Laura Huttunen and Gerhild Perl (eds). An Anthropology of Disappearance: *Politics, Intimacies and Alternative Ways of Knowing.* New York, USA: Berghahn Books. EASA Series, Volume 46. 2023. 290 pp. ISBN: 978-1-80539-072-5 (hardcover); ISBN: 978-1-80539-364-1 (E-book); ISBN: 978-1-80539-073-2 (web PDF). DOI: 10.3167/9781805390725.

What does it mean to disappear? In *An Anthropology of Disappearance: Politics, Intimacies, and Alternative Ways of Knowing*, editors Laura Huttunen and Gerhild Perl, along with their contributing authors, offer a powerful exploration of this unsettling phenomenon. They argue that disappearance is not simply an absence to be explained; it is a force that reconfigures relationships, challenges dominant narratives, and reveals intimate intersections of power and loss. This volume thus draws on ethnographic case studies that encompass a wide spectrum of disappearances, including the ambiguous losses of migration, the deliberate severing of ties in voluntary disappearance, and the enforced erasures of political violence.

In their introduction, Huttunen and Perl make a compelling case for the value of disappearance as an analytical category in anthropology, arguing for its significance both as a lived reality and a methodological challenge. Drawing on the notion of 'negative methodologies', they encourage anthropologists to grapple with absences, ambiguities, and gaps as productive sites of inquiry. This framing recalls foundational anthropological works on liminality (Turner 1969: 94–113) and the political lives of the dead (Verdery 1999), but the editors expand these frameworks to explore the affective economies and epistemic uncertainties that disappearance entails.

Part I, 'Voicing Disappearances', examines how disappearances are mourned, negotiated, and mediated through personal and cultural practices. Atreyee Sen's chapter on custodial disappearances during the Naxalite movement in India centres on Shanta, a mother whose son vanished after being detained by police. The bureaucratic file she clings to becomes a mode of resistance—a tangible force that redefines her relationship with the state and grounds her pursuit of justice. This theme of sense-making recurs in Heike Drotbohm's exploration of 'social disappearances' in Cape Verde, where migration creates voluntary absences that disrupt familial structures and demand new ways of negotiating intimacy and obligation. Drotbohm's analysis poignantly illustrates how absence reshapes kinship, complicating the boundaries between agency and loss.

Ori Katz's chapter builds upon this by examining how temporary absences in Israel expose a cultural void around ambiguous loss, challenging conventional interpretations of violence and state repression. Expanding the scope of inquiry beyond cultural norms, Anna Matyska's analysis of the 'right to disappear' in Poland raises intriguing questions about the tensions between individual autonomy and familial claims. She conceptualises the Polish state as a 'wedge intermediary' between self-determination and collective

obligation. Although Matyska's chapter offers a valuable critical legal perspective, it falls short of examining how these rights are actively contested and negotiated in the lived experiences of individuals, leaving a gap in understanding their practical implications.

Part II, 'Politics of Disappearances', shifts focus to the structural and political dimensions of disappearance, examining how states employ absence as a tool of control and erasure. Diana Marre and Jessaca Leinaweaver's analysis of forced adoptions in Franco-era Spain details how disappearance operates as a form of ideological realignment, as children were systematically removed from leftist families and placed into conservative households in order to neutralise political opposition. Stefan Millar's study of South Sudanese dissidents in Kenyan refugee camps similarly demonstrates how enforced disappearances can be wielded as a political weapon. A powerful counterpoint to these state-centric approaches is provided by Rosalva Aída Hernández Castillo's chapter, which showcases how grief can become a form of resistance. Her fieldwork reveals how Mexican women become 'chroniclers of violence' in their search for disappeared loved ones, constructing alternative narratives of loss, resistance, and memory, disrupting state monopolies on 'forensic knowledge' and 'transitional justice'. Castillo's chapter further highlights the 'indignant love' that fuels these women's activism, creating powerful affective bonds within their communities.

While the volume's thematic organisation provides a clear structure, the chapters do not always engage in direct dialogue with each other, leading to a sense of fragmentation across each section. For me, this became most noticeable in Part II, where the contributions occasionally seemed to talk past each other despite sharing a clear focus on how disappearance is governed and resisted. Deeper ties between Parts I and II would also make the 'personal' and 'political' dimensions of disappearance more cohesive and convincing. For example, Millar's (Chapter 6) case study of a South Sudanese refugee camp could have built upon the insights of Drotbohm (Chapter 2) regarding the social and familial consequences of disappearance in migrant communities. Perhaps there is something comparable here between kinship politics and state politics? Similarly, Marre and Leinaweaver's (Chapter 5) exploration of forced adoptions in Franco-era Spain could benefit from engagement with Sen's (Chapter 1) focus on the individual struggles of mothers seeking justice for their disappeared children. By connecting these chapters, the volume could offer a more comprehensive analysis.

The third section, 'Alternative Ways of Knowing', addresses the epistemological challenges of studying disappearance, focusing on ambiguity, material traces, and the production of truth. Victoria Tecca's chapter on the disappearance of Nima, a Kurdish migrant in the English Channel, demonstrates how competing narratives—constructed by family members, smugglers, and officials—create a climate of 'epistemic murk' (Taussig 1984) that obscures the structural violence underlying migrant deaths. Ville Laakkonen's focus on material traces in Greece, evocative of De León and Wells (2015), shifts the focus from missing bodies to the objects they leave behind—life jackets, shoes, water bottles—imbued with auras that whisper stories of precarious journeys.

Laakkonen's approach raises compelling methodological questions: Could a similar focus on material traces be used to study the disappearance of other entities, like endangered species or shrinking habitats? Could we develop an anthropology of disappearance not just for humans, but also for non-humans, concepts,

and ecological systems? This potentially groundbreaking idea remains largely unexplored in the remainder of the volume, which primarily focuses on the human experience of disappearance. This limitation restricts the volume's scope and leaves open the question of whether a broader, more inclusive anthropology of disappearance is possible. Regardless, Laakkonen's chapter is intriguing and for me serves as the most convincing example of 'negative methodologies' within the volume.

The two final chapters within Part III provide further case studies from the Mediterranean. Kivilahti and Huttunen's work on migrant disappearances between Morocco and Spain reveals how families negotiate uncertainty by piecing together fragmented, temporally jumbled witness accounts. Their analysis highlights the role of informal social networks and personal connections in mediating knowledge about disappearance. Zuzanna Dziuban's chapter conceptualises the Mediterranean as a 'forensic archive', arguing that the sea is not merely a *site* of disappearance but an active *means* of enforcing border regimes. I was reminded of similar observations from Mainwaring and DeBono (2021: 1043), who examine how EU states conceptualise the Mediterranean as being both 'theirs to control' as a securitised borderscape and 'theirs to empty' as a 'natural' seascape. Dziuban's chilling observation that European states actively prevent even the *corpses* of migrants from entering their territory shows just how comprehensive the necropolitical logic of border control is. Certain lives are deemed unworthy not just of protection, but even of *recognition* in death.

Robben's afterword serves as a powerful coda to this volume. He skilfully draws together the diverse ethnographic cases presented throughout the book to demonstrate how disappearance disrupts our conventional understandings of presence and absence, life and death, remembering and forgetting. He argues that by attending to the 'traces and material agency' of disappearance—the faded photographs, the worn-out shoes, the bureaucratic files, the unmarked graves—anthropologists can gain valuable insights into the hidden operations of power, the intimate dynamics of grief, and the enduring legacies of absence that shape our world.

Despite some missed opportunities for cross-referencing and narrative cohesion throughout the volume, I am struck by how successfully this book merges ethnographic granularity with conceptual breadth. Future research might expand on the volume's methodological innovations by developing an anthropology of non-human disappearances, exploring the absences of ecologies, ideas, and ways of life. By prompting us to consider what disappears, why, and how we engage with the traces left behind, *An Anthropology of Disappearance* invites a fundamental rethinking of our relationships with absence, loss, and the enduring presence of the past.

REFERENCES

De León, Jason and Michael Wells 2015. *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail*. Oakland: University of California Press.

Huttunen, Laura and Gerhild Perl (eds) 2023. *An Anthropology of Disappearance: Politics, Intimacies and Alternative Ways of Knowing* (Vol. 46). Berghahn Books. https://doi.org/10.3167/9781805390725

Mainwaring, Ċetta and Daniela DeBono 2021. Criminalizing Solidarity: Search and Rescue in a Neo-Colonial Sea. *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space* 39 (5): 1030–1048. https://doi.org/10.1177/2399654420979314

Taussig, Michael 1984. Culture of Terror – Space of Death: Roger Casement's Putumayo Report and the Explanation of Torture. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26 (3): 467–97. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417500011105

Turner, Victor 1969. Liminality and Communitas. In *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company.

Verdery, Katherine 1999. *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change*. New York: Columbia University Press.

TIMOTHY RAYMOND ANDERSON
SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY
TALLINN UNIVERSITY
timothy_raymond.anderson@tlu.ee