

Being There in the Presence of Absence

Researching the Remains of Migrant Disappearances

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I am with a group of volunteers from an NGO I have joined for the summer. We are cleaning the beaches on Lesbos's northern shore to maintain good relations with the locals. This particular small stretch of beach is barely accessible on foot – we used ropes tied to a tree for safe climbing – and has no actual everyday use whatsoever outside of migrant landings, but it does not look very clean as it is. Furthermore, nobody wants all the plastic to be washed back into the sea. The atmosphere is remarkably easy-going for what we are dealing with. Remains of wooden fishing boats, parts left from dinghies, plastic water bottles, shoes, torn life jackets, backpacks, ropes, more bottles, a children's swimming ring with colourful fishes, discarded Turkish ID cards. After a few hours, they are all either piled up at the end of the beach or collected in rubbish bags, almost twenty of them. Once the NGO's RHIB [a fast, agile and light-weight boat capable of manoeuvring in shallow waters] comes to collect them, very little is left to remind us of the numerous migrant landings, wrecked boats and torn life jackets this remote corner of the shore has seen – until new ones appear.

—Fieldnotes, summer 2019

Where and how do we situate anthropological knowledge and the ethnographic account of such knowledge, when much of what we are looking to work with is inaccessible or present only in a residual or piecemeal form? Since 2018, I have been researching migrant¹ disappearances in Greece, an important Mediterranean node in mobility bound for the Global North. During my research, sites such as the

one described above have formed a crucial point of contact with this kind of cross-border mobility, and I have been constantly faced with the limits of knowledge about what has taken place and the irretrievability of past experiences. Together with cemeteries, material remains, either washed ashore or left behind along the migration trails, make up a sizeable part of my research data. In this chapter, I take on a twofold task. I discuss how traces (Napolitano 2015), and even more importantly, auras, in Walter Benjamin's (1999, 2002; Hansen 2008) sense of the term, become a key point in understanding what has taken place, and I argue that in situations like the one I found myself in, the task of ethnography is to construct a context wherein such traces and auras make sense.

Mostly between the spring of 2019 and that of 2020, I carried out fieldwork on the island of Lesbos, in Athens and around the Evros region. During that time, I joined an NGO responding to new arrivals crossing from Turkey, followed the work of forensic professionals, mapped and documented cemeteries, interviewed migrants, activists and local residents, and tried my best to immerse myself in the everyday life of the various locations on the Greek side of the Greek–Turkish borderlands. I had set out to answer the question of what happens – socially, culturally and politically – before, during and after migrant disappearances. Yet the material remains of mobility described in the opening vignette highlight the limits of ‘being there’, perceived in the traditional anthropological sense: often I was observing not the emergence, but the aftermath, of an event. The chapter is based on that fieldwork, which involved participant observation and ‘deep hanging out’ (Geertz 1998), but in which I increasingly found myself dealing with social relations and material conditions that were altered by something I could not have witnessed. This involved staring at the debris, piecing together what may or may not have happened and trying to provide context to unnamed, silent graves. However, just as the silence of the unnamed graves did not indicate a dead end but rather a knot in my inquiry, the material remains were not where my observations ended: the rubbish, the crushed boats and the personal effects speak – of presences and histories, of mobility and tragedy. The questions to which I found myself looking for answers were, as I will elaborate, how to contextualize and account for the presences I encountered and what they could tell me about what was absent.

In my research, I propose to engage with not just disappearances, but *disappearability*. While I will discuss disappearability in more detail below, it is useful to note here that with such a research

orientation I seek to highlight how migrant disappearances do not simply happen by accident and in any possible situation, but instead arise from particular conditions under which undocumented mobility towards the Global North often takes place. It follows that knowledge of such disappearances is also produced under the same conditions. This configures ethnography's possibilities in a very distinct way. Anthropological discussions on the nature of 'evidence' (e.g. Descola 2005; Engelke 2008; Lambert 2009) have noted that anthropological knowledge is relational, implicit, interpretative and acquired progressively through practice. That it has these qualities is certainly true, but it is important to note that the majority of such arguments are concerned with 'positive' knowledge and methodology, where 'evidence' is readily accessible. However, in my inquiry into disappearances I was constantly faced with what *was not* there (Huttunen and Perl, this volume). The clandestine nature of cross-border mobilities that causes disappearances and border deaths and the opacity and impenetrability of official responses to such tragedies meant that 'evidence' was always elusive (Kivilahti and Huttunen, this volume). The focus of much of my research, then, was forced to lie precisely in making sense of what was not there. I had to engage with the 'negative' (Fowles 2008; Navaro 2020).

Yael Navaro (2020: 165) has charted ways around the absences, silences and misappropriations of knowledge in the context of mass violence and genocide, through 'tarrying in the negative'. Both her analysis and Mikkel Bille, Frida Hastrup and Tim Flohr Sørensen's (2010: 4) notion that 'absences are cultural, physical and social phenomena' greatly inform my argument. In what follows, I will proceed by outlining what I mean by disappearability and look into three different sets of problems encountered over the course of my fieldwork. They are all practical, but they are also methodological and epistemological. The first of these sets is related to research ethics and the second to encounters with gatekeeping and silences, while the third set deals with constructing a credible account of what has happened. To overcome these problems, I will then move on to material traces as sources of knowledge and elaborate on Walter Benjamin's notion of an aura. In the final part of this chapter, I suggest that ethnography is a practice of building a context where absences, anomalies, rejections and uncertainties are data in themselves.

Researching Migrant Disappearability

By migrant disappearability I refer to situations conditioned by various cumulative precarities, such as unsafe routes and means of transport, pushbacks and detentions, and being forced to travel clandestinely, which then materialize into the disappearable subject. On the one hand, migrant disappearability is a condition – or a threat of a condition – inflicted on individuals while they are forced into undocumented mobility. On the other hand, it is a deliberate strategy of deterrence employed by states and border enforcement authorities (Laakkonen 2022). Disappearable migrants occupy an ambiguous space between enforced disappearances, as exemplified by Latin America (Gatti 2014; Robben 2005) and Bosnia (Huttunen 2016; Wagner 2008), and cases of the ‘ordinary missing’, which often engender a personal or familial rupture rather than a societal one (e.g. Parr, Stevenson and Woolnough 2016). Disappearability is the result of violence and deterrence that define and enforce the borderlands but are simultaneously masked as ‘accidentalized’ (Feldman 2019) by both authorities and most media accounts. Disappearability operates in a variety of often interrelated temporalities: as a historically layered phenomenon, it has developed over time as various new configurations of border enforcement, surveillance and anti-migration strategies have been adopted. However, it can simultaneously materialize in an instant, such as in the case of a car crash or a drowning, leaving behind a body without a name or a family member holding onto a name without a body.

The construction of an ethnographic account of disappearability comes with a number of problems that are at least partially present in participant observation and anthropological research in general, but also with others that are specific to disappearance and disappearability. While the rest of the chapter narrows its focus to the perspective of the anthropologist, it is worth noting that families of disappeared migrants experience similar kinds of absence, silence and erasure when dealing with the liminality (Huttunen 2016: 202) of their loved ones, and this is also part of what makes disappearability a specific condition.

The First Set of Problems: The Ethics of a Tragedy

The most traditional line of inquiry, that is, the collection of ‘evidence’ via participant observation, interviews, fieldnotes and photographs, may well run into a fundamental problem: not every setting

is there for the researcher to participate in. Not every experience can be tapped into. As much as we may hate to admit it, there are things that can – and sometimes should – be left unsaid. In the summer of 2019, I learned of a shipwreck that took place roughly two months before my arrival in Greece. A child's life was lost. I could have interviewed people who were present on the shore at the time of the tragedy, including those who took part in the search and rescue, and could have supplemented my knowledge with news articles and a forensic assessment of the incident. What I was missing, however, was the consent of the surviving family members to publish an in-depth analysis of what was ultimately *their* tragedy. As Indigenous struggles for the repatriation of ancestors' and family members' remains taken away in the name of colonial science remind us (e.g. Smith and Wobst 2005; Thomas and Bijon 2018), there are matters – such as kinship, belief traditions, belonging and mourning – that take precedence over the need to transform death into a scholarly argument. In weighing others' bereavement against my academic inquiry, I decided against writing anything more detailed about the case.

The first set of problems when researching disappearability pertains to ethical considerations. As Megan Warin and Simon Dennis (2008) note in their research with Bahá'í women who have fled Iran, fieldwork methods such as tracing, interviewing, documenting and photo-elicitation bear an uncanny resemblance to methods employed by authoritarian states. They point out that the word 'informant' itself was something their interlocutors questioned, as it held a very particular meaning for someone escaping an oppressive regime with an extensive state security and intelligence network (ibid.: 103). In migratory contexts, research interviews can replicate those done by aid workers and medical or legal professionals (Cabot 2016: 652). Furthermore, as Alejandro Castillejo Cuéllar (2005: 173) argues based on his work with trauma and memory in post-1994 South Africa, there is something deeply problematic about the way in which other people's traumas are turned into a commodity of sorts in the academic market – a source of one's own prestige. Equally, writing in the context of refugees in Greece, Heath Cabot (2016: 650) calls for the 're-humbling' of the ethnographer, urging us to recognize that anthropology's knowledge production is 'contaminated' by and complicit in dominant forms of power. Academic inquiry should, then, be about building solidarity – making use of a platform, not people.

In the context of victim support groups in post-apartheid South Africa, Cuéllar (2005: 163) writes about the 'violence of voicelessness'.

Indeed, there is a crucial tension between such voicelessness and deliberate silence, as Cuéllar observes – between recognition and invisibility (ibid.). When I listened to migrants – in camps, in Athens’ squares and so forth – recounting their journeys to me or discussing their current situation, a sense of unease was often present, as when one interlocutor asked Ruben Andersson (2014: 35), ‘What can you offer us?’ In research ethics, which are often drawn from disciplines such as medicine and psychology, questions of anonymity and consent frequently dominate, while questions of what we do to the people who choose to take part in our research and what can we give them seem to receive far less consideration.

The Second Set of Problems: Gatekeepers and Silences

‘You ask too much!’ Stratos,² the refugee camp director, shook his head at me. He was a tall, imposing man, whose short-cropped hair, wide shoulders and olive-green attire gave away his military past. ‘What do you even do with all this information?’, Stratos sighed. He then smiled at me knowingly. ‘I have a title for your work: “Beginning.”’ As he continued, he became serious again: ‘They have such unrealistic expectations, if you ask me: reaching Germany, getting money for their mothers ... But this [reaching Greece] is not the end of their journey, it’s the beginning. This is where their dreams die.’

I had travelled to the Greek refugee camp because it hosted individuals categorized as vulnerable or traumatized, and also those who had lost a family member while on the move. Proceeding through formal channels, securing a letter of invitation and then getting a rubber-stamped permission from the municipal authorities, I had managed to arrange a visit to the camp, but the results were somewhat disappointing. Stratos was the first gatekeeper I encountered. I had been given a tour during which my guide made sure I did not talk to any of the camp’s residents; I managed to interview a couple of staff members, but that was it. My interlocutors often avoided my questions or gave me the answer to a question they had hoped I would ask. When I asked Stratos about how they dealt with residents who were missing a disappeared loved one or a travel companion, he simply shrugged dismissively: ‘We don’t have those here. But we would have our channels to report them.’ It was the summer of 2018 and the region already had hundreds of migrant graves, most of them unnamed.

Thus, the second set of problems relates to questions of access. Researching disappearability and disappearances in migratory

contexts, and definitely so in Greece, can prove difficult for a number of reasons: the accounts of shipwrecks and the routes people travel have to be pieced together from a number of sources, such as news articles, various activist and NGO reports, and myriad forms of research data. The migrants are often pushed onto clandestine routes in order to avoid detection, and may simply vanish, at least for a long period of time, in the event of a tragedy such as drowning. Sometimes the authorities treat their bodies with contempt and disregard upon discovery. The material and bureaucratic trail may also be thin. Unlike the forcibly disappeared victims of dictatorships, whose status as nationals enables those left behind to make demands on the state, at least after the fall of the authoritarian regime, migrants are non-nationals, and the authorities are rarely, if ever, held accountable (cf. Nyberg Sørensen and Huttunen 2022).

And there were gatekeepers like camp commander Stratos. Such gatekeepers may be authorities, NGOs or local residents. Some act to cover up potentially embarrassing – or even illegal – practices they have engaged in as the competent authorities. Some act with the well-being of others as their primary concern, protecting individuals from being retraumatized by the researcher. Some gatekeepers treat information as a commodity, the possession of which will, they believe, grant them an advantage when competing for jobs or funding. Others believe that matters such as disappearances are not worthy of investigation in any case. Some such motivations are commendable, such as concern for those who have survived tragedies or those who have lost someone in one. For instance, I was directly told by a coordinator with an NGO to not pursue inquiries into a certain shipwreck off the coast of Lesbos. This was a frank request I had no problem following for the reasons outlined above. Other motivations are less commendable, though, including cover-ups of state violence. In heavily militarized border zones such as the land border along the Evros River, researchers are not welcomed by the authorities. Like journalists, anthropologists risk being followed, surveilled and even detained and interrogated: for example, I only learned after my visit that the police regularly check hotel registers for foreigners. The choice may very well be between ‘being there’ and not risking criminal investigation.

Over the course of my fieldwork, I also encountered several types of silence. One kind of silence came from authorities and international organizations. Sometimes it seemed that my attempts at establishing contact were simply not welcome. Despite my dutifully including a research information sheet in my emails, my motives may have been

unclear to the recipients. Why would a researcher from Finland want to know about burials? Why would he ask about search and rescue protocols? What does he really want from us? The more established the actor in question or the higher the position of authority, the more likely it was to never hear back from them. Sometimes I followed up with a phone call but was told to call back later or perhaps tomorrow. And later, or tomorrow, I was met with another excuse.

Another type of silence, one that was common among locals, was engendered by resentment towards ‘foreign powers’ – or those perceived to represent them. Only after beginning my fieldwork did I come both to understand how the migrants folded into local imaginaries the experiences of the 2010 economic crash, from which Greece had still not recovered, and also to note the deep mistrust of foreign presence and ‘intrusion’ (see also Theodossopoulos 2014). The notion of ‘being eaten from within’, as expressed by Dimitris, a middle-aged man living in a small fishing village on the north coast of Lesbos, is illustrative:

It’s as if everyone wants to destroy us from the inside. We’re being eaten from within. There you have Europe, there you have Russia ... The refugees keep coming, the state is doing nothing and Europe is doing nothing. In 2015, I was driving truckloads of rubbish from the beach every day. Every day the boats kept coming – no matter where you looked, there was at least twenty of them at any given moment. Why did I have to clean the beach?

The way in which Dimitris read the situation was not uncommon and was the source of a very particular type of silence. Many living in Greece established a continuity from austerity imposed by the ‘European Troika’³ to Greece being made a zone of containment for migrants by the EU and to the presence of all the international organizations and NGOs in the country. Many people were interested in writing about Greece, but few were interested in what Greeks wanted to say. In this reading I was, in the end, just another foreigner coming to benefit from Greeks’ hardships, underlining the extractive relationship that the international community had often had with the country.

Another kind of silence altogether was engendered by the fact that disappearances, and border deaths more generally, were tragedies. Human lives were lost. For example, people obviously have various reasons for not wanting to talk about what they have witnessed. For everyone in contact with such incidents as shipwrecks and drownings, from rescuers to translators, from hospital staff to

fellow travellers, the effects can be deeply traumatizing. Sometimes there were attempts to make an event, or a story, disappear through silence, for example, when the situation was clearly considered to be potentially embarrassing – primarily for authorities or forensic professionals who had done a shoddy job. Again, no one was really interested in talking about what had happened.

There are also complex political and ethical value judgements involved in telling or withholding a story. Silence, or intentional withholding, can be a means to retain ownership of a story (Perl 2019a), and in some ways this is a response to the moral dilemma that Cuéllar (2005) noted – the question of who gets to benefit from such recounting. But the fear of repercussions, personal or professional, was also a factor. Many professionals spoke to me on condition of anonymity and without their employers' knowledge. Despite the informality and, I hope, confidentiality of our meetings, it was clear that there was often a point at which people withheld information they clearly had.

The Third Set of Problems: Evidence and Veracity

'They move at night', my interlocutor replied as he nodded towards the mountainous horizon before us. We were standing on a hilltop overlooking patches of farmland, close to the site of a migrant mass grave. Hüseyin had been a lifesaver, because in his youth, he had been a sailor travelling around the world and therefore knew English well – something not common in the rural Evros region I was visiting, where many spoke Turkish. We were discussing the journeys of migrants passing through his village and I had asked him where they would be walking to. During our conversation, it became obvious the villagers were accustomed to burying unknown dead. The local clergyman had for years received bodies from the authorities for Islamic burial and by the time the mass grave was discovered hundreds of migrants had found their final resting place on a small muddy hill a few minutes' drive from the village. 'The mufti has all the records', the man assured me, a point city-based forensic professionals would later loudly contest. The site itself had only two graves with grave-stones, identified as a Syrian man and a Palestinian man, aged 31 and 22 respectively; the rest comprised criss-crossing mounds holding hundreds of unknown bodies. An empty pit, perhaps one metre deep and gathering rainwater, caught my attention: 'for the next one', my companion nonchalantly explained. If such an arrangement had been a professional nightmare for Greek forensic specialists, who

insisted that Islamic practices – such as burial without a gravestone or a plaque – did not justify a mass grave, it definitely was intriguing for an anthropologist.

This third set of problems comes with the requirement of producing an account of what has happened that is both broad and sufficiently detailed. In terms of what can be done to find them, there is often little to go on when a migrant disappears in the Greek borderlands. Bodies that disappear in the water, in the Aegean Sea or the Evros River for example, often drift far from where the person was last seen – if they were seen at all. They may be found months later or damaged to the point of being unrecognizable (or both). Sometimes tattoos or personal belongings may help in identifying a body but, as forensic professionals told me in our discussions, such items may have been bought by migrants at any point on their journey, or may even have belonged to a travel companion until very recently.

Writing an ethnography of disappearances and disappearability involved dealing with details that were invisible, inaccessible or only fleetingly present. While there may be other people to turn to in the social fabric in which the disappeared individual is embedded, you cannot talk with the one who is not there. You can write, for example, about identification procedures, about how shipwrecks happen and the border is enforced, and about the lives, up to the point of disappearance, of those who disappear, but there is always something about the phenomenon that is difficult to grasp. Writing about the aftermath of mass violence, Navaro (2020: 162) problematizes anthropology's 'professional imaginaries about "research methodologies"' that 'assume the availability, presence, and accessibility of "evidence"'. When researching disappearances in a migratory context, it is not only that various silences and gatekeepers come into play, as I have described above, but that there may be no one to interview and no site to photograph – no event to participate in and observe. In addition to 'positive' methodologies, such as interviewing survivors and working in an environment where testimonies and the identification of bodies are available (e.g. Robben 2005; Wagner 2008), Navaro calls for a 'negative methodology'. While I certainly collected what can be analysed as 'positive' research material, such as knowledge of border crossings and forensic investigations, as well as photographs, statistics and personal accounts, none of them were enough to answer the questions I went to the Greek borderlands with. At this point, 'the negative' became one of my primary concerns.

Negativity: Traces and Auras

Disappeared migrants are, simultaneously, gone and very much present. As I have noted, they are gone for their families, loved ones and whoever might be searching for them or waiting for news of their fate. Equally, I have described how they are gone in the sense that unnamed bodies or names without bodies prove difficult to manage and account for. Yet they are also present as memories and dreams, as objects of affection, as the places they occupy in social networks and as the material objects left behind. The three sets of problems described above had practical implications: how to build rapport, how to navigate both personal and bureaucratic networks and how to work in ways that were not simply extractive by nature. But these problems were also very much methodological and epistemological. As I was trying to understand and analyse border disappearances and deaths after I had entered my ‘field’, as it were, how to account for someone who was not there turned out to be a far less important issue than how to make sense of the presences, material or otherwise – how to account for the violence at borders and its aftermath. What could I claim to know and how did I come to know what I knew? To respond to both the practical and the epistemological or methodological conundrums, I first turn to Valentina Napolitano’s (2015) examination of the ‘trace’.

In her discussion of ‘anthropology of traces’, Napolitano (2015: 47) argues that ‘the trace is at once an analytical tool and an ethnographic site for inquiry’. For her, traces ‘emerge out of a condensation of stories/histories’ (ibid.: 57) and form material and processual knots that speak for not only a singular history, but all the social and material histories layered upon a situation, a place or a material object. This exposes the marginalized histories and the limits of official narratives. The focus on traces also evokes *tracing* as a field-work methodology, in works such as Jason De León and Michael Wells’s (2015) ethnography of border crossers in the Sonoran Desert between Arizona and Mexico. De León and Wells document a trail of material debris – as well as bodies – lying where thousands have disappeared. In the context of Greece, my field site, Yannis Hamilakis (2018: 9) notes that artefacts such as ‘boats and dinghies, life vests, and discarded rucksacks’ form such material traces, and Gerhild Perl (2019b) has demonstrated the strength, and the necessity, of tracing in the event of migrant disappearances. For research, the meaning of a collection of traces is greater than the sum of its parts, allowing for connections to be made over the gaps and silences.

But how do we tell a trace apart from mere rubbish? Where do we start our inquiry? Or, as Perl (2019b: 31) asks: ‘How can we trace the hollow sound of an effaced grave site?’ To account for how details, for example, among debris actually make sense, I will now turn to the concept of an aura. Making a distinction between trace and aura, Walter Benjamin (2002: 447) wrote that the ‘trace is the appearance of a nearness, however far removed the thing that left it behind may be. The aura is the appearance of a distance, however close the thing that calls it forth. In the trace, we gain possession of the thing; in the aura, it takes possession of us.’ Aura is, for Benjamin, the medium of perception rather than an inherent property of a person or an object, the ability of an object to return our gaze (Hansen 2008: 342; Napolitano 2015: 61). A medium refers here to that something in between that mediates and constitutes meaning and perception (Hansen 2008: 342–43), rather than, for example, a means of communication as such. Napolitano suggests that instead of being completely separate, a trace can have auratic qualities ‘connecting different parts of histories, “objects” and people. A trace grasped in its receding aftermath transforms and “looks back at us”’ (2015: 61). In this section, I look at traces and auras – and, indeed, their interconnectedness – and examine how they become research material.

Benjamin’s theory of aura is far from being straightforward or uniform (see Hansen 2008). In his famous essay ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ (1999: 211–44), Benjamin perceived aura as something a work of art would lose in reproduction. Rather than lamenting the fact, he instead saw this historical change – mechanical reproduction and mass culture – as having democratizing, revolutionary qualities. Yet in other writings, such as ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire’ (ibid.: 152–96), Benjamin theorizes the qualities of an aura in more detail, as more than an aesthetic, as something processual and still easily perceivable. He argues that the experience of an aura ‘rests on the transposition of a response common in human relationships to the relationship between the inanimate or natural object and man’ (ibid.: 184). In his ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, Benjamin wrote:

The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again ... For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably. (Ibid.: 247)

Navaro (2020: 164) takes up this notion and argues that knowledge of the past, in the context of mass violence, can only come to us in a piecemeal, compromised way. The same is true for migrant disappearances and disappearability; if traces, ‘images of the past’, are not recognized as such, they, too, are under threat of irretrievability. This ‘Benjaminian’ history, of compiling fragments, is also exemplified by Michael Taussig’s (1986) account of colonial violence in Colombia. Approached in this way, material remains such as those I started this chapter with possess distinct auratic qualities and are also fragments that coalesce into an account of something that took place at the site of crossing.

Such material traces as the ones I opened this chapter with, from rubbish to ID cards, wrecked vessels to clothing, form a crucial body of ‘evidence’, but, unlike seeing and ‘being there’, they speak of what is not present: the people who wore those shoes and were bruised during high-speed boat rides, who hung on to that swimming ring or drank the bottled water to fight dehydration. I have noted the ‘positive’ methodologies for dealing with the aftermath of violence, such as analysing detailed and contextualized witness testimonies and engaging with DNA analyses, but I often had no such possibilities. Yet, following Navaro’s notion of a ‘negative methodology’, the material traces account for many things: they speak of mobility, risk, fear and violence. They speak of flight and of dinghies punctured either by sharp rocks, Greek authorities or panicked migrants trying to avoid being towed back to Turkish waters. They address the gaps, voids and silences in our accounts of disappearances. They make up for the absences and erasures, even if often only partially – or they allow not knowing to make sense. A water bottle brought from Turkey or a Shi’ite prayer book tell of a journey, a self-made dinghy of the conditions and means of such a journey. I encountered similar sights elsewhere in Greece, with clothing, backpacks, dummies, food wrappings and so forth lying along railway tracks and in abandoned buildings. A local dog playing with an abandoned shoe. The personal items of unidentified migrants collected by forensic examiners also work in the same way, from phones to jewellery, medicine to babies’ dummies – De León and Wells’s (2015) ‘migrant trail’. Sometimes these material traces have been made into a monument, such as the ‘Life Jacket Graveyard’ that grew on a rubbish site in Molyvos, Lesbos, where massive mounds of life jackets and other related items were collected. However, they are often simply left lying around or are cleaned away, removed from sight. Some of the violence of disappearances come from the fact that all too often the

whole story cannot be reconstructed, but an item, a residue, staring at us will bypass gatekeepers and allow access to something perhaps otherwise forgotten. The auratic qualities of material remains also transform our ethical considerations: they compel us to bear witness. In contrast to silence, they speak out loud.

The qualities Benjamin gives to an aura, namely the ability to designate distance, the ability to return our gaze and the characteristic of transposing the relationship between two persons into a relationship between an object and a human, make aura a useful notion to think with. The baby's dummy, the phone charger and the carbamazepine, used to treat epilepsy, certain nerve pains and bipolar disorder: all these objects project an aura, which to the sensitive observer offers a glimpse of who they belonged to, perhaps how they were acquired and to which point of the journey they pertain. Items I collected or photographed indeed fill a gap, tell a story: emergency blankets for staying warm or fighting the heat, life jackets for hopefully staying afloat, water bottles sold in Turkey that were packed for hydration, shoes that were worn out by long hikes over rough terrain. All these objects may be physically within the reach of the researcher, but what they designate is far away, at a distance. The objects provoke the individual to relate to them as to another human, who possibly now lies in refrigeration without a name or is buried in a cemetery as *ágnostos*, 'unknown'. Unlike the daguerreotype, which never returned our gaze (Benjamin 1999: 184), these objects indeed do look back at us. And because of their particular aura, they become intelligible in a particular way. For the forensic examiner, personal effects link to a body, catalogued and stored; for the anthropologist, they link to a phenomenon.

Benjamin gives the aura two further characteristics (1999: 154–55, 184–85), that of Proustian *mémoire involontaire* and the requirement to be perceived by whoever is looking at the object. With *mémoire involontaire*, he refers to a memory triggered by a sensation or an observation that activates something already forgotten – like a smell that reminds us of home. We do not know which object will trigger that memory; for Proust it was the madeleine cake. For my discussion of aura, this type of piecing together is exemplified by the dog playing with the shoe. A single shoe in the middle of a residential area where people do not leave clothes or rubbish on the street. We did not know the shoe was there, but it immediately reminds us of the railway tracks a short walk away, the railway tracks along which migrants travel at night. On the role of the observer, Benjamin (*ibid.*: 184) writes that to 'perceive the aura of an object we look at

means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return'. But not everyone will see the object in that way, or they may remain silent or decline to acknowledge it – perhaps because of one or many of the reasons I have explored. In the vignette I began this chapter with, it is noteworthy that my companions and I did not discuss the people to whom some of the objects had belonged. Crossings to Greece had become such a common event that it was almost as if it were perfectly normal for such items to end up on a remote, barely reachable stretch of coast. Perceiving an aura is an active attempt to glean it from the mere closeness of an object, such as a baby's dummy or a packet of tablets: investing in it a sense of humanity, but also a sense of contextuality that makes perception possible in the first place. Providing this context is anthropology's expertise (Huttunen 2017: 117), and this is a notion I will turn to next.

Ethnography as Context

Napolitano (2015: 62) posits that the 'methodology on traces brings anew into focus the forms that forces of lingering histories, attachments and marginalities, unmediated by conclusive structures of meaning, may take' and points to the historically layered meanings that traces take on in her work. Her traces, much like the auras in the material remains I documented, only make sense if we appreciate the historical, political and social conditions under which they appear. Regarding Mustafa, a Bosnian interlocutor displaced by war, Huttunen (2017: 118) argues that it is the task of the anthropological project to contextualize such an individual 'in time and place, and consequently to take [their] public voice, and public agency, seriously', and the same was true for the non-human subjects of my inquiry. Just as Mustafa's personal suffering was inescapably intertwined with particular historical events – as well as with circulating experiences, stories and imaginaries (Huttunen 2014, 2017) – the meanings of the residues of cross-border mobility and tragedy I witnessed arise only when we understand their context, in the sense of both how they came to be where they were found and the circumstances in which they were encountered.

Let me illustrate this point with an example. The city of Orestiada lies some mere six kilometres from the Evros River and the border with Turkey. It was founded by Orthodox Greeks displaced from the area around Adrianople – now Edirne – by the League of Nations-mandated exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey in

1923. This is reflected not only in the original name of the city, Nea Orestias – New Orestias – but in the intergenerational trauma that is present and the local configurations of social and political imaginaries. Does this directly, perceivably, relate to the unidentified bodies in the University Hospital of Alexandroupoli? Not immediately. But after a while it does. It is what makes the site of crossing, or the site of disappearance, what it is. The locals' knowledge of the family home long gone and their present-day resentment of Turkey while they at the same time acknowledge, and live, the continuous everyday cross-border movement are ethnographically crucial. For the anthropologist, there is a degree of uneasy continuity, or continuities, to be established, in which the past is embodied, lived, repurposed and reactivated (see also Knight and Stewart 2016).

Of course, there are first-hand accounts of the massive displacement of 1923, during which over a million Orthodox Greeks were removed from Turkey, but most of what we now know about the events is history: recorded, selected, arranged, archived and presented. But this can, nevertheless, also become part of what makes a contextualized ethnography of migrant disappearances in Greece possible. The people who go about their lives, serving food in a taverna, cultivating garlic in the adjacent fields or selling tickets at the train station, are all part of the ecology, if you will, of the borderlands – and of the disappearances that take place there.

As an anthropologist I was not merely cataloguing material remains or interrogating professional responses to disappearances, but also looking at how locals relate to such remains. Such contextualization also shows the various ways of conceptualizing the remains' auratic qualities. For many of my Greek acquaintances in the borderlands, the migrants passing through represented disorder. For example, they interpreted completely differently the clothing, medicine and backpacks left along the railway tracks that I recorded as data. It was a special kind of rubbish, a reminder of how their everyday surroundings seemed to be beyond their control. The old Orestiada railway station is a case in point: a local amateur historian recounted to me how the wooden building burned down after migrants seeking shelter from the cold made a fire inside. He lamented the loss of a historical building, but instead of making a connection to the forced clandestinity of migrants' journeys and their inability to rely on formal support structures, for him the incident folded into the injustice that locals, and by extension the entire Greek nation, were facing. Locals' resentment and political imagination form one of the intersecting structures conditioning migrants' mobility – and,

indeed, their disappearances – along and across the borderlands. This is where understanding the historical contingencies at play becomes important: why the remains are treated as rubbish, on the one hand, and how they are linked, socially and politically, to the nearness of the border and the presence of neighbouring Turkey, on the other. This also helps in understanding the tension between solidarity and discontent, all without witnessing a single instance of border death or disappearance in the area first-hand.

Conclusion

Ethnography as a contextualizing endeavour draws from *being there* in the presence of absence. Names without bodies and bodies without names, as well as victims of state violence, can often be approached ‘positively’, for example, through witness accounts or DNA identification (e.g. Cuéllar 2005; Robben 2005; Wagner 2008). But this may not always be possible. Sometimes, as I have argued, a ‘negative’ methodology, as proposed by Navaro (2020), is necessary. In my research, it was seemingly impossible to account for disappearability and disappearances without also accounting for the discontinuities present – the gaping void in our ‘evidence’. However, when contextualized, material traces and the auras the observer can appreciate in them address the absences, silences and erasures in ways that, when meticulously documented, contribute towards a rich ethnographical account. In my Greek example, such context requires an understanding of the histories of forced mobility that are present, the border violence and surveillance that push migrants towards disappearability, the strategies migrants themselves employ, such as their choice of particular routes, and the lacklustre search, rescue and identification infrastructure. Building this context, making the interconnections present and displaying them, is an anthropological task. The reason a detail ‘pricks us’ (Barthes 2000: 26) by standing out, the thing that triggers a *mémoire involontaire* or otherwise contributes to our inquiry, is contingent on the interconnections we can make, either in the fleeting moment of seeing the dog playing with the shoe or later, as we begin to assemble what we have learned.

Jean Paul Sartre (1966: 41–42) has described going into a café expecting to meet ‘Pierre’, who, nonetheless, is not there. In Sartre’s discussion of nihilation, by virtue of ‘Pierre’s’ absence from the café, all other faces and objects ‘decompose because they “are not” Pierre’ (ibid.). In other words, his absence fixates our attention on his

absence alone, making the café itself disappear. However, in contrast to ‘Pierre’s’ absence, the absences I encountered precisely illuminated what was there (cf. Bille 2010). Crucially, then, it is the interconnections that we shed light on in our writing, between the dog, the shoe and the railway tracks, between the border police patrol, the Shi’ite prayer book and the mass grave. How such interconnections become tangible and how material objects fill the gaps is dependent on all other available information, from historical accounts to geographical details, from testimonies – or, indeed, the lack thereof – to forensics. This context not only fills in the gaps but may also show us where the silence is or help to make sense of an absence elsewhere and, crucially, make intelligible why an absence or silence is where it is in the first place.

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Notes

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1. In contrast to the exclusive definition adopted by, for example, the UN refugee agency UNHCR, I use the term ‘migrant’ to refer also to refugees. This is to highlight how people can be forcibly displaced by capitalist accumulation, protracted low-intensity conflict and colonial extraction in ways not always accounted for in the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention.
2. The interlocutors’ names in this chapter are pseudonyms.
3. The ‘Troika’ is a name commonly given to the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund, who all played a central role in pushing for Greece’s austerity programme.

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