

Book Review

**Horsti, Karina:
Survival and Witness at Europe's Border:
The Afterlives of a Disaster
Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press. 2023**

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On 14 June 2024, marking the one-year anniversary of the “Pylos shipwreck”, survivors and victims’ families held a commemoration ceremony in Berlin. One year after the fishing trawler *Adriana* capsized and sank off the coast of Pylos, Greece, due to alleged misconducts of the Hellenic Coast Guard (Malichudis et al., 2023), killing more than 600 people with 82 bodies recovered, activists launched coffins filled with colourful paper boats down the river Spree outside the parliament in Berlin. Survivors and families formed a community of grief and trauma, called for justice in protest against Europe’s cruel border regime, and demanded better support in their asylum procedures (Santos, 2024).

Following the story of the Pylos disaster and its afterlives is a haunting experience after reading Karina Horsti’s book *Survival and Witness at Europe’s Border: The Afterlives of a Disaster* (published by Cornell University Press in 2023). The disaster in focus in Horsti’s book happened ten years earlier, on 3 October 2013 off the coast of Lampedusa, Italy. More than 360 people died. Horsti presents an impressive and humbling study of the ways the disaster lives on: how it is communicated about in public spheres, witnessed and represented, and remembered and memorialised by a variety of actors. Based on anthropological fieldwork and participatory action research over the course of ten years, the reader is presented with an analysis of “the politics, subjectivities, and relationships that emerge through the disaster’s afterlives. How does the disaster shape not only the lives of individuals, families, and communities, but also the European Union, which created the conditions in which the natural forces of the sea kill certain people?” (p. 4).

In three major sections, Horsti cuts through different dimensions of the disaster’s afterlives: the ways words, images, and numbers controversially shape mediated representations and public communication about the event (chapters 1–3); how those who did not know the dead witness and remember the disaster and the dead “Other”, such as in burials, ceremonies, and memorial installations in Lampedusan and Sicilian communities, as well as across Europe (chapters 4–6); and, finally, how survivors and the victims’ families enact citizenship, remember, live on, and grieve.

The book departs from the notion that survival is productive, generating complex relationalities which are constructed through and negotiated within different media practices of representation, witnessing, and remembering. Horsti draws on an array of theories from critical border studies, the ethics of representation and witnessing, trauma and survival, as well as citizenship studies. Productively mobilising these theoretical insights, the chapters present a situated, empirically rich exploration of media representations, memorials, and media practices of survivors, relatives, politicians, and activists. I cannot summarise the many (yet always appropriately deep) analyses of examples and cases here, which range from public apologies and a failed state funeral, the erection of memorial sites, transnational online practices of Eritrean survivor communities, public emotions during annual visits to the disaster site, T-shirts with calls for justice, graves adopted by Sicilians, poems by survivors and Italian high school students, to films and theatre plays,

and many more. Yet, the book does not fall apart. Instead, Horsti manages to tie together her analysis of the afterlives of the disaster by not shying away from the complex ethical questions about representation, positionalities, and forms of citizenship that her interlocutors and co-researchers, as well as the author herself, enact and are interpellated to.

The book convinces with its careful sharpness. Horsti presents a benchmark of engaged scholarship. Ample space is provided to the voices, stories – and, impressively, poems – of different participants and co-researchers, yet Horsti provides reflective, poignant, and critical analyses of the ethics and subjectivities, out of a position of care, and sensitivity, in search for potentials of political transformation. The nonreductive-ness of the analysis is a particular strength of the book, carving out the politics, ambiguities, and contestations in highly complex settings. While at points the organisation of the book according to witness groups makes it slightly confusing to keep up with the 10-year timeline of events, the book offers a clear arc that arguably reaches its strongest sections in chapters 7–9, focusing on the survivors and the victims' families. An especially great contribution is Horsti's concept of "survivor citizenship" (Chapter 7), grasping how survivors act as citizens of Europe, out of a position of "responsibilizing oneself as a survivor" (p. 176). This perspective transgresses tensions between, on the one hand, romanticising the agency of victims, and on the other, condescending victimisation based on compassion. This notion of citizenship productively stands in the context of other citizenships identified across the book, such as a citizenship of attentiveness of Sicilians, a citizenship against indifference, or forensic citizenship of those reconstructing victim lists.

In light of the 2023 Pylos disaster, the particular ethical gravitas and compellingness of Horsti's study becomes apparent. While the book offers a vocabulary to make sense of emerging practices of memorialisation and survivor citizenship enacted in the Berlin ceremony, the repetitiveness of observing yet another shipwreck's afterlife is haunting: a testimony to failures of real political transformations, and a testimony of the unbearable endurance of Europe's border lethality. Ultimately, Karina Horsti's book itself is part of the afterlife of the Lampedusa disaster. And the reader cannot escape. Rather, the reader is made into an active participant in the citizenships compelled by mediated representations, witnessing and remembering. As once again survivors "refuse to become paralyzed as they experience the violence of the border" (p. 226), one cannot help but be haunted by the piles of afterlives of continuous border deaths.

References

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