

**Noam Leshem**, *Edges of Care: Living and Dying in No Man's Land*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2025. ISBN: 9780226835976 (paper); ISBN: 9780226835952 (cloth); ISBN: 9780226835969 (ebook)

In *Edges of Care: Living and Dying in No Man's Land*, Noam Leshem challenges us to unlearn and deconstruct our imaginaries of the prevalent yet theoretically narrow idea of no man's land. The normative imaginaries of no man's land, Leshem contends, conjure up visuals of desolate landscapes, exploded trees, barbed-wire fences, and the strewn, discarded objects of war. They are also, importantly, imagined as empty of life. Indeed, Leshem proclaims three clichés of no man's land which he challenges. First, that it is empty and devoid of human life. Second, that ownership and tenure of the space is absent. Third, that it is exclusively a border phenomenon. These imaginaries and clichés, the book argues, have turned no man's land into a "convenient metaphor", in turn flattening "historical specificities and political nuances" (p.3). Leshem confronts this notion, conceptualising no man's land as a space which has been abandoned by sovereign power, and meticulously evidencing the lives and communities that resist, endure, and create within this environment.

Central to the book's concept of no man's land is that this sovereign abandonment is a form of *uncaring*, a set of "extreme conditions under which any pretense of sovereign care is severed, under which care itself is abandoned" (p.7). The form of care being withdrawn from no man's land, the book contends, is not "its more general application as an individual sentiment or state of mind", but rather "specifically ... as a political relation between state and subjects" (p.8). Leshem argues that uncaring is not passive—it does not emerge from accidental error or oversight from the state. It is an active disavowal of responsibility, and it is this "complete abdication" of care which forms a unique political relation.

The book traces the genealogies and spatialities of the political relation of uncaring. At the same time, it gives crucial attention to the stories of the people and communities that live with uncaring as "a condition of life" (p.8). These stories come from a rich diversity of sources, including sites across Palestine, Cyprus, Colombia, Ukraine, and Syria. In doing so it successfully expands analysis of no man's land beyond Anglo-European history and thought. The structure of *Edges of Care* is important for this approach, and for the "unlearning" of no man's land. Leshem does not structure the book to provide varying accounts of no man's land

through history and across different places. Instead, drawing from stories and visual fragments, some archival, some ethnographic, it produces new lines of thought on living within an environment of sovereign uncaring. This produces a narrative flow to the book that is thematic, rather than spatially or temporally linear, an approach which continually challenges us to rethink no man's land as a concept.

The remainder of this review will not summarise the book through a discussion of each chapter. Instead, it will focus on a line of thought which emerged during its reading which resonated with me, and which I feel speaks to radical geography. This book challenges us not only to realise the persistence of life in no man's land, but to observe and listen closely to the stories that this life and living holds. Leshem's call is challenging, presenting us with distinct difficulties which require a creative, thoughtful, and dedicated methodological ethos. In the very final passage of the book, Leshem provides an insight into his methodological ethos and practice:

It has been over seven years since Omar arrived in Rukban. I've never met him in person because I could never research the camp, and he cannot leave, but over the years, we have exchanged thousands of messages. When conditions deteriorate and life in the camp becomes even more unbearable, he sends a text message or a link to a Facebook post. These might describe the death of a child during a heatwave or widespread malnutrition when the Syrian government blocks smuggling routes.  
(p.207)

The ethnographic commitment—and severe challenges—of this project becomes palpable here. Thus, one of the valuable questions that the book implicitly prompts is what is the reach of radical ethnographic research? How do we witness, and engage with, “spaces often assumed to be too distant or too perilous to visit” (p.18)? What emerges through the book is a deep care for the people, communities, and their stories of the impact of life in no man's land. Reflecting at the end of the book on this methodological approach a particular passage stood out: “It relies on practices of intimate listening and vulnerable observation that may break our heart, but it may also bring us closer to those who reside in uncaring, to those who live and die in no man's land” (p.209). Within radical geography there have been recent discussions of

the methodological, ethical, emotional, and practical concerns of challenging places and issues to research (Brankamp 2022; Hagan 2022; Miller and Vu 2021; Minca 2022; Weima 2022; Weima and Brankamp 2022). *Edges of Care* challenges this debate to go further, to look at places we may assume and imagine as desolate voids empty of life.

Leshem's book is conceptually sharp, driven by the stories of life in no man's land. In particular, the concept of uncaring as a unique political relation between people and sovereign power will no doubt be of distinct use to thinking in radical geography, political theory, and beyond. But equally, the methodological questions it prompts regarding engaging with no man's land are also of real value to radical geographical scholarship. Leshem's approach demonstrates the value of stories in ethnographic work, and these feature vividly in the book. Due to this, I would have liked to have read more about the methodological process the book was built on, in terms of how relationships with communities were established and maintained. Similarly, it would have been interesting to hear more about the methodological affects on the author. *Edges of Care* frames uncaring as a sovereign act, but also as an affect that entrenches itself in bodies, one "that embod[ies] the absence of care" in "wilful indifference", "minor acts", and "gestures of abandonment" (p.18, 203). It is also about those that experience uncaring as a lived, enduring reality: "For the Palestinians who were driven from their homes and have never been allowed back, sovereign uncaring is a present-tense condition" (p.203). In this sense, according to Leshem, uncaring "lodges itself in hearts and minds"—it "lingers" (p.203). This made me wonder about the methodological affects of the book project on the author. How did witnessing life in no man's land and the uncaring present impact them? This would have added methodological depth to the book.

In the final chapter Leshem describes how he grew up in no man's land, in a suburb between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem which until 1967 divided Israeli and Jordanian forces. The story told of his childhood experiences living, exploring, and playing in the surrounding landscape with his brothers was one of my favourite sections of the book. In particular, the passage detailing his lived experience of a gradual decoding of this landscape to reveal "a space saturated with violence", stayed with me:

Then there was an entire other layer that was even harder to decipher, a coded landscape of pain and loss that remained silent to us until much later. Hidden in a

gully, surrounded by an old orchard of almonds and pomegranate, we came across a single wall, the only one left standing as the rest of the structure collapsed around it. Whose house was this? Whose trees? What made them leave and where were they now? Trivial questions that, back then, were never asked. We were, after all, in no man's land, on the right side of the line. (p.202)

This passage, and the wider section at the start of the final chapter wonderfully expresses, through the book's lucid writing style, the relational, intertwining nature of thoughtful, embodied ethnographic research. However, the book could have brought these methodological aspects more to the forefront of the discussion around no man's land, uncaring, and the subjectivity of the researcher in the research process.

*Edges of Care* is a timely and conceptually rich investigation into the idea of no man's land. It challenges us to expand our understanding of these places as more than desolate voids, reframing them as spaces marked by sovereign abandonment and persistent, creative life. Leshem's approach is conceptually incisive and methodologically intimate, offering vital insights into how we research difficult, sometimes inaccessible spaces. It will be a valuable source for postgraduate and advanced undergraduate students, and scholars in human geography, political theory, anthropology, and other disciplines with an interest in sovereign relations, state power, and the lived experiences of marginalised spaces. Equally, I can see the book being a useful resource for practitioners concerned with borderlands, displacement, and the afterlives of war.

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