
Who are the “disappeared” and why do they matter? Gabriel Gatti’s edited book takes us through a journey to understand how the “disappeared” have been delineated as a social, legal and political category to be used in places and situations that exceed its original meaning. Through understanding the different ways in which a disappearance matters, the book and its authors open up the possibilities for the category to have a life beyond what was initially thought of.

As Melissa Wright has aptly shown in this journal, the term “disappeared” represents an innovative activist technology that emerged in the 1970s under repressive governments in Latin America, in regimes that constantly “denied their role in disappearing people, whom, they argued did not exist in the first place” (2017: 251). A widely known example of this repressive rationale can be seen in a statement made by Argentina’s former military dictator, Jorge Rafael Videla, during a press conference in 1979. In response to a journalist’s inquiry about Pope Juan Pablo II’s condemnation of the human rights abuses and illegal detentions occurring in the country, Videla declared:

The disappeared as such, is an unknown. If the man appeared he would have X treatment, but if the disappearance transforms into the certainty of his death then he would have Z treatment. However, if he continues to be disappeared he cannot have any special treatment he is an unknown, he is a disappeared, a nonentity, he is not here … not dead nor alive, he is a disappeared, and we cannot do anything about it.¹

¹ “Frente al desaparecido en tanto esté como tal, es una incógnita. Si el hombre apareciera tendría un tratamiento X y si la aparición se convirtiera en certeza de su fallecimiento, tiene un tratamiento Z. Pero mientras sea desaparecido no puede tener ningún tratamiento especial, es una incógnita, es un desaparecido, no tiene entidad, no está… ni muerto ni vivo, está desaparecido” (press conference in Spanish; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7PCzaoEPv10 [last accessed 31 January 2017]).
Gatti’s edited book ("Disappearances: Local Uses, Global Circulations") attempts to create a scientific concept of disappearance, and in the process it opens up a genealogy of the term. “Disappeared” has become a category that orders the reality it describes. The disappeared is an absent-presence; not-dead-nor-alive. An absurd. Inevitably the search for a scientific category of disappearance is doomed from its very beginning, especially if we understand scientific categorisation as the definite, precise, well-bounded description of a phenomenon or idea. Knowing its futility, Gatti embarks in this impossible enterprise nonetheless, bringing together experiences from all over Latin America. In his attempts he constantly “fails” to create a scientific concept of disappearance, but in this “failure” the book provides a rich analysis of what it means to be a disappeared and the potentialities that lie within the term.

13 texts make up the book. The collection offers a wide spectrum of academic analyses of how the legal term “disappearance” has changed from its first uses in the context of Argentina’s Dirty War to the everyday use of the term. The collection of essays shows us how this particular kind of absence travels in time and space and acquires different meanings as it confronts new contexts. From an unexpected situation to be explained amidst political violence to a category that explains – that allow us to think through uncomfortable moments of – new disappearances: missing in combat, missing with no trace, kidnapped immigrants, refugees, victims of femicide.

The book puts into conversation a wide variety of literature, not only that concerning grave human right abuses, and the judicial aspects of them, but also literature on science, geography and social movements. It is a conversation that takes us from the political disappearances in 1970s Argentina to what is now happening in Colombia and Mexico amidst the so-called “War on Drugs”. It further speaks to recent discussions around the living disappeared in Argentina and the challenges that the identification of these individuals is posing to social and legal life in the country. This book represents an important academic effort, bringing together literature that spans legal and ethnographic analysis in one volume.
alongside photography, to spark an academic conversation on the meaning of disappearances, locally and globally.

In the Introduction, Gatti argues toward a “scientific concept of disappearance” (“concepto científico de desaparición” [p.13]). In order to achieve this goal, he guide us through a set of milestones that have shaped the concept historically. Using as a starting point the “originally disappeared” in Argentina, the chapter argues that it was the public outcry of families affected by the disappearance of a loved one that instigated the social life of the term. As such, the disappeared became a new state of being. According to this analysis a disappearance entails a negation, an absence of evidence, materiality, purpose. There is an irrepresentability of the disappeared in everyday life; however, critical geographers who attend to the materiality of the disappeared and its multiple embodiments in forensic files, social media, DNA, memorials, and intimate narratives mobilised by their friends and relatives, have shown that the “disappeared” can be thought of differently.

According to Gatti, a second milestone for the category was its international reach. The international awareness of the category was made possible through the development of a legal framework (primarily by the United Nations) where “to disappear” was framed as a state of exception. This was a successful strategy for the category in two senses: firstly, the disappeared were recognised as such; and, secondly, the category became a nominative success. Thus, the category begins its journey, it is constantly used and gradually extends to explain other cases, in different spaces and times, but always referring to Argentina’s enforced disappearances as the “ideal type”. This has implications for the ways in which the notion of family and kinship have been directly linked to biological ancestry and blood lineage without always considering the intricate relations that were developed in the case of the “living disappeared” – children born in captivity to mothers who had been detained and disappeared during the dictatorship in Argentina, who were forcibly abducted and later raised by military families as their own offspring (Vaisman 2014: 391). Considering Argentina’s disappeared as the “ideal type” has created many controversies as Virginia Vecchioli, Cecilia Sosa, and Rosa-Linda Fregoso further explain in later chapters.
The retroactive construction of the disappeared has been applied to different types of enforced absences whether committed by state forces or not. Such flexibility explains the category’s movement from the disappeared as the exception to the everyday disappeared. This marks the use of the category for a wide variety of human rights abuses more or less similar to the ideal type, including but not limited to ethnic genocide, colonial wars, and spaces where the rule of law is fragile. The extension of the category to cover other types of violence is what Gatti conceptualises as the “fourth milestone”.

Gatti’s fourth milestone resonates with what Jenny Edkins has long argue in her analysis of the experiences of families of missing persons after the terrorist attack in New York on September 11th 2001, and the July 7th bombings in London in 2005: contemporary forms of politics constantly objectify and instrumentalise the individual, thus rendering the individual missing from politics (Edkins 2010, 2011). Edkins’ notion of being missing from politics denotes a subject who is not visible on the threshold of recognized political subjects, a subject that has disappeared. And thus, the term “disappeared” is being used by stakeholders and academics, not only in the global South where the category originated, but also in the global North, to describe individuals that are denied their uniqueness and irreplaceability, who are being reduced to nothing but their own ordinariness, subsumed by numbers and bureaucratic practices (Edkins 2011).

The book allow us to deepen our understanding of disappearance(s) through the analysis of rich local experiences and responses to absences, from critical approaches to the absence of a body as the material evidence that a life has been taken away to discussions around DNA identification processes in Argentina, and a poignant exercise to understand absence via family portraits left with blank spaces to mark the absence of a loved one. The analytical thread that links the essays in this volume is the possibilities within the category of “disappeared”. For instance, Élisabeth Anstett’s chapter sheds light into the challenges and risks posed by trying to accommodate different types of violent absence under one umbrella term such as “enforced disappearance” or “detainee disappeared”. Kirsten Mahlke’s chapter explores violent absence as a technology used by governments through the promotion of a
collective psychosis. Alejandro Castillejo Cuéllar and César Augusto Muñoz Marín’s ethnography of the corpses of the disappeared in Colombia describes the forensic analysis of the body as the prime materiality of violence and how the materiality of the body and its absence became forms of evidence.

The book also discusses the search strategies developed by local NGOs in Mexico (Ignacio Irazuzta’s chapter) and the international awareness raised about gender violence in the Northern states of Mexico (one chapter is written by Rosa-Linda Fregoso, a judge in the hearing on femicide and gender violence organized by the Permanent People’s Tribunal in Chihuahua). In these chapters, violent absences, government’s strategic not knowing, and families’ experiences of search are at the core of the discussion. And it is precisely this relation between absence and search that takes us to critically engage with Cecilia Sosa’s chapter that explores new forms of being with others, by analysing non-linear narratives of kinship and family to rethink the normative family frameworks created around Argentina’s disappeared and their blood-biological ties.

Sosa’s chapter deserves special mention as she uses the queer gaze as a critical tool to engage with a politics of grief that takes into account the new filiations created amidst violence, in order to fight the biological kinship argument which was part of Argentina’s post-dictatorship. In contrast, Virginia Vecchioli’s chapter on genetics, blood and memory offers a different approach to family as a biological bond. It is precisely the blood of the living disappeared that makes them politically relevant. The body is shown again and again. However, it is always shown to be not univocal: it simultaneously reifies the biological family, and opens up the pathways for reparation and recognition through DNA and forensic science.

Finally, a local and global approach to disappearances wouldn’t be complete without a geographical approach to the disappeared. Pamela Colombo’s chapter on geographical imaginaries and the disappeared reminds us that absence and state violence can also be analysed vertically. In this chapter, subterranean spaces controlled by the military in Tucuman, Argentina are analysed alongside local accounts, vertical imaginaries of violence
that affect everyday life and spaces of memory underground: where the bodies of the disappeared are rumoured to lie.

The book ends with a photographic journey as a gateway to talk about violence and disappearances, and to explore identities built upon absence(s). Overall this book offers its readers an important overview of recent theoretical, ethnographic and critical approaches to the notions and experiences of disappearance. It is a timely and important critique of a concept that has grown out of its original intentions, semantics and practices, first recognised in Argentina but with a larger history of terror. This book is a reminder of all the different spaces and forums where the disappeared have been (and continue to be) discussed and acknowledged.

As this collection of essays shows, “disappearance” is a concept that might be in the process of becoming something other than originally intended; it is a concept that despite our efforts to grasp and fix will always escape us. Its potentiality and appeal comes precisely from its ill-defined, non-scientific nature.
References


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