



Book review of
Huttunen, Laura and
Perl, Gerhild (eds.) 2023.
*An Anthropology of
Disappearance: Politics,
Intimacies and Alternative
Ways of Knowing*. New
York, NY: Berghahn Books,
298 pp.

BOOK REVIEW

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Every year, hundreds of thousands of people go missing worldwide. While many disappear because of natural disasters or by their own choice, many others are victims of ‘enforced disappearance,’ in which state agents are responsible for their disappearance (OHCHR 2006). *An Anthropology of Disappearance: Politics, Intimacies and Alternative Ways of Knowing*, edited by Laura Huttunen and Gerhild Perl, examines ‘state violence and state complicity’ in disappearances. It also explores migratory and mundane disappearances, showing both differences and similarities between various forms of absence, as well as how they intertwine personal and political dimensions and generate struggles over knowledge. As Huttunen and Perl note in the Introduction, the volume confronts the politics of letting disappear by examining disappearances and their consequences through academic investigation.

With a strong ethnographic focus, the book highlights the profound personal and political consequences of disappearances, revealing how absence reshapes individual lives, disrupts relationships, and imposes reconfigurations on the collective fabric of affected communities. In the book’s compelling Introduction, Huttunen and Perl conceptualize ‘disappearance’ by exploring its individual, communal, and state-related dimensions. As the editors indicate, throughout the book, the authors challenge dominant knowledge structures surrounding the missing and urge scholars to engage with the subject by embracing voids, uncertainty, and unknowing—an approach known as negative methodology (Navaro 2020). The book is structured into three parts: *Voicing Disappearances*, *Politics of Disappearances*, and *Alternative Ways of Knowing*.

The first part, as Ori Katz (Chapter 3) writes, reflects on the experiences of those left behind when someone disappears. Atreyee Sen (Chapter 1) examines the 1974 disappearances of youth in Calcutta under state repression, revealing how authoritarian regimes silence dissent. The author highlights the role of mothers who, despite their vulnerability, demonstrate political agency and challenge injustice. Sen also explores how these disappearances affect post-conflict kinship relations and

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the reconfiguration of one's role in the social, legal, and political fabrics of a society. Heike Drotbohm's chapter (Chapter 2) examines 'social disappearances,' in which, by choosing to withdraw from their social environments, the disappeared become the agents of their own disappearance. Drotbohm, studying social disappearances in Cape Verde and the Cape Verdean diaspora, argues that relatives' access to information and their interpretation of it shape how they perceive and evaluate the disappearance. Exploring the case of missing civilians in Israel, Ori Katz (Chapter 3) investigates the social actions surrounding the search and how those left behind negotiate and renegotiate their actions within everyday life, challenging perceived passivity often associated with disappearance, as their search efforts constitute a form of social action. This section's final chapter (Chapter 4) by Anna Matyska contributes a discussion on the search for the missing within the context of Polish politics. Matyska explores the 'right to disappear,' the role of the state in facilitating reappearance through search efforts, and the individual's right to choose whether to reappear. Together, these chapters reveal how disappearances affect those left behind, reshape kinship, and blur the boundaries between personal loss and political struggle.

The second part brings together three case studies. Diana Marre and Jessaca Leinaweaver (Chapter 5) explore disappearance through adoption in Spain between 1936 and 1996, arguing that infants were particularly vulnerable to being made to disappear, which, according to the authors, was used as a paramilitary tactic. Then, Stefan Millar (Chapter 6) further elaborates the concept of 'extended disappearances.' Millar argues that disappearances in Kakuma Refugee Camp reflect colonial strategies of control by turning absence into a tool for distorting the communal social fabric. The final chapter of this part by Rosalva Aída Hernández Castillo (Chapter 7) is particularly important for its postcolonial and feminist analysis of 'criminal violence' in Mexico. She examines how women reframe their roles as mothers, wives, and sisters of the disappeared by adopting political agency and actively resisting silence. The chapter challenges epistemic hierarchies in knowledge production around disappearance. It serves as a bridge between the book's earlier discussions on disappearance and the upcoming exploration of alternative ways of knowing.

In this review, I focus especially on the third part of the book for its substantial and critical contribution and the conceptual depth of inquiry. This final part engages with the themes of epistemic power structures and epistemic uncertainty. In Chapter 8, Victoria Tecca investigates how structural violence contributes to migrant disappearances. Focusing on the France–UK border, Tecca's study demonstrates how competing narratives of border disappearance conceal accountability and reinforce epistemic power structures—framing the fate of the disappeared within layers of blame directed at already vulnerable populations, which further diverts attention from state responsibility and structural violence.

In his study of migrant disappearances in Greece (Chapter 9), Ville Laakkonen explores how material traces and 'auras' help us understand what has happened to the disappeared. In his work, Laakkonen shows that traces and auras help materialize absence, void, and uncertainty, revealing how disappearance is experienced beyond forensic evidence. Another important contribution of Laakkonen is coining the concept of 'disappearability,' which explores the political and systematic circumstances set upon migrants, which make them more susceptible to disappearance. Chapter 10, authored by Saila Kivilahti and Laura Huttunen, engages with 'epistemic uncertainty' by illustrating how the disappearance of loved ones becomes a matter of interpretation shaped by fragile evidence and vulnerabilities inherent in undocumented migration. In the absence of bodies, knowledge is assembled from witnesses, co-travelers, and

other indirect forms of evidence—all revolving around the emotional tension between hope for life and fear of death.

Finally, in Chapter 11, Zuzanna Dziuban offers a bold and critical examination of European dimensions of disappearance across the Mediterranean, arguing that dominant political epistemologies consider certain migrant deaths invisible, unnoteworthy, and normal. Dziuban reimagines the Mediterranean as an ‘archive of violence,’ which materially, symbolically, and politically preserves and archives the bodies. The chapter challenges dominant state narratives, proposes alternative ways of knowing, and introduces a post-anthropocentric perspective, all while highlighting artistic protest of disappearances in the Mediterranean. As such, it powerfully concludes the third part and brings the book to a close. In the concluding passage of the *Afterword*, Antonius C.G.M. Robben brings together the book’s wide-ranging ethnographic discussions and highlights the volume’s critical, courageous, and humanistic approach, reinforcing the significance of the book’s contribution to shaping an anthropology of disappearance.

By resisting the passive acceptance of disappearance, this book makes a significant contribution to the field of disappearance studies. Through ethnographic depth, it challenges technocratic narratives and foregrounds the lived realities of human absence. While reading the book, I found myself wishing for a stronger sense of continuity and interplay between the chapters. Although each contribution engages with disappearances from a distinct angle, the volume, altogether, lacks the kind of internal dialogue that might have deepened its collective impact. This observation aligns with an earlier point made by [Anderson \(2025\)](#), who noted limited narrative cohesion across the chapters (p. 119). My own reading similarly suggests that more deliberate cross-referencing and thematic integration could have enhanced the book’s flow. Additionally, the three parts of the book could be strengthened by brief introductions that clarify the relevance of the grouped chapters and how they collectively address the complexities discussed.

While the book primarily focuses on disappearances resulting from political violence under authoritarian regimes, intra-state conflicts, social disappearances, and those occurring in migratory contexts, it pays only limited attention to disappearances in inter-state conflicts. This indicates that the role such cases play in post-conflict reconciliation remains only partially addressed and that the agency of families and relatives in challenging state security narratives—and their potential contribution to reconciliation processes—is overlooked, even though this perspective could have supported the harmonization of multidisciplinary research on disappearances and post-conflict reconciliation ([Brett et al. 2024: 106](#)).

Overall, *An Anthropology of Disappearance* stands as a key reference and valuable source for anthropologists, migration scholars, and others engaged in the interdisciplinary study of disappearances. It offers a valuable entry point for early-career researchers, providing theoretical and methodological contributions, while at the same time inviting scholars to recenter marginalized knowledge and engage in spatio-temporal contextualization that promotes critical reflection on the complexities of disappearances.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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