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On the Slow Silencing of Absences

Sensing Social Disappearances in Cape Verde

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Introduction

I left the party much earlier than I had planned because something unexpected caused me to feel a deep sense of unease. The mood was relaxed at the Cape Verdean-run pub in South Dorchester, a neighbourhood in Boston, USA. The Cape Verdean community had come together, accompanied by a generous quantity of national dishes and live music, and I was introduced to people from the islands who I had not met before. When I asked the small, conservatively dressed Fatinha[1] where she was from, I could hardly believe her response. A few months earlier, when I was conducting fieldwork some 5,000 km across the Atlantic on the West African archipelago, I had heard about Fatinha and about how painfully she was missed. As she shook my hand, seemingly feeling just as uncomfortable, I vividly remembered the terrible sound of her young daughter Líria's nightly wailing, which made everyone aware of the void her mother had left her with. Unable to confidently manage my awkward feelings about this unexpected reappearance, I said a hasty goodbye.

This chapter considers 'social disappearances', in which the absent person is the agent, and the consequences of this type of absence for cross-border social ties. My contribution explores the vast intermediary space that expands, alongside dis- and reappearances, between absence, remembrance, detachment, denial and abandonment. It builds upon earlier scholarly positions that have argued that the momentum of the absent, the void or the non-being cannot be

examined solely by tracing a given substance – a thing, a relationship, a person – or its changes over time (Bille, Hastrup and Sørensen 2010; Hockey, Komaromy and Woodthorpe 2010; Candea et al. 2015; Petersen 2013; Schindel and Gatti 2020).

Drawing upon empirical data obtained via multisited anthropological research in Cape Verde and the Cape Verdean diaspora, the chapter traces how the ab/normality of absences is sensorily grasped when the not-there and the elsewhere are accompanied by silences and – under certain temporal, social and political conditions – transform, or are transformed, into disappearances. I suggest approaching the difference between there and not-there, existence and absence, and available and disappeared through the lens of perception and perspectivity. According to Julien Deonna (2006: 32),

> [t]here are essentially two dimensions to perception: a factual dimension and a perspectival dimension … The perspectival dimension of perception specifies how things look from one's perspective. Perception not only alerts a creature to how things are in the world, but it informs her of how things are in the world from the standpoint where she stands. Objects are represented to perceivers as liftable, places as within reach or to the left, shapes as graspable, ditches as leapable and so forth.

To this, one might add relatives as reachable and socially present. In transnational families, absences are both a normalized element of the everyday and a troubling void indicating the risks and uncertainties of maintaining contact across spatial distances. As an element of the ordinary everyday, they are evaluated through mutual perception, knowledge and judgement; under certain conditions, they can turn, or be turned, into disappearances. To understand perceptions of these processes and the different consequent kinds of intersubjective implication, it seems appropriate to trace the complex sensuous collective engagements towards the ab/normal of absences from different angles. Not only individuals, but also collectivities such as families, friends, neighbours and colleagues, as well as representatives of institutions and many others, are involved in making sense of the ab/normal of absences, by eventually contributing to consolation, pacification and justification, or, in the opposite case, sharing the pain of loss, guilt and even shame. This chapter concentrates on 'social disappearances', that is, the fact that individuals can eventually disappear from certain sites, networks and relationships through their own choice. It will make use of these circumstances in exploring how the ambiguities of not-knowing disturb the legibility and reliability of social ties, how they alter the status and social relations of those

waiting and how this contributes to what Huttunen and Perl have called 'disturbed intimacies' in the introduction to this volume.

To make this argument, I will rely mainly on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2006 and 2008 on Fogo and Brava, two small islands in the south-west of the Cape Verde archipelago. I travelled to Fogo with my husband and daughter, and we integrated our family into the community of São Filipe, the island's main town. I also became familiar with extended family networks across Fogo and occasionally travelled both to the island's interior and to Brava, the neighbouring island. During the twelve months (in total) of fieldwork, I combined participant observation with semi-structured and narrative interviews, as well as ego-centred network techniques, focusing on households with key members living abroad. I subsequently visited family members residing in Lisbon and Boston, acquiring the complementary insights that I use here to illuminate absences from different perspectives. Although my research initially concentrated on the dynamics between mobility and immobility within cross-border family networks, collective doubts about transnational connectedness and fear of abandonment constantly appeared in my daily encounters.

The Historical Conditions Surrounding a Culture of Absences

The Cape Verdean islands emerged historically through the painful experience of economic scarcity – due to both dependence on global flows of goods and political isolation – and thus, life there is built upon different forms (internal, cross-island, cross-border and transcontinental) of mobility. Since the mid-fifteenth century, Portuguese traders have used these ten islands, located approximately 650 km west of the coast of Senegal, as trading posts for slaves, sugar and cotton. As a constitutive element of transatlantic economies (Guyer 2004), Cape Verde gained an international reputation and accumulated wealth by creating ties with other Atlantic trading populations, including Portugal, the countries of the Upper Guinea Coast and Brazil (Batalha 2004). However, the decline of slavery in the mid-nineteenth century signalled drastic changes, requiring new economies to be developed. Cape Verde is a desert country, and its local agriculture provides only small harvests. There is limited national industry, meaning that 90 per cent of all food and consumer goods need to be imported. Alongside this, population growth led to severe

famines during years of drought, with frequent food crises marking life on the islands until the 1960s (Bigman 1993). These conditions converted spatial mobility and global networking from a privilege into an essential means of survival (Halter 1993). Over the course of history, however, migration destinations have changed. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Cape Verdeans regularly crossed the Atlantic to build new lives in North America, particularly in Massachusetts, but political independence from Portugal in 1975 saw the emergence of strong labour migration flows to not only Portugal but also the Netherlands, Luxembourg, France and, more recently, Italy. A considerable number of Cape Verdeans can also be found in other ex-Portuguese African colonies, including Guinea Bissau, São Tomé and Principe, Angola and Mozambique (Batalha 2004; Carling and Batalha 2008; Drotbohm 2009). These places and the linkages between them constitute the Cape Verdean diaspora, which is numerically larger than the current-day population of the islands themselves.

This long-established transnational history testifies to not only the normality of mobility but also the deep uncertainties that can accompany a person's departure. Whether in melancholy songs (such as those of the famous singer Cesária Évora), in films or in literature, the dangers of travel, the pressure of maintaining contact, and techniques for remembering and mourning when contact is broken and only uncertainty remains are strong topoi in Cape Verde's cultural history. However, at the same time, numerous techniques serve to normalize absences and integrate those living abroad into the islands' everyday life. Kin and friends who have left the islands are not forgotten: there are regular phone calls, remittances and communication surrounding the way that they are spent, gifts that arrive on the islands on certain occasions and daily gossip about the fates of the absent. All of this serves to foster a collective sense of connectivity and transcend the physical distances required to sustain a joint social structure (Drotbohm 2009). Indeed, '[l]onging becomes the symptom of absence' (Bille, Hastrup and Sørensen 2010: 4) and even when these signs and symbols of connectivity cease, those who are physically absent maintain a considerable presence because the lack of care, attention or recognition can deepen or amplify perceptions and understandings of absences.

Nonetheless, the awareness that a regular form of making-present can be a chimaera also constitutes part of the Cape Verdean experience. As an irony of global history (Rozema 2011), even in the twenty-first century, migration remains a highly contingent and,

for many, extremely risky endeavour, despite constant improvements in transportation, registration, control and communication. The contemporary moment, characterized by the closing of borders, the criminalization of undocumented entry or residency, the delays in or denials of family reunification, and involuntary returns (i.e. deportations), renders people more aware than ever of the uncertainties of transnational mobility and connectedness (Drotbohm 2011, Menjivar, Ruiz and Ness 2019; De Genova 2021). Anyone who maintains a significant relationship across national borders is usually painfully aware that absences do not necessarily signal a loved one simply being temporarily elsewhere; they know that absences can transform into a person disappearing and being gone.

Researching Processes and Layers of Discreetness

As an outsider trying to make sense of social and kin ties by tracing different types and intensities of relatedness across space and time (Drotbohm 2009, 2010, 2015), I found it challenging to identify not only the normality but also the irregularities of absences. Scholars researching gaps in the social fabric depend on access to longer temporal continuity because they need to know who, or what, was once 'there', and which kinds of absence are considered normal. That is, how can we – who are usually only temporarily part of a given research site – identify absences if a particular absence is not articulated and the corresponding voids are covered or hidden? How should we proceed if – as will become clearer in the following pages – acknowledging a person's absence does not feel appropriate? When people are struggling with an absence and managing feelings of anxiety, mourning, shame or guilt, probing can often be inappropriate. In the most concerning instances, notions of asking the right person about the individual who is missing, choosing the most suitable terminology and phrasing and ascertaining the right conditions for inquiring are all subject to normative expectations, if not taboos. Therefore, recognizing absences is both, an ethical and a methodological problem.

During my time in Cape Verde, however, the main difficulty was not that irregular and unaccounted for absences were not clearly articulated. On the contrary, complaints about the apparent unreliability of migrants who maintained little or no contact with the relatives left behind were constant. 'It was clear that this one would evaporate quickly', was a bitter comment made by Miriam,

a 20-year-old with a newborn child who was still living in her own mother's house in the centre of São Filipe. Miriam – and everyone else – knew that the child's father had maintained an ambivalent attitude towards her pregnancy and then to the newborn. After a short period of public demonstration of fatherly pride, his visits became rare. Finally, he informed Miriam that he had been issued a Portuguese visa. Miriam had no illusions about his departure and knew that his emigration would not transform him into a caring father. Young men like Miriam's boyfriend, who leave the islands when the pressure of responsibility becomes unbearable, are often (and sometimes unjustly) suspected, soon after their departure, of failing to be accountable. In everyday life, this scepticism – especially towards male migrants – is exemplified by the omnipresent greeting, 'Did he call?' This frequently replaces 'How are you?' and is often perceived as a form of social control of those whose partners live abroad. In the context of Cameroon, Tazanu and Frei (2017) have reported heightened awareness of absences, especially during the first few months after a migrant's departure, a period often characterized by a 'slippery attitude' and increased difficulty in reaching the migrant by phone. In contrast to these simultaneously anticipated and scandalized variants of absence, which eventually turn into disappearances and are often the subject of disapproving gossip (Drotbohm 2010), other variants are substantially less easily observed, determined or even discussed.

This especially applies to those absences that will come to be perceived as irregular only over time, triggering existential uncertainty or fear on the part of those waiting. A good example of this kind of unexpected rupture and the subtle social framing of the process is Claudio, who had left Fogo about five years earlier, in his mid-forties. Claudio held a central position in the village and came from an influential family that was well connected within the region through trade and other activities. He was also particularly popular, being known as a friendly, jovial man who was also a good husband and a loving father to his two children, who were 10 and 12 years old at the time of his departure. His wife, Teresa, never imagined that the years after his departure would produce so much grief. In contrast, she was certain he would use his time in Porto to obtain a good job, look for a nice apartment in a good part of town and get everything in order so that he could bring his family back together as soon as possible. In the first year after his departure, everything had been fine. He called at least once a week, and sometimes more often, he talked about the conditions he had found in Portugal and he sent his family at least five

hundred euros every month, which enabled them to live much more comfortably than before. When migrants act 'appropriately' – that is, as expected – and remain present despite their physical absence, this usually enters the Cape Verde gossip mill, enhancing the reputation of the relatives who remain behind (Abeje 2021).

This kind of 'news coverage' also serves as a good seismograph for signs of irregularity and uncertainty. Nenezinha, a good friend of Teresa's who lived in the same village, clearly remembered the summer two years after Claudio's departure:

> Well, at the time, we already had the impression that not everything was going quite smoothly. But Teresa didn't say anything, so we expected Claudio to come at least for the Banderona [an annual festival that brings thousands of migrants back to the island from different parts of the diaspora]. Everyone was certain that he would come. But then Toni, one of his friends, said that it was strange that he hadn't called. Then, when he didn't come, it was very difficult. For some, it was difficult to even celebrate [because] we were so worried and, also, disappointed. Others, OK, yes, but not Claudio.

The distressing atmosphere that slowly emerges when the informal public commentaries begin to fade is clearly sensed by those who are aware of the power of talk in bringing those absent into the everyday life of the islands. Although Claudio's absence from the festival was discussed with dismay and regret behind Teresa's back for several weeks, inquiries regarding his phone calls gradually diminished before stopping completely after a few more months. Later, it was only intimate female friends who felt close enough to ask about Claudio and share Teresa's pain in the case of a negative response.

At the time of my fieldwork, it had been almost five years since Claudio's departure. Not only had his calls and money transfers stopped, so had the collective commentary on his absence. Whenever I met Teresa, she wore black, following the custom of Cape Verdean widows. Regardless of whether Claudio might still be alive, this signalled her loss of hope. For her own life, the way in which he had disappeared could almost be considered a social death. Meanwhile, this physical marking unmistakably reminded her social environment of her loss and demanded that friends and acquaintances respect the particularity of her (self-perceived) changed social status. I found Teresa to be a very reserved and also suspicious woman whom it was not easy to engage in conversation. During this uncomfortable process, Teresa turned, or was turned, into an 'intermediate figure';

her previously achieved upward social mobility was revoked, her fate undecided due to the lack of information. Many Cape Verdean women live with a similarly unclear social status because their husbands living abroad have fallen from sight. This impacts not only their relationships but also their position within their communities, their position as care providers, their sexuality and their potential to form new partnerships, as well as their access to state and other kinds of assistance, all of which contribute to the 'disturbed intimacies' that Huttunen and Perl problematize in the introduction to this volume.

Nonetheless, according to Teresa's friend, Nenezinha, friends and acquaintances had been working discreetly but vigorously over the previous few years to locate Claudio in Porto. Painfully, after almost several years of waiting, Teresa was subtly led to understand that she should not worry any more: Claudio could be traced. He was not gone but instead had changed his life and future orientation. The results of this search, which had been not only driven by the informal networks within the Cape Verdean diaspora but also state actors, including the police, were hidden from the curious public behind a curtain of insinuations, with the gradual collective silence around Claudio's disappearance considered necessary for life to go on. Most of the time, Teresa seemed to accept her altered social position, living in the village not as a wife but as a (kind of) widow. However, in moments of despair, cracks in her self-imposed discipline appeared: at night, the street completely dark, the frightening sounds of Teresa yelling and banging against her furniture could be distinctly heard all over the village.

Social Disappearance and the Complicity of the State

Especially in precarious migration contexts, which often do not proceed in a well-organized manner, phases of protracted absence are both common and commonly accompanied by doubt and fear. A person's classification – as elsewhere, formally missing or disappeared – is usually a question of the time elapsed and the information transmitted. Given that travelling to and staying in an unfamiliar place can always entail difficulties and risks, the interpretation of silences depends on the personal characteristics of the absentee: their age, gender, level of education, income situation, communication skills and family duties, as well as their expected reliability. In terms of assessing whether an official search should be launched, these factors differentiate Miriam's unreachable boyfriend from Teresa's normally

reliable husband, and from young mothers such as Fatinha, whose trajectory will be discussed in the following section.

When people disappear in unexplained circumstances, it is always possible that the disappeared person is actually the 'disappearing agent', a term aptly employed by Huttunen and Perl in this volume's introduction. Elsewhere, Schindel (2020: 20) has used the term 'social disappearance' to describe those forms of existence that 'are fundamentally deprived of all inscription and civil protection'. When migrants travel undocumented and work illegally, they fear exposure; however, it is also possible that they opt for a clandestine life when they want to escape controlling, exploitative or violent relationships. Although not gone, such persons have disappeared from a certain gaze. This is the case in the work of Martínez (2020), who considers women in Spain who have been victims of sex trafficking, and that of Lewicki (2020) on HIV-positive Polish migrants living in Berlin. In both cases, migrants protect their lives, which they perceive as 'failed' or even 'unworthy', from both public attention and the pressures of transnational social control.

Morally, the situation differs in cases involving those who use access to international mobility via flexible citizenship possibilities to expand their opportunities (Ong 1999), thereby finding themselves in new positions of power. Disappearances can be intentional in such constellations, with uncertainty and a lack of information forming part of damaging social practices. Transnational marriage arrangements, in which intimate and institutional asymmetries intersect, constitute one example of these 'gendered geographies of power' (Mahler and Pessar 2001). Numerous studies have shown that unexpected extended phases of family separation often end in new partnerships, including marriages, and that contact with the families left behind can fade over time. Parallel relationships can be tolerated and even appreciated under certain conditions, so long as the migrated partner fulfils their responsibilities (Drotbohm 2013; Lauser 2006). However, a migrating relative breaking off contact can produce not only feelings of neglect and abandonment in the country of origin but usually also social and financial difficulties. In the Indian context, Anitha, Roy and Yalamarty (2018) have reported that sociocultural norms make it difficult for wives to defend themselves against this type of abuse and to claim their rights:

> [By] strategically abandoning their wives in the home country and then filing for divorce in foreign courts, transnationally mobile South Asian migrant men make it almost impossible for their wives to secure justice.

> These actions deprive women of their financial rights[,] such as an equita-
> ble settlement upon divorce, maintenance of their children, and recovery
> of dowry. (Ibid.: 767)

As these insights make clear, the state has a special responsibil-
ity in balancing power within cross-border family constellations.
A 'chosen' disappearance occurring in the context of a conflictive
transnational relationship should not be understood as a 'simple'
continuation of disputes that can occur inside a country. Rather, state
migration regimes intersect with both gendered asymmetries and
additional axes of inequality, including class, age and immigration
status (Menjivar and Salcido 2002). If those left behind want to search
for those who are missing, they are disadvantaged in many ways.
Applying for a visa to travel to Europe or other parts of the world
from the Global South is already complicated; without a migrant
sponsor (which could be the person who is missing), access to
cross-border mobility becomes even more difficult. Contacting the
police abroad and obtaining information can be almost impossible.
The same applies to accessing financial benefits such as orphan and
widow pensions (Fitzpatrick and Orloff 2016). For many of those
waiting, already overwhelmed by the worrying opacity of their situ-
ation, cumbersome international bureaucracies constitute a breaking
point. Abeje (2021) has studied the social effects of transnational
marriage arrangements in the Amhara region of Ethiopia, focusing
on the position of the wives who remain behind and identifying
the moral dimensions of neglect and abandonment. Her findings
reveal that abandoned Ethiopian women are considered 'spoiled' and
'unsuited to life' (ibid.: 168) and risk being subsequently abandoned
by their own families too. Elsewhere, Anitha, Roy and Yalamarty
(2018: 767), with the aim of dismantling the 'myth of flexible citi-
zenship in transnational migration', have suggested conceptualizing
transnational abandonment as a form of violence.

In Cape Verde, given the long-established constant of cross-border
relationships, the experience of losing contact is very common.
Authorities often use the 'ordinariness' of social disappearances as
a convenient interpretation in order to escape the obligation to take
action. As if it were self-evident, a young Cape Verdean police officer
explained why initiating an international search would, in many
cases, make little sense:

> If things happen in another place, such as in another country, access is
> complicated. We have to speculate: is it an abusive husband who wants
> to escape the financial consequences of a divorce? Is it a migrant who is

fleeing from a violent family? Is the missing person the victim of a crime? Often, we have to say that if a person wants to come back, they will come back. Those who remain gone may have their reasons. It's better not to foster too many illusions.

Feelings of doubt and ignorance, cultivated by differently situated actors, can be interpreted as an unwillingness to know. Although this better-not-knowing is eventually considered 'good' and appropriate by some, it certainly complicates the efforts of others to foster hope and endurance. Indeed, by many of those waiting on the islands, confronted with the opacity of the situation and the inaccessibility of international travel through which to gain information, the state and its representatives are seen as accomplices in the processes of disappearance.

Caring through Opacity

Normally, waiting or hoping relatives invest substantial energy in articulating the pain of loss and, at least during certain phases of these unaccounted-for absences, in mobilizing official searches. At the same time, informal approaches to searching, organized through private networks, also produce significant momentum for handling experiences of loss (Parr, Stevenson and Woolnough 2016). However, this raises questions about cases in which these searches do not take place, such as that of Rosana and Tom, both over the age of 50 and with three sons, a daughter and a 4-year-old grandchild living in their household, that brings us back to this chapter's opening vignette. Before I even got to know this family, the sound of the grandchild's crying might have led me to realize that something was different. Every evening, around sunset, little Líria's wailing began; it could be heard throughout the neighbourhood. I noticed both this nerve-racking noise and the fact that no one seemed to care. One evening, I was standing in front of Rosana and Tom's house with a neighbour, and I commented on the girl's crying. The neighbour said that it was only a matter of time before it would stop. Then, voice lowered, he continued, 'It's the age, the age of the child. Maybe it would be better if the child could just forget about Fatinha.' It was only then that I realized that Líria's birth mother Fatinha was absent and that the woman taking care of her was actually her aunt, her mother's sister.

Until about a year earlier, Fatinha had done everything she could to be a good mother. When the opportunity arose, she went to

Boston to study law and at first checked in with her family whenever possible. However, she slowly stopped calling so regularly, and then contact ceased.

Here, it is important to note that various studies have considered the differently gendered norms within transnational parenthood, especially the differential normative framing and practice of transnational motherhood and fatherhood (Fog Olwig 1999; Poeze and Mazzucato 2013; Lam and Yeoh 2019). As explained in the historical overview earlier in this chapter, material provisions are interpreted as signs of cultivated contact in Cape Verdean transnational fields. However, the collective expectations in relation to migrant mothers are particularly high and precise. For instance, I have previously demonstrated that remittances from mothers are not deemed sufficient and that sending personal gifts, such as clothing, toiletries, school materials and toys, is considered critical to signalling 'good motherhood' (Drotbohm 2013). Notably, in research on Ghanaian transnational families, Coe (2011) avoids assumptions that emotional and material dimensions of love can be differentiated, arguing that 'the materiality of care is important in and of itself as well as its signal of emotional depth and closeness' (ibid.: 20). Against the emotional background of these material testimonies, it is clear that children need these signs of affection to measure the 'normality' of their mother's absence against normative standards. Furthermore, whether a migrant's child perceives a parent's absence as right and normal or as worrying depends on the effort or the success of their foster parents. Together with Lisa Åkesson and Jørgen Carling, I have elaborated on the Cape Verdean foster triangle, which comprises the foster parent, the child left behind and the migrant, and which, under ideal circumstances, compensates for the absence of the parent(s) through social and embodied practices (Åkesson, Carling and Drotbohm 2012). Central to this are the everyday techniques of remembering – including mentioning and telling stories about the absentee – and the everyday rituals that the caregiver conducts to bridge extended periods of unexpected separation. When children sense their mothers' (or fathers' or parents') presence through these objects, ideas and intimate practices, they are able to understand absences as not only normal but expected, appropriate and appreciated.

After Fatinha's calls stopped, Rosana and Tom chose an unusual route. They tried (for example, in conversations with me) to trivialize the missing information about Fatinha's whereabouts. Student life in Boston is exhausting, Rosana told me at one point. Fatinha needs rest in order to study, she said in another conversation. Another time: she

has probably got a new lover. There were certainly reasonable explanations for the lack of vital signs, and it was still possible that everything would be fine. Yet, at the same time, the family urged everyone to avoid mentioning Fatinha, especially in Líria's presence. They also emphasized the importance of not involving the police under any circumstances. It was not yet time, according to one neighbour; they trusted in God.

Rosana and Tom chose opacity over transparency, which they apparently perceived as an adequate way of handling this ambiguous phase of not-knowing. Although their choice of concealment was not approved of by everyone in their social environment, to categorize the behaviour as lying, suppressing the truth or manipulating the situation would be to fail to acknowledge the complexity of the temporal condition of waiting for a missing person. The act of reconfiguring social ties and the attempt to refrain from knowing reveal uncertain interpretations of inexplicable silences. In some ways, Fatinha's parents tried to imagine several futures simultaneously. On the one hand, they relied on the fact that Líria was still young and would be able to build a strong and trusting relationship with her foster mother. Similar to that neighbour mentioned before, some members of the community thought that it would be good if Líria could forget her mother. For them, hiding the fear and pain of waiting constituted some kind of protective care for the child. On the other hand, Tom and Rosana did not know what had happened to Fatinha or whether she might eventually reappear. Thus, for both their own life and their position in the village, clinging to Fatinha's existence was meaningful.

Líria, with her insistent crying, seemed to have managed to resist these ambiguities, at least up to a certain point. During one of my visits to the house, I encountered an arrangement of objects on Líria's bedside table. There was a photo of her as a baby in her mother's arms, cuddly toys and a T-shirt with her mother's faint perfume; every evening, this shrine enabled Líria to sense her mother's presence, which eased her off to sleep.

Disposability and Feelings of Guilt

About six months later and a few days after the encounter in the Boston pub described in this chapter's introduction, I tried, unsuccessfully, to contact Líria's mother Fatinha through acquaintances. On several occasions, I went to the pub in the evenings, hoping she

would turn up again. I confessed my frustration to a friend, who told me that it was better to let such matters rest. However, she also gave me the phone number of a friend of Fatinha's, having agreed to notify her about my request beforehand. This friend and I had a rather short, elliptical conversation, during which I was made aware that Fatinha had not been able to continue her law studies after the first two semesters. Her personal situation had become complicated and, due to her failures and her financial difficulties, she had got into a serious conflict with her father. Her guilty feelings left her unable to do what was expected of her. My interlocutor ended by saying, in English, 'You know, when you're in real shit, there is a point of no return. You feel like waste, you behave like waste, maybe you are waste in the eyes of those you love?'

The link established here between an absent family member's chosen withdrawal from her close relationships and a (self-)classification as 'waste' fuses perceptions of disappearance with 'disposability', a concept that has been introduced in research on the vulnerability of (racialized and gendered) workers in the context of global capitalism (Cock 1981; Stasiulis 2021). Some scholars have already detached this notion of disposability from the structural forces and abject material conditions that created and justified the hyper-exploitation of (migrant) labour (Wright 2006; Squire 2018). The concept has also proven useful for considering the unbearable conditions that can arise in the context of state punishment, whether imprisonment, detention or deportation (De Genova 2021). Indeed, these punitive state practices exist alongside social and spatial confinement, potentially – and perhaps certainly in the eyes of loving relatives – rendering them a form of disappearance. Under such circumstances, people can find themselves outside of social and political practices of integration, recognition and care, leading them to be labelled or to perceive themselves as unworthy in the eyes of both the state and their relatives. Again, we can see how perspectivity and perception are intertwined. This devaluation – the reclassification as waste and the relocation to the hidden, unseen places of sociality – disappears things and people from those dimensions of perception that are associated with a dignified and politically recognized form of social existence.

Fatinha's case indicates that the perception of disposability and of hiding in invisible social spheres can occur on both sides of the relationship. For those waiting in the country of origin, a relative's disappearance, which is often accompanied by insecure and involuntary conditions of waiting, can be considered a social form of moral punishment, especially when those remaining suspect misunderstanding

or conflict. That is, the reason or motive for the disappearance might not be found in or with the person who has disappeared, but instead in or with the apparently abandoned person(s), which is a particularly painful element of social disappearance. As the work of Povinelli (2011) on the structural weakening of Indigenous communities in Australia demonstrates, abandonment can, under certain circumstances, be understood as a form of 'letting die' (ibid.: Chapter 4). During the process of waiting and doubting, those who have been abandoned assess the positions of the different actors involved and the different forms of responsibility, which produces not only anger and frustration but also guilt and shame. Building on De Genova's (2021) thoughts on the 'disciplinary power' of waiting, which is coupled with a sense of arbitrariness, it can be understood how the searching and hoping relatives might eventually assume that they did not live up to the values and expectations of their migrated relatives and were, therefore – and in their view, legitimately – abandoned or disposed of.

   Fatinha's case is particularly revealing: it makes clear that many of these interpretations are matters of not only perception and interpretation, but also of access to unequally distributed information and knowledge. Without providing an understanding of the exact circumstances of Fatinha's chosen disappearance and the conditions of the alleged conflict between father and daughter, this case demonstrates that a feeling of unworthiness and disposability can also occur on the part of the supposedly privileged, with Fatinha struggling with her perceptions of failure and unworthiness. Furthermore, this constellation of perceptions illuminates the burdensome position of those who, possibly involuntarily, become accomplices in an (attempted) concealment, myself included. Although immediately after Fatinha's unexpected reappearance during the party in Dorchester I was full of indignation and intended to contribute to the restoration of transnational family justice, later on, especially following my conversation with Fatinha's friend, the slippery connotations of knowing more than others preoccupied me. I realized that I would need to be aware of the enormous consequences of exposing Fatinha's conflictive position to the whole family or her child. I also realized that I shared that painful burden with many others who knew both Fatinha and the relatives waiting on the islands. Awaiting external impulses and opportunities in the months that followed, I remained undecided, ultimately becoming part of the practice of silence that is so typical within the Cape Verdean transnational landscape and, thus, complicit in Fatinha's disappearance.

Conclusion

This chapter explored disappearances from the angle of transnational social ties and made apparent that these are often not an individual procedure but form part of a web of relationships that evaluates the normal or abnormal of a given absence. In her work on economies of abandonment, Povinelli (2011) explores how hope, despair, endurance and exhaustion are distributed unequally in late liberalism. According to her, 'the ordinary does not exist. The ordinary is a statistical projection of a variety of socially disturbed ordinaries – what the texture of the ordinary is for some is not for others' (ibid.: 133). For transnational families constantly confronted by absences, silences and the uncertainties of physical distances, the texture of the ordinary pacifies the collective sensing of irregularities, which might be both banal and dramatic. Everyday social practices comprise stabilizing, memorizing social and material practices that fill gaps and provide psychological stability. Under these ambiguous conditions, not only must the normality of absences be continuously established, but their eventual abnormality and even their catastrophic dimensions need to be taken into account. The empirical examples presented here make clear that these are matters of knowing. When those who are waiting sense irregularities in the absences of their loved ones, a decision must be made to follow the path of doubt, to search for more information or to accept the collective agreement that missing can mean gone and disappeared.

Examining social disappearances – that is, constellations in which the disappeared was the agent of their own disappearance – makes apparent that we can explore this type of ambiguous knowing by differentiating between perception and perspectivity. On the one hand, numerous actors are involved in the perception and interpretation of the void, for example by trivializing and weakening worrying if signs of normality are considered sufficient and satisfactory. The collective perception of Claudio's absence began with banalizations before evolving into dramatization and outrage and later culminating in discretion and silence. In the case of Líria, central actors tried to simply ignore the constellation of worry, pushing Fatinha's absence out of sight. In confronting a specific temporality of social constellations, members of these transnational communities were able to constantly sense and identify which kinds of silence were disturbing, which kinds of disturbance were allowable and which kinds of disturbance generated unbearable feelings of guilt and shame. Ultimately, silencing a person's absence marked something like a collective agreement

to account for the disappearance and, thus, to spare those waiting the painful fear of abandonment.

On the other hand, the actors were also aware that the perception of disappearances depended on access to information, rendering disappearance a matter of perspectivity. In the case of Fatinha, we learned that rather than being gone, those missing have sometimes disappeared from a certain gaze, whether this is the family gaze, the bureaucratic gaze (of either the country of origin or the country of residence, or both) or the gaze of the anthropologist asking inappropriate questions. That is, a missing person can disappear from one gaze but simultaneously (re)appear in another, which can, as I have attempted to demonstrate, involve moral dilemmas.

In the context of the constellations considered in this chapter, different collectivities assessed irregular absences and made decisions on the appropriate communal response. Whether transparency, the will to know, the right to know or opacity were understood as most appropriate in each case, variants of sociality-in-absence participated in the collective judgement. Not only relatives, friends and communities, but also state actors – such as the police and border control agents – contributed to either making absences matter or willing ignorance and fostering a preference for not knowing. For those waiting, but also for those who have disappeared – by choice, in these cases of 'social disappearance' – the openness of the situation disturbed their social ties, the interpretation of their past and their future prospects. Interwoven with feelings of guilt, fear and eventually shame, 'disturbed intimacies' became part of these fragile cross-border constellations. At the same time, maintaining the status quo by refusing to lament, search and mourn in some cases can also be understood as a strategy that pushes disappearances out of the collective mind, allowing life to go on and collectively covering the pain of social death.

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Note

1. To protect the interests of my research participants, all personal names have been changed to common Cape Verdean names.

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