess evidence and evaluate the possibility of death in the absence of a body or other forensic evidence. All these narratives weave a canvas of constant threat of disappearance and death, of which migrants embarking on a crossing of the Mediterranean, as well as their families and larger communities, are aware. This possibility necessarily affects the ways in which different pieces of evidence are interpreted when a migrant goes missing. However, when there is no tangible evidence, the course of events is often reconstructed through a reliance on rumours, secondary information and experience of similar circumstances and events.

The social world of undocumented migration is permeated with constant uncertainty, including what we have called 'epistemic uncertainty'. All knowledge is evaluated in situations when a co-traveller or somebody else connected to the disappeared person tries to reach conclusions about the uncertain events and to forward this information to others. Many migrants end up as witnesses, having seen the death or disappearance of their friends and co-travellers. Such a situation often carries the silent obligation to inform the family and community in the sending country about what has happened. Both the co-travellers who witness events en route and the families left behind assess the information in order to make sense of the existing, often scarce, evidence of the events. The evidence is assessed and negotiated by the relatives and by other travellers, and certain forms of evidence,

This open access edition has been made available under a CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license thanks to the support of Tampere University. https://doi.org/10.3167/9781805390725. Not for resale.

such as narratives and witness accounts given by co-travellers, can be important, but fragile and insufficient on their own. In this sense, this limited, incomplete and fragmented knowledge creates 'epistemic uncertainty', leading to various interpretations of the events by both the co-travellers and the relatives of the disappeared.

In the process of assessment, co-travellers who witness an event with their own eyes are positioned differently to the families left behind, who need to make sense of the accounts that they hear. Based on their own experiences and their empirical observations of the circumstances of travel, co-travellers evaluate the probabilities of survival of the disappeared person. Similarly, boats that are known to have departed but have not been confirmed as arrived can be interpreted as evidence of death by co-travellers. This evidence is reinforced by the ever-present knowledge of the possibility of death during the journey and the accumulating number of other migrants losing their lives in the crossings.

The accounts of co-travellers are important to the families left behind but, beyond these, they assess other indications of disappearance, such as the passage of time. Families and friends constantly evaluate the duration of time between departure and the expected phone call informing them that the migrant has arrived at the destination. The longer the period of no contact, the more convincing this evidence of distress becomes. However, in this landscape of constant uncertainty, there are always many possible explanations for the absence of contact, making the process of evaluation complex and multifaceted.

Thus, both the co-travellers and the families left behind assess the existing evidence, but are differently positioned in relation to it. While co-travellers have first-hand knowledge of both the circumstances of travel and the events during the journey, the families are often dependent on news brought by these individuals. In this situation, co-travellers become the messengers of death, which is often felt to be a burdensome duty. Co-travellers, then, assess what they have seen and experienced, while the families assess their general knowledge of the circumstances of disappearance as well as the information they are told by the co-travellers. In other words, the families need to assess the credibility of both the evidence and the witness. In a sense, they are doing what judges and juries in formal court cases do: they assess whether the evidence is convincing, whether it is enough to prove the case and whether the witness is trustworthy. However, what is identical in both the co-travellers' and the relatives' process of assessing the evidence is that when

This open access edition has been made available under a CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license thanks to the support of Tampere University. https://doi.org/10.3167/9781805390725. Not for resale.

there is an expectation that the disappeared person would contact them if they could, they interpret the absence and loss of contact as evidence.

The importance of the co-travellers' accounts is underlined by the limited possibilities of finding a person disappeared at sea, and by the absence of states as actors in the search for the undocumented missing. Even though the Spanish police works with the identification of dead migrant bodies found in its territory, none of the interlocutors in this chapter refer to the police when recounting how they tried to discover the fate of the disappeared persons. The Moroccan state is present in Ndeye's story, but only as a violent actor pushing the disappeared young man to his death. In place of states, some NGOs figure in these accounts as potential searchers and transferers of information. However, unofficial contacts and social networks seem to be the most important channels of information, thus corroborating the understandings of earlier research (Lucht 2012; Dearden, Last and Spencer 2020).

Among the families left behind, the acceptance of the death of a disappeared person in the absence of a body is a patchwork of weaving together various kinds of evidence: loss of contact, witness accounts of trusted persons and the exhausting of the possibilities of finding the missing person by visiting hospitals, prisons and morgues whenever such a search in Spain or Morocco is possible. At some point, there is enough such accumulated evidence to convince those left behind that the disappeared person is dead. The passage of time is often a crucial factor in this accumulation, as the final proof of death. However, this process of evaluation and negotiation of the ontological status of the absent loved one is marked by epistemic uncertainty throughout. In addition, there are always those who remain unconvinced, for whom the fate of the absent loved one remains a haunting question, and their return a possibility tinged with intertwined hope and despair (see also Perl 2019; Huttunen forthcoming). This process of evaluation and negotiation is thus marked by pervasive epistemic uncertainty.

Robert Hertz's (1960) classic text argues that death is a process, in both a social and a material sense. We end this chapter by returning to this idea of process. In the world of undocumented migration, marked by vulnerabilities, deep uncertainties and a lack of protection by any state, this process is very complicated and evidence is fragile. The difficulty of knowing what has happened to the absent loved one makes the process uncertain, and the porous line between life, death and disappearance open to reinterpretation. Epistemic uncertainty

This open access edition has been made available under a CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license thanks to the support of Tampere University. https://doi.org/10.3167/9781805390725. Not for resale.

leaves its deep mark on the process of facing death in these circumstances. However, with the passage of time, the process of death proceeds, even when surrounded by uncertainty.

Acknowledgements

This chapter is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted by Saila Kivilahti, the conceptual analysis of which was carried out together with Laura Huttunen. The chapter is part of a research project on migrant disappearances entitled 'Governance and Grieving: Disappearing Migrants and Emergent Politics', led by Laura Huttunen and funded by the Academy of Finland (grant numbers 315979 and 326570).

Saila Kivilahti is a PhD candidate in Social Anthropology at Tampere University, Finland. Her dissertation explores the search for and identification of undocumented disappeared migrants in the western Mediterranean by focusing on the knowledge and evidence surrounding the disappearances. She has conducted fieldwork in Spain and Morocco with the relatives, friends and travel companions of disappeared migrants, as well as with NGOs and authorities working with the disappearances.

Laura Huttunen is Professor of Social Anthropology at Tampere University, Finland. She has worked extensively on issues of migration and transnational communities, and has conducted ethnographic research among the Bosnian diaspora since 2001. More recently, she has worked on the anthropology of human disappearances. In 2013–14 she ran a project that focused on the question of missing and disappeared persons in Bosnia–Herzegovina; in 2018–22 she led a research project with a focus on disappearances in migratory contexts. Currently, she is working on a monograph on human disappearances and reappearances.

Notes

1. Spanish law enforcement is divided between different agencies, such as the Civil Guard (Guardia Civil) and the National Police (Policía Nacional).
2. International Committee of the Red Cross.
3. International Organization for Migration.

This open access edition has been made available under a CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license thanks to the support of Tampere University. https://doi.org/10.3167/9781805390725. Not for resale.

4. International Commission on Missing Persons.
5. For example, Algeciras Acoge, Centro Internacional para la Identificación de Migrantes Desaparecidos (CIPIMD), Fundación Cepaim and the Spanish Red Cross.
6. Four of them were from Senegal and one was from the Democratic Republic of the Congo.
7. In SK's material there were also stories of shootings and other types of killing or death caused by the authorities or by criminal networks; the IOM's *Fatal Journeys* reports, numbers 1 to 4, reveal a whole range of other causes of death. See https://publications.iom.int/search?search=Fatal+Journeys&f%5B0%5D=category%3A130 (accessed 9 February 2023).
8. They might, for example, be arrested by the police, get injured, decide to disappear or stop contact for other reasons.

References

Albahari, Maurizio. 2016. *Crimes of Peace: Mediterranean Migrations at the World's Deadliest Border*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Andersson, Ruben. 2014. *Illegality, Inc.: Clandestine Migration and the Business of Bordering Europe*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Crenzel, Emilio. 2011. 'Between the Voices of the State and the Human Rights Movement: Never Again and the Memories of the Disappeared in Argentina', *Journal of Social History* 44(4): 1063–76.

Dearden, Kate, Tamara Last and Craig Spencer. 2020. 'Mortality and Border Deaths Data: Key Challenges and Ways Forward', in Paolo Cuttitta and Tamara Last (eds), *Border Deaths: Causes, Dynamics and Consequences of Migration-Related Mortality*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, pp. 53–70.

Durham Peters, John. 2001. 'Witnessing', *Media, Culture & Society* 23: 707–23.

Hertz, Robert. [1909] 1960. *Death and the Right Hand*. Glencoe: Free Press.

Huttunen, Laura. 2016. 'Liminality and Contested Communitas: The Missing Persons in Bosnia-Herzegovina', *Conflict and Society: Advances in Research* 2: 201–18. https://doi.org/10.3167/arcs.2016.020117.

———. Forthcoming. 'Narratives of Absence: Making Sense of Loss and Liminality in the Post-War Bosnian Diaspora', in B. Bonisch-Brednich et al. (eds), Migrant Narratives – Moving Stories: Modalities of Agency, Collectivity and Performativity. Routledge.

IOM. 2021. 'Families of Missing Migrants: Their Search for Answers and the Impacts of Loss'. IOM Publications Platform. Retrieved 9 February 2023 from https://publications.iom.int/books/families-missing-migrants-their-search-answers-and-impacts-loss.

This open access edition has been made available under a CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license thanks to the support of Tampere University. https://doi.org/10.3167/9781805390725. Not for resale.

———. 2022. '23,568 Missing Migrants Recorded in the Mediterranean (since 2014)'. Missing Migrants Project. Retrieved 9 February 2023 from https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean.
Jelin, Elizabeth. 2003. State Repression and the Labors of Memory. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Laakkonen, Ville. 2022. 'Death, Disappearances, Borders: Migrant Disappearability as a Technology of Deterrence', *Political Geography* 99: 102767. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2022.102767.
Le Courant, Stefan. 2019. 'Imposture at the Border: Law and the Construction of Identities among Undocumented Migrants', *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale* 27(3): 472–85. https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8676.12572.
Lucht, Hans. 2012. *Darkness before Daybreak: African Migrants Living on the Margins in Southern Italy Today*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Metcalf, Peter, and Richard Huntington. 1991. *Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Parr, Hester, Olivia Stevenson and Penny Woolnough. 2016. 'Search/ing for Missing People: Families Living with Ambiguous Absence', *Emotion, Space and Society* 19: 66–75.
Perl, Gerhild. 2016. 'Uncertain Belongings: Absent Mourning, Burial, and Post-Mortem Repatriations at the External Border of the EU in Spain', *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 37(2): 195–209.
———. 2018. 'Lethal Borders and Translocal Politics of "Ordinary People"', *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures* 27(2): 85–104.
———. 2019. 'Traces of Death: Exploring Affective Responsiveness across the Spanish-Moroccan Sea', PhD thesis. Bern: University of Bern.
Pospíšil, Leopold. 1971. *Anthropology of Law: A Comparative Theory*. New York: Harper & Row.
Robben, Antonius C.G.M. 2004. 'Death and Anthropology: An Introduction', in Antonius C.G.M. Robben (ed.), *Death, Mourning and Burial: A Cross-Cultural Reader*. London: Blackwell, pp. 1–16.
———. 2005a. 'How Traumatized Societies Remember: The Aftermath of Argentina's Dirty War', *Cultural Critique* 59: 120–64.
———. 2005b. Political Violence and Trauma in Argentina. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
Rouland, Norbert. 1994. *Legal Anthropology*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
Sant Cassia, Paul. 2007. *Bodies of Evidence: Burial, Memory and the Recovery of Missing Persons in Cyprus*. New York: Berghahn.
Shalev Greene, Karen, and Lilian Alys (eds). 2017. *Missing Persons: A Handbook of Research*. London: Routledge.
Steward, Pamela J., and Andrew Strathern. 2004. *Witchcraft, Sorcery, Rumors, and Gossip*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Taylor, Diana. 1997. *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and*

This open access edition has been made available under a CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license thanks to the support of Tampere University. https://doi.org/10.3167/9781805390725. Not for resale.

Nationalism in Argentina's 'Dirty War'. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Wagner, Sarah. 2008. *To Know Where He Lies: DNA Technology and the Search for Srebrenica's Missing*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Zagaria, Valentina. 2020. '"Burning" Borders: Migration, Death and Dignity in a Tunisia Coastal Town', unpublished PhD thesis. London: London School of Economics.

This open access edition has been made available under a CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license thanks to the support of Tampere University. https://doi.org/10.3167/9781805390725. Not for resale.