



Book Review of Horsti, Karina 2023. *Survival and Witness at Europe's Border: The Afterlives of a Disaster*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University. pp. 286.

MIRJAM TWIGT 

BOOK REVIEW

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Karina Horsti's beautiful ethnography *Survival and Witness at Europe's Border: The Afterlives of a Disaster* makes a convincing case for the importance of recognition of fellow human beings and humanization in academic studies. Horsti explores how contemporary border violence, relating to colonial pasts, has its own afterlives (Hartman 2007) that haunt our present and future societies. Survival, she argues, is productive, as the experience of a disaster significantly transforms the lives of survivors, of people who survive loved ones, of people who witness first-hand and of those who learn from it through media representations. All are affected – albeit in different ways – by border disaster and exercise agency and creativity in how to respond.

The book follows the events of 3 October 2013, one of Europe's most mediatized migrant disasters. An overcrowded boat that was carrying mostly people seeking refuge from Eritrea caught fire close to the shores of the Italian island Lampedusa. Hundreds drowned, also due to inactions of border guards and fishermen who did not notify authorities (p. 193). Only 155 – 6 of them women – were eventually saved by other local fishermen. Through nine chapters, Horsti analyses how media representations of the disaster and its survivors – words, pictures, narratives – come to matter and the varied actions that are undertaken by the differently positioned witnesses, from the immediate aftermath to months and years later. She actively involves narratives of nine survivors and people who have survived loved ones, allowing for much-needed reflection beyond humanitarian-oriented immediacies of disaster and towards persistence of life.

Chapters 1–3 focus on the critical role of media representation. Chapter 1 considers how the disasters' framing – a shipwreck, a tragedy or the Italian *strage* (massacre) – produce categorically different ethical and political registers. Whereas the first two suggest accidental events, the latter exposes the production of systemic and systematic dangers. Chapter 2 explores dominant visual representations that

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perpetuate asymmetries between spectators and the people who have arrived, alive or dead. Iconic images of the disaster – of rows of anonymous coffins reflecting governmental performance of compassion – mark the anonymized presence of death. Survivors, family members and journalists however seek alternative visualities, for instance, by attaching photographs to the coffins. Depicting ‘irreplaceable life’ (p. 68) allows the public to imagine who the deceased persons were. The question of who the victims were and how many is also central to Chapter 3. While the International Organization for Migration (IOM) – a central actor in border management – started to record some fatality metrics (p. 72) soon after the disaster, such statistics can further depersonalize border violence. In contrast, survivors compiled a list of victims’ names, which played a pivotal role in memorialization through art and advocacy. Another counterhegemonic strategy is to centre on one individual – in this case a young woman called Yohanna – to humanize the broader tragedy.

Chapters 4–6 shift to rituals and memorials by those without prior personal connections to the victims or their community. The retrieved dead bodies were transported from Lampedusa and buried in different cemeteries spread out over Sicily. Chapter 4 considers how Sicilians cared for the dead, with some even ‘adopting’ them and their relatives into their communities, demonstrating cemeteries to be communicative spaces. Chapter 5 examines memorials and annual commemorations established in Lampedusa, created partly because the victims’ bodies were no longer on the island. These efforts, often led by civilian rescuers, challenge Europe’s border policies and open a discursive space for multiple layers of identification. Chapter 6 considers how memorialization extended beyond Lampedusa. Italy established 3 October as National Day of Remembrance for the Victims of Immigration. Teachers across the country engage students in commemorative activities, and the disaster’s memory continues to inspire local actions across Europe.

The most compelling contributions are in Chapters 7–9, which centre on the experiences of survivors and those surviving their loved ones. There is a notable absence of survivors’ perspectives in cultural productions on the disaster – only 3 out of 50 works include their experiences (p. 197). Horsti’s approach underscores the importance of time: to secure legal status, rebuild lives and search for ways to process. Time is also essential in working against extractive research practices and towards ensuring dignity. Readers are invited to reflect alongside Horsti, to gain a closer understanding of the event’s complexities and to challenge voyeuristic consumption of disaster narratives and difficult stories. Some input of the survivors and relatives is also provided in the earlier chapters, for instance, as they respond to the author’s interpretations. And throughout the book, the humanity of the deceased becomes understandable through their relationships with the living.

Chapter 7 highlights Eritrean survivors returning to Lampedusa to participate in commemorations. Their political, social and moral claims about memorialization are dynamic, often navigating the expectations of Lampedusans, fellow Europeans (as many now also uphold European citizenship), diasporic communities and Eritrean’s oppressive regime. Chapter 8 examines what survival means, beyond staying alive, through the experiences of some survivors. Their experiences are harrowing, such as needing to swim away from drowning fellow travellers to ensure their own survival. This punch in the gut does not – should not – elicit pity but outrage at the systematic conditions that enable such disasters. The survivors are not victims, as they have proceeded from that position and have actively engaged with the world around them. Chapter 9 explores the grief of those who have survived their loved ones. Mourning

in a context of border death is fraught with uncertainties, not least around whether the person has died, the location of the body and implications for burial practices. We follow a young Eritrean refugee who retrieved his brother's grave in Sicily with the help of survivors. Now the eldest son, he sends his phone containing the photographs he has taken of the grave to his mother in Eritrea. Alternative mourning and memorialization practices are sought in intimate and often digitally mediated ways.

Throughout the book, Horsti draws on Isin and Nielsen's (2008) understanding of citizenship – as acts constitutive of belonging to communities beyond formal status. Forms of transgressive citizenship – forensic citizenship, survivor citizenship and diasporic citizenship – illuminate relationships with the living and the dead, often despite the state. Despite attention to the continuation of colonial past and towards new kinds of Europeanness, the book could have engaged more with Europe's issues of race, racism and racialization. It is questionable whether 'EUrope' (Stierl 2020) would respond similarly if the victims and survivors were not predominantly people of colour.

The epilogue recounts Kebrat's story, highlighting the way in which her personal story is retold and changes in the cultural productions as well as her evolving role in advocating for justice for the dead and condemning Europe's collaboration with Libya. Europe's racialized politics of death persist. Mare Nostrum – Italy's Search and Rescue mission that was launched in response to this and another disaster – was cancelled after a year. Eleven years later, border violence – both within and beyond the Mediterranean – continue unabated. Horsti's focus on relationality and perspectives of survival refuses paralysis and steers our thinkings towards ways in which these violences can be undone.

The book is essential for scholars, students and activists across many disciplines, such as media studies, migration studies, and international relations. Horsti's attentiveness provides crucial insights into the manifold ways in which borders, power and racialized capitalism act and the ways in which critical tools for resisting detachment in such contexts can be developed. For instance, although Horsti does not mention this specific context, the horrors currently unfolding in Palestine and beyond – brought to many of us on our smartphones – highlight the need for a focus on relationality. This focus helps keep us from retreating into the role of distanced spectators (see also Hammad 2024) and reminds us that collective creativity and actions are essential to dismantling oppressive structures.

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