

Introduction

GONE

Neide fixes her deep brown eyes on mine; linear, and piercing. I'm suddenly unnerved. "You're here now, but if you were to disappear here, now, *ah meu filho* [my child] . . ." she laughs, ill at ease, but full of assertion. Her gaze shifts, the focus dissipates. One day, in 2008, Neide's son Felipe walked out the door of their home. He said he was going to return a motorcycle with a friend of his. He was never heard from again.

Between twenty thousand and twenty-five thousand people go missing in São Paulo every year, or so a prosecutor and the newspapers tell me. Many of them are found, one way or another. Thousands of others are not.

I sit with Neide in the living room of the house she built from scratch with her husband on the south side of São Paulo. Neide's house—put in place brick by brick, mortar on mortar, a new room one year, another one years later by her husband's hands—is around the corner from one of the fluid urban capillaries that connect the informally urbanized periphery with the downtown of this global city of around twenty-four million people. She told me to tell the minibus driver to drop me by the big Y intersection, after taking the metro, a bus, and a short walk. In the other direction the capillary courses down to the Billings Reservoir, a dammed body of heavily contaminated urban water that feeds into the Pinheiros

River, a thread of brown liquid that moves back through the city, past the crystalline towers along United Nations Avenue—the height and light of so-called global harmony.

For Neide, everything changed when night fell and Felipe didn't come through the door. Soon, there was trauma. She speaks of depression and dejection mixed into every stride of the searching. Reiterated trauma. When he didn't come home, Felipe was still vividly present. His absence was generative, affective, brimming in what, to others, might seem like silent emptiness. Where he might have spoken or laughed in a family conversation, nothing was audible. Instead, there was melancholy, an individualizing but nonetheless collective reminder of the unfulfilled expectation of his presence, borne in excess by Neide. Such silences were not of solace or of coming to peace. What Neide describes is a smile that should be there, the warmth of eye contact, of someone's distinctive smell, of knowing how they sit and hold a fork or spoon between their fingers at the lunch table.

Soon emptiness started soiling everything surrounding it—any conversation, the euphoria of a song, a birthday party. Shreds of happiness and contentment always caving into guilt. Materials and moments are the crux of his memory (figure 1). Other things are also gone. The emptiness Neide describes is not just of Felipe's presence in his absence, but also of the way that a sensation of emptiness carried her own life away with it. Neide had worked for a law firm doing minor paralegal tasks. After Felipe vanished she tried to muddle through, but in the end she lost her job. Eventually, her husband did as well. Soon after, then, Felipe's disappearance was also an absence of money. His material emptiness, which had become her emotional emptiness, now became emptiness in the family purse. Soon, there was an emptiness in their stomachs.

But, as it turned out, even more emptiness was possible. A kind of political emptiness, as though the state that would help to find Felipe had itself gone away. Felipe had been a high school student. And, as with every student in the municipal public school system, when he was absent from school, parents would hear about it. Sometimes the *assistente social* (school extension worker) would call to ask where he was, why he wasn't in the classroom. "They would harass us," Neide said. The first thing these municipal employees would always ask was, "Is there a problem at home?"



Figure 1. Neide (photo courtesy of Aline Abdala).

And then, five or six months after he disappeared, Felipe's school principal called. The extension workers had escalated the issue. Neide told him that Felipe was gone, he'd disappeared. The principal was shocked. He'd heard nothing of the matter. In a nanosecond his inquisitiveness about Felipe turned to awkwardness and withdrawal. "After he hung up," said Neide, "I never heard from him again." It was like the principal, too, had disappeared.

This shift of the principal and the school system from inquisitive to abrogated resonates in Neide's words, even years later. As she puts it, "But where is the extension worker now to help me? Where is that group of people, from the Concelho Tutelar, that is supposed to be so concerned about child welfare? They do nothing, but say that they do. But if I was ever to spank a child, the police would be there the next day."

They cared when he was occasionally absent from school. But they don't care when he is completely absent. Neide traces the sensation with her words, speaking around the way that their "care" was, really, an effort to control. That care is now gone, and not just from the school. State agencies that are supposed to care instead show indifference, resignation beneath the filed paperwork. With some important exceptions, she's found very few who will join her in the search, outside of other mothers and a handful of fathers she has come to know because their sons and daughters have disappeared, too.

The widespread indifference to searching for Felipe is shrouded in other kinds of doubt about what might have happened. When Felipe disappeared he was with a friend, a young man that Neide didn't know. Both he and Felipe vanished. So, for Neide, this wasn't just a problem of finding Felipe. It was about finding both of them. One would likely hold the key to knowing what happened to the other. But Neide was surprised to not find a willing partner in the other man's family, who reacted very differently. They didn't do much searching, and she could never really account for why. Sometimes they would say that they didn't have enough money to do it. That seemed the justification; they would do it when there was enough money. But they certainly weren't without the acute trauma of loss. As Neide put it, the mother seemed like she would only shout, "I want my son! I want my son!" She was groundless, untethered, but apparently totally disinterested in finding him.

"You know those kinds of people that never really open their mouth?" says Neide. "That don't really want to share anything with you? And so, she just never wanted to say anything. She would just keep shouting, 'I want my son! I want my son!'" They often wouldn't pick up the phone, and they wouldn't open the door when Neide came by. People spoke of her as being depressed. One time, to Neide, her husband wrote off her inconsolability as "a problem of depression." Neide had a hard time not reaching out, not trying to share

in the effort and not uniting forces to find the two young men. It seemed so obvious to her, so important. She still can't get her head around why they "weren't interested." Where had their desire to search gone?

At some point, Neide was contacted by the Public Prosecutor's Office and told to leave the mother alone. Neide doesn't know how the prosecutor came to know, or why *this* was important enough for an institution that usually doesn't work at street level to intervene. This intervention from on high, concerned with someone *searching* and not with the disappearance itself, was striking to Neide. Rather than assembling a search party to find Felipe, she was threatened for asking questions—or maybe the right questions of the wrong people. The Prosecutor's Office, it seemed to her, was asking her to stop the search.

Neide has been everywhere else that could possibly help her. An NGO—Mães da Praça da Sé (Mothers of the Central Square)—for parents of missing children, gives out a prepared and photocopied list of places to look. She's been to each of their suggestions what feels like hundreds of times in these last ten years. To places like her neighborhood police station, where they record it but dismiss his disappearance as "not a crime," noting under their breath and in pseudonyms and posture, that he was a young man who wasn't always at school who was driving a motorcycle in a poor neighborhood. "Maybe he wasn't an angel," they imply. To the missing persons unit, which exudes disinterest and an affective film of bureaucratic violence. They drawl, "Did you find anything?" when she returns each time, hoping that their job has been done for them. To the morgue, which smells of a heaviness of decomposition that sticks to the fibers of her clothes. To public cemeteries—especially those for the indigent—with their routine processes of interment, disinterment, and disposal. She follows any hint of what I call "mundane mass graves," tracking any community whispers about a new one being found. She's been beneath every urban underpass, where struggling people congregate for shelter, that she's seen and could think of. She talks of São Paulo's infamous psychiatric *manicômio* and of the newer, partially private, and mysterious rehabilitation centers—home to the homeless, mentally ill, and dying persons left there by police, by hospitals, by families and by neighbors.

She has found nothing. She pins her hopes on Felipe maybe walking right back in through the front door—one day.

“Eight people are registered as disappeared per hour in Brazil in the last ten years,” shouts a 2017 newspaper headline. One person every seven and a half minutes. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), which has worked on efforts to trace missing people around the world since the Franco Prussian War in 1870, says eighty-two thousand people are reported missing every year in Brazil. Numbers are approximate, and there is a battle over them.¹ Many people reappear, having been tracked down and returned or their body found—an argument often used to minimize urgency around the thousands that never do. Unlike “political disappearances” in historical moments, occurring amid crisis, war, and outright contestation for political power, which have been well studied, counted, and disinterred, this kind of mundane disappearance is made apolitical and treated as banal.² The numbers, which collapse the missing dead, the missing alive, and the missing in search of life, elsewhere, just don’t seem to count. Mundane disappearance, existing outside of systemic crisis, is yet to be marked as a political problem, even as its condition as mundane is necessarily a question of power. Why?

For the ICRC, as for others, the project is to make this kind of disappearance political, through enumeration and population delineation. But numeration can feel like a project of containing a cloud in a football net, or using a pitchfork to move a pile of rice. The affects of disappearance, its varied violences, and systemic productions are not captured in the numbers. For those who search and hope, those who have disappeared are not easily assigned to death, to life, to violence, or even to politics.

In this city and state—which would be the fourth-largest country in Latin America if measured by population—other numbers describe what surrounds disappearance. Over 4.2 million chattel slaves were trafficked into Brazil in the transatlantic slave trade, the largest amount of any nation in the Americas. Still today, according to the Brazilian government, there remain at least 3,524 *quilombos* (Maroon communities) created by slaves who disappeared from plantations, fleeing to build new societies. Urbanists describe how greater than 60 percent of the city of São Paulo urbanized informally, in spite of the state rather than through regulation, redistribution, and an attention to life. Police statistics show that every year, police kill between seven hundred and eight hundred people in the city, 75 percent of whom are typically young Black men. São Paulo’s

prison population has grown by 2,144 percent since 1983—from 9,972 to 233,755. An organized crime group now controls all but seven of the state's 178 prisons, 28 of which have been built since I wrote the first sentence for this book in 2016. That organized crime group is now present in each of Brazil's twenty-six states, plus Bolivia and Paraguay. The rise of this organization from the historically violent and informally urbanized parts of the city and through the prison system coincides with a homicide decline in the city of around 80 percent, which, in real terms, means at least six thousand fewer intentional deaths per year. Journalists have written about thirty-five mass graves discovered around the city since 2007. The Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency (ICE) of the United States detained seventeen thousand Brazilians at one land-border station alone, El Paso, Texas in 2019.

Alongside all of this, how might one make sense of the equivalent of a small city disappearing every year—if indeed it actually is? What does such mundane disappearance—the nebulosity of no body, no life, and no death—tell us about a contemporary political condition that holds some life as so devoid of value that it can disappear and not be pursued? While apparently passive, disappearance is an acute condition, speaking to the blurring of political nonexistence and material disappearance, with the former a necessary condition for the banality of the latter. Some people will be pursued by the state when they disappear. Most others, like Felipe, are not. It seems that politics—the state, popular urgency, an affective desire to collectively pursue the absent, protest in the streets—has itself gone missing. And yet there is a search.

Over the course of this book, I will describe three claims. First, disappearance is a generalized assumption tied to capitalism as a system that inscribes inequality on human life, as though an ethical or universal truth. In this sense, disappearance cannot be disentangled from a condition that sees human value relative to what it can(not) produce, make, or do—a constant comparative gesture embedded with value-laden difference. This differs from an understanding of disappearance as political only when someone is yanked off the street, rendered away by cloaked figures because they were members of a political organization, or were actively contesting a political regime. Always political, disappearance—today—works through indifference and forgettability for some, but a spectacular outcry for others,



Figure 2. Felipe at age five (photo courtesy of Neide).

each of whom are understood, relative to the other, to be worthy of either pursuit or nonexistence. Here, then, “the disappeared” are not a discrete population, solely to be counted or numbered, one category of wrong among many. Rather, disappearance is itself *the* political reason, defining a prison system where people get lost and can’t be found, and working as a

defining characteristic of life and social death. In other words, disappearance is more than being denied humanity, it is a way of everyday knowing, succumbing, and surviving, in a global condition where there are too many bodies for capital's use, a need for some life to be maintained, and where bodies must be understood as useful in the service of accumulation. To mark mundane disappearance as a political problem is to implicate the kind of politics that presides over inequality as assumed and unquestioned. Mundane disappearance is central to capitalism's order and forms.

Second, this does not mean that someone vanishing doesn't matter. It has preconditions. The aftermath of Felipe's disappearance reasserts social and political order, affirming the inequity of life; an act of non-pursuit written on the face of a resigned police detective or through a spectacular public hunt for an innocent White child. An absent search, a mother or father left to search alone, performs inequality, where saving those who must not disappear also shapes the person who *can* disappear: the disappearable subject. In this way social and political order should be understood as being reasserted not only at the time of death, as Bloch and Parry (1982) once argued, but also even where the relationship between time and death is unknown, and unknowable. In doing so, material disappearance works as a discursive social category—"he disappeared," "they vanished," "he's gone"—dependent already on whether someone could be understood as disappearable, and independent of what might actually have "caused" their disappearance. *Who* makes people disappear, why people disappear—or flee—works at a second order of importance, behind an understanding of their already absent value, or of their supposed position as threatening to the status quo. Supposition about who the disappeared are, what they may have done, and why they do not deserve to be pursued, conditions the scope of a search—or lack thereof.

Third, an ethnographic focus on disappearance of both kinds reveals a *search for life*: a world of weeping tied up in the political economy of mass incarceration and dehumanizing racism. Within the assumptions and uneventfulness of disappearance there is an unmistakable search for life; mothers and fathers fighting to prevent bones being incinerated, collectivity at muted gravesides where commemoration of life is a criminal act, in the toil of everyday disinterment with care, and via distinctive organizations that take an opposition to mundane disappearance

and sub-humanity as their starting point for a different assertion of lives that matter. Mothers unite, struggling to mobilize against all odds. Other people, who are contained in the prisons that are a materialization of the mundane ethics of disappearance, are emboldened to monopolize conditions of life and death on different terms. Such searches for life are tenuous and tricky, walking a knife's edge between reasserting the importance of some lives, and denying such recognition to others—including in the making of mundane mass graves.

Disappearance is not, then, a condition of absolute foreclosure. This banal paradigm is revelatory of a tenacious resistance to letting people be disregarded; to contesting the very idea that some people matter less than others. Though disappearance may imply absence and nothingness, it speaks immutably of a fight for a better politics; an ethos of determination to not let disappearance define the status quo. Against efforts to forget, to let the absence of people become the absence of memory, there is astonishing movement. As I will show, this takes everyday shape in flight, in collective organization, in violence, in a dogged devotion to recast disappearable subjects as worthy of being human, and in a call to never let people be forgotten. To keep the bones alive. Looking closely at who disappears reveals the indomitable efforts to radically reassert the importance of life in the bleakest conditions, however unnerving, illiberal, or counter-ethical. *The search*, then, is a means to appreciate what disappearance creates in subjectivity, will, and possibility.

In narrative form, this book is organized around two intertwined themes: disappearance as a political assumption, and, people searching. The narrative follows both, with empirical struggles, constraints, successes, and violence tracing the assumptions and practices of how disappearance functions as banal in the political status quo. Along the way, the reader will encounter the historical arc, spaces, people, institutions, trajectories, and inhumanity that shape contemporary disappearance, and how conventional but not inevitable political solutions like prisons and police produce this accelerating regime of disappearance. The chapters follow this pattern, leading from the moment of someone vanishing, to speculative answers about where the search ends.

The narrative unfolds as follows: “Disappearance and the Search” places the contemporary resurgence of missing people in context, describing how

vital the two ideas and practices have been in the making of Brazilian political order, attending to what has changed and what has not. “Keep the Bones Alive” follows the efforts of mothers and fathers, individually and collectively, to search for their disappeared, placing the dehumanized ethics of disappearance alongside the lives of a son and mother, Kaio and Débora. “Unearthing Life” takes the reader to the cemetery for the urban poor where the unknown and unclaimed are buried, introducing the work and toil of Otávio, a gravedigger. “Disappearance and the Cemetery” points to the centrality and use of the cemetery of the urban poor in the making of political order, *especially* via disappearance, across historical moments and material forms. “The Usefulness of Capricious Knowledge” shows that the cemetery is only one instance of passive governance and selective rationalization of bodies within the state, inquiring into the medical examiner and into the uses of bodies in the production of knowledge and science. “The Disappearable Subject” trains a lens on prisons, and especially one just for police, to show the ways that direct and exterminatory violence works alongside the politics of disappearance. “From Disappearance, Presence” places a collective search for life within this exterminatory violence, showing how violence and mass incarceration generate new sociality.

“Muted Martyrdom” looks more closely at this rationale, and the way the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) continues to function as a collective search for life, by focusing on the work of death and commemoration at the graveside. In “Make Live, Make Disappear,” I reveal that this form of belonging has its own regime of disappearance and searching. The organization answers some questions about the missing, but it poses new ones by causing others to flee and search for a new life elsewhere. “I Just Want to Live” invites answers to the enduring question, *but where did they go?* I introduce Matias, an asylum seeker in an ICE detention center run by a private detention company named CoreCivic. The search leads people like Matias in many directions, cloudy and crisscrossed as they are, away from mundane mass graves, from being buried in a pit by police, to the anonymized streets of the city, into Microsoft’s facial recognition database for the United States’ ICE, and, ultimately, into a patterning of global political order that also takes disappearance as its starting point.

1 Disappearance and the Search

In Brazilian law, disappearance is just a *fato atípico*; an “atypical occurrence.” It carries no notion of atrocity.¹ The “atypical” sits alongside the positivist “typical” in Brazilian jurisprudence, where the latter works through four enmeshed normative premises: *conduct, result, relationship of causality, and legal typology*. These four principles, forged in a global colonial legal pact premised on bodies as the pith of knowing, require a linearity between intent, outcome, effect of action, and the ability to categorize according to codified doctrine. The “atypical,” by contrast, is the absence of these complementary and necessary conditions.

Another way of locating the absence of legal reason amid everyday rationality is through a foundational writ: *habeus corpus*. Bring the body. Brazilian legal theory—derived from hegemonic Western legal theory—holds that if a body has been deprived of liberty, and for such a condition to be contested as unjust, the body must be brought to court for *it* to attest to its own condition of deprivation. Such a logic of deprivation of liberty vests its premises in the materiality, voice, or representation of the body to the state. The absence of a body untethers the ability, and any substantive demand, to claim “deprivation of liberty.” Without a body there can be no deprivation of liberty, by fact of law. Thus, “atypical.”