

Border Regime Violence and Lethal Outcomes: Narratives and Practices Surrounding Migrant Deaths and Disappearances

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Translated from the French by John Angell

The increasingly perilous nature of migration to the European Union and its Member-States is directly related to the “border regime” implemented in the region over the past twenty years. Indeed, although the number of migrants arriving on European territory via the Mediterranean Sea decreased in 2018,¹ the death rate has steadily increased.²

Understanding the factors behind migrant deaths³ requires close examination of policies designed to control human mobility as well as their outcomes. Based on contributions by political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists, and geographers, a new social science sub-discipline--Border Studies--⁴ has developed since the 1990s. Although it applies diverse research methods in numerous different terrains, taken as a whole, this recent body of research strongly suggests the need to transcend exclusively legalistic conceptions of borders. By analyzing the ways in which migratory monitoring and control policies and surveillance technologies have substantially changed the nature of borders, border studies show that the “borders” have in effect expanded through time and space to become denser, multivariate, non-linear, and occasionally even intangible and asymmetrical. Expanding the definition of borders to consider them as social processes involving interactions between numerous different actors, Border Studies have called increased attention to both the instability of borders and a process of “borderization.”⁵ Indeed, migrants face multiple border interfaces

¹ According to the HCR estimates, there were 121,755 arrivals in 2018, as opposed to 172,301 in 2017.

² According to the HCR, 3,139 persons died or disappeared in 2017, compared with 2,262 in 2018. Nevertheless, the risk of dying has greatly increased. In October 2018, 19% of those who attempted to cross from Libya have died or disappeared, an unprecedented percentage for the Mediterranean route. Matteo Villa, “Sbarchi in Italia: il costo delle politiche di deterrenza,” Istituto per gli studi di politica internazionale, October 1, 2018 (<https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/sbarchi-italia-il-costo-delle-politiche-di-deterrenza-21326>) (consulted on April 3, 2019).

³ Regarding this distinction, see the literature review by Françoise Lestage, “Comment les cadavres des migrants sont devenus des objets sociological. Notes sur quelques travaux en human and social sciences (2012-2018).”

⁴ Thomas M. Wilson & Hastings Donnan (Eds.), *A Companion to Border Studies*, Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2012; Denis Duez & Damien Simonneau, “Repenser la notion de frontière aujourd’hui. Du droit à la sociologie,” *Droit et société*, 98 (1), 2018, p. 37-52.

⁵ Michel Agier, “Toute la rugosité du monde,” in Jean Birnbaum (Ed.), *Repousser les frontières?* Paris: Gallimard, 2014, p. 87-101; Didier Bigo & Elspeth Guild (Eds.), *Controlling Frontiers: Free*

designed to “screen” them before the official border (through “remote controls”), beyond it (through controls inside of national borders), and along its concrete manifestations (at official border crossings). The collection of essays in this special issue includes contributions such as those Valentina Zagaria and Laurence Pillant that show that contemporary mobile screening and separation mechanisms function until the moment of death. In southeastern Tunisia and at the Greek-Turkish border, unidentified bodies of migrants are not buried in local cemeteries but are often relegated to “improvised,” peripheral areas.

Screening policies and identity checks modify the temporal and spatial environments of which borders are an integral part, but they also exert a range of contradictory and ambiguous effects. First, instead of combatting undocumented migration, the border system actually encourages it.⁶ Indeed, the correlation between the emphasis on border security in immigration policy and increases in maritime arrivals has been widely documented.⁷ The visa requirement for those originating in countries outside of the Schengen space and the growing difficulty of obtaining visas have caused an increase in irregular border crossings, particularly via maritime routes. Second, the effects of the border regime have been irrefutably shown to be lethal. As opposed to repeated political and media suggestions that traffickers bear sole responsibility for these phenomena, researchers and activist groups⁸ have amply demonstrated the link between the emphasis on immigration security and higher mortality rates along European borders.⁹ The proliferation of border and identity checks (both in countries of origin

Movement into and within Europe, Aldershot, Hants/Burlington: Ashgate, 2005; Philippe Bonditti, “Biométrie et maîtrise des flux: vers une ‘géo-technopolis du vivant-en-mobilité’?” *Cultures & Conflits*, 58, 2005, p. 131-154; Paolo Cuttitta, “Le monde-frontière. Le contrôle de l’immigration dans l’espace globalisé,” *Cultures & Conflits*, 68, 2007, p. 61-84; Prem Kumar Rajaram & Carl Grundy-Warr (Eds.), *Borderscapes: Hidden Geographies and Politics at Territory’s Edge*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007; Évelyne Ritaine, “Blessures de frontière en Méditerranée,” *Cultures & Conflits*, 99-100, 2015, p. 11-24; Guillaume Le Blanc, *Dedans, dehors. La condition d’étranger*, Paris: Le Seuil, 2010.

⁶ Maribel Casas-Cortés, Sebastian Cobarrubias, & Nicholas De Genova, et al., “New Keywords: Migration and Borders,” *Cultural Studies*, 29 (1), 2015, p. 55-87.

⁷ Gabriella Lazardin & Khursheed Wadia (Eds.), *The Securitisation of Migration in the EU: Debates since 9/11*, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015; Camille Schmoll, Hélène Thiollet & Catherine Wihtol de Wenden (Eds.), *Migrations en Méditerranée: permanences et mutations à l’heure des révolutions et des crises*, Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2015; Philippe Bourbeau (Ed.), *Handbook on Migration and Security*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2017.

⁸ See in particular La Cimade, Migreurop, and the Gisti in publications such as Migreurop (Ed.), *Atlas des migrants en Europe*, 2017, or the journal published by Gisti, *Plein droit*.

⁹ Deaths at borders are not a new phenomenon. In December 1996, for example, the sinking of a watercraft near Sicily resulted in 283 deaths (Giovanni Maria Bellu, *I fantasmi di Portopalo: Natale 1996: la morte di 300 clandestini e il silenzio dell’Italia*, Milan: Mondadori, 2004), and, since the early 2000s, the Mediterranean has been described as a “marine cemetery” by activist and academic networks. However, those who have died or disappeared in the Mediterranean were long ignored by institutions and academics. Abstractly referred to as statistics, they were rarely addressed by political

and in transit, and in the Mediterranean as well as inside the Schengen space) have caused changes in migratory routes.

To avoid being identified, detained, and expelled, migrants use increasingly dangerous itineraries. Studies show that rising fatalities are the direct result of interactions between the drivers of migrations, trafficking activities, and restrictive migratory policies.¹⁰ The fatal consequences of the border regime have also been revealed by studies in other migratory spaces, such as the border between the United States and Mexico.¹¹ Finally, in terms of political economy, the increase in irregular migration and greater funding for efforts to prevent the mobility of “undesirable migrants”¹² have created economic opportunities for a range of additional actors, particularly the defense and arms industries involved in border controls and human trafficking networks¹³ Such concepts as “migration industry,”¹⁴ “business of migration,” and “security economy”¹⁵ clearly illustrate the lucrative effects of migratory policies and the border regime. The economic stakes that underlie the border regime are addressed in this collection, if indirectly, by a study of the “mortality economy” that has developed in Greece and the financial stakes involved in burying deceased migrants in the Tunisian city of Zarzis.

debates or scholarly research. The situation changed beginning in 2010, particularly after two sinkings on October 3 and 11, 2013 near the coast of Lampedusa that caused 636 fatalities.

¹⁰ Thomas Spijkerboer, “The Human Costs of Border Control,” *European Journal of Migration and Law*, 9 (1), 2007, p. 127-139; Peter Shields, “The Human Cost of the European Union’s External Border Regime,” *Peace Review*, 27 (1), 2015, p. 82-90; C. Schmoll, H. Thiollet, & C. Wihtol de Wenden (Eds.), *Migrations en Méditerranée: permanences et mutations à l’heure des révolutions et des crises*, *op. cit.*

¹¹ Wayne Cornelius, “Death at the Border: Efficacy and Unintended Consequences of US Immigration Control Policy,” *Population and Development Review*, 27 (4), 2001, p. 661-685.

¹² M. Agier, *Gérer les indésirables. Des camps de réfugiés au gouvernement humanitaire*, Paris: Flammarion, 2008.

¹³ Anna Triandafyllidou & Thanos Maroukis, *Migrant Smuggling: Irregular Migration from Asia and Africa to Europe*, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

¹⁴ Rubén Hernandez-Léon, “L’industrie de la migration,” *Hommes et migrations. Revue française de référence sur les dynamiques migratoires*, 1296, 2012, p. 34-44; Thomas Gammeltoft-Hansen & Ninna Nyberg Sorensen (Eds.), *The Migration Industry and the Commercialization of International Migration*, New York: Routledge, 2013.

¹⁵ Claire Rodier, *Xénophobie business: à quoi servent les contrôles migratoires?* Paris: La Découverte, 2012.

Governance and Rescue in the Mediterranean

The perilous nature of European borders is closely linked to oversight of maritime regions and rescue operations. By commissioning boats for migrant rescue operations in the Mediterranean, NGOs such as Open Arms, Sea-Watch, Sea-Eye, and SOS Méditerranée partially replace States. Indeed, civilian groups' operations are increasingly subject to interference from States, including accusations of collaborating with people traffickers, withdrawing flags and permits, blockades at sea, and refusals to land.¹⁶ Since the Italian Interior Minister, Matteo Salvini, came to power in June 2018, he has forbidden ships in distress carrying rescued migrants to land on Italian territory, forcing crews and exhausted migrants to remain at sea for days or even weeks.¹⁷ Every rescue operation becomes the focus of diplomatic conflicts between European States engaging in back-and-forth accusations and denials of responsibility for receiving NGO ships.

In this context, the Mediterranean maritime space has evolved into a distinct research field that has inspired a range of studies using specific configurations and methodologies to investigate the factors that shape the destinies of migrants. Some studies of rescue and border operations, for example, have examined such questions as the identification and management of deceased migrants' bodies in the Mediterranean. These studies promote understanding and critical awareness of the implication of non-State actors (including associations, religious authorities, private firms, international organizations, and local authorities) and of the interactions between humanitarian practices and security practices.

Other studies have shown the effects of interdependence and the articulation between humanitarian and security practices and representations¹⁸ in the Mediterranean region, calling

¹⁶ Eugenio Cusumano, "The Sea as Humanitarian Space. Non-Governmental Search and Rescue Dilemmas on the Central Mediterranean Migratory Route," *Mediterranean Politics*, 23 (3), 2018, p. 387-394; Collectif Babels, *Méditerranée: des frontières à la dérive*, Lyon: Le Passager clandestin, 2018.

¹⁷ This ban, a political decision, violates the international conventions signed by Italy, particularly the 2004 SAR (Search and Rescue) Convention of the International Maritime Organization.

¹⁸ Studies of relationships between humanitarian and security practices and discourses related to migration have focused largely on international organization (Martin Geiger & Antoine Pécoud, *The Politics of International Migration Management*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010; Giulia Scalettaris, "Le HCR face aux expulsions des Afghans de l'Iran: une organisation intergouvernementale et transnationale en action," *Le sujet dans la cité*, 1, 2012, p. 96-112) and on the inclusion of the humanitarian narrative in institutional discourse (Didier Fassin, "Compassion and Repression: The Moral Economy of Immigration Policies in France," *Cultural Anthropology*, 20 (3), 2005, p. 362-387; Didier Fassin & Jean-Sébastien Eidelman (Eds.), *Économies morales contemporaines*, Paris: La Découverte, 2012).

particular attention to the so-called “border spectacle,”¹⁹ especially after highly publicized sinkings in October 2013 in which over 600 persons lost their lives. Media attention and political discourse increasingly examine scenes of rescue and humanitarian actors, as the concept of surveillance and border control has expanded to encompass search and rescue operations.²⁰

The image of a migrant invasion coexists with images of the macabre in these discourses. As border checks have become increasingly strict, the growing prevalence of discourses relating to rescue operations signals a shift away from the image of people fleeing war and violence, who consequently possess certain rights, and towards an image of passive victims of sinkings waiting to be rescued. Indeed, “rescue policy”²¹ transforms human beings into bodies that need to be saved, negating their human rights and freedom of movement. In addition, emphasizing assistance and rescue relegates to the background the system of restrictions on mobility promoted and implemented by the very same States simultaneously involved in rescue activities. These studies reveal the new prevalence of humanitarian government technologies, while also demonstrating the impossibility of separating rescue practices from control practices; the same individuals are subjected to seemingly contradictory mechanisms in the Mediterranean. As targets of security measures (by being controlled, detained, sorted) and, simultaneously, of humanitarian interventions (by being saved and placed in centers), individuals are assigned a variety of labels, depending on their position along their migratory itineraries, as either asylum seekers, undocumented migrants, “Dublined,”²² case-dismissed, or “expellable.”

Studies of oversight in the central Mediterranean have shown that, instead of being managed systematically and uniformly, the maritime zone is fragmented into competing jurisdictions (national and international waters, SAR responsibility zones) that each include a range of actors following seemingly contradictory logics, such as NGOs, commercial

¹⁹ P. Cuttitta, “Delocalization, Humanitarianism, and Human Rights: The Mediterranean Border Between Exclusion and Inclusion,” *Antipode*, 50 (3), 2018, p. 783-803; P. Cuttitta, *Lo spettacolo del confine: Lampedusa tra produzione e messa in scena della frontiera*, Milan: Mimesis, 2012.

²⁰ Eugenio Cusumano, “Migrant Rescue as Organized Hypocrisy: EU Maritime Missions Offshore Libya Between Humanitarianism and Border Control,” *Cooperation and Conflict*, 54 (1), 2019, p. 3-24.

²¹ Martina Tazzioli, “Border Displacements. Challenging the Politics of Rescue Between Mare Nostrum and Triton,” *Migration Studies*, 4 (1), 2016, p. 1-19.

²² The term “Dublined” has entered the language to designate asylum applicants who are subject to European regulations of 2013, called Dublin, which specifies that they must apply for asylum in the first European country in which they are registered.

shipping, national and European military services, human traffickers, and migrants.²³ Interactions between these actors, systems, zones, and jurisdictions have transformed the central Mediterranean into a border area in which the eventual destination of a maritime crossing, and the fate of migrants' bodies, depend primarily on arbitrary administrative decisions, the evolution of power relations between different actors, and the vagaries of random chance.

In this collection of essays, Lorenzo Pezzani and Charles Heller establish a dialogue with the body of work pertaining to the governance of the Mediterranean that reveals the border violence in the Mediterranean that occurs during surveillance and rescue operations. Their work underscores the responsibilities of a range of different actors' for growing migrant death rates that are exacerbated or even caused by non-assistance practices in maritime zones.

Dead and Disappeared Bodies on the Borders:
Counting, Identifying, Repatriating, Burying, and Commemorating

The question of maritime rescues of migrants inevitably involves the fates of the remains of those who die attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea. Establishing quantitative data regarding the dead and disappeared along regional borders represents a critical initial precondition for public and scientific debate. "Counting the dead" has in fact given rise to a number of cartographies and databases. In the 1990s and 2000s, civilian organizations initially collected these data, including the association United for Intercultural Action, the Fortress Europe blog, and the WatchTheMed platform. Given the complete lack of official statistics and blatant State disinterest, these groups attempted to gain visibility for the phenomenon in order to denounce repressive migratory policies and to prevent mass, collective amnesia about those who die or disappear as migrants. Journalists (via the Migrant Files project) and researchers (through The Human Cost of Border Controls project) eventually joined efforts to produce knowledge and data. Since 2013, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) has compiled and maintain records of migrant fatalities through its Missing Migrants project.

²³ P. Cuttitta, "Inclusion and Exclusion in the Fragmented Space of the Sea: Actors, Territories and Legal Regimes Between Libya and Italy," in Elaine Burroughs & Kira Williams (Eds.), *Contemporary Boat Migration. Data, Geopolitics, and Discourses*, London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2018, p. 75-95.

The proliferation of data sources and differences between results raise a number of key questions, the first of which relates to precisely defining the field, and second, appropriate methodologies.²⁴ Who are the “border dead” and how can they be counted? Should “only” those who die at sea be included, or should those who die “because of” European migratory policies in general be counted as well? In the latter instance, should we not include deaths by dehydration and hypothermia at sea and on land, as well as from direct or indirect violence against migrants in third countries or inside the Schengen space (i.e., shot in Ceuta in 2005, for example, or crushed attempting to enter the Channel Tunnel, dead in the desert, in detention centers, or during expulsion operations)? The definition and delimitation of the boundaries of this particular (or any) social category constitute political decisions based on a process of institutionalization notably grounded on statistics. Pursuing this question, Charles Heller and Antoine Pécoud analyze the compilation of statistics related to fatalities in the Mediterranean, which was initially conducted by civilian organizations in the 1990s and subsequently assigned to the IOM in the 2010s. While civilian groups were collecting quantitative data to support denunciations of European migratory policies by demonstrating their fatal consequences, the IOM tends to depoliticize statistics, presenting itself as a neutral participant and avoiding references to the causes of mortality along the region’s borders.²⁵

Finally, the statistical approach reflects an effort to represent the Mediterranean as a governed, and therefore transparent, space under perpetual surveillance. Indeed, record-keeping about border-related deaths primarily relies on data from real-time surveillance systems and satellite images collected following sinkings and shipwrecks. However, divergences between data, interpretations of what happens during sinking events, and the question of the “disappeared” all shed light both on the partial visibility of the maritime space and the persistence of “shadow zones.”²⁶ Lorenzo Pezzani and Charles Heller explore these

²⁴ Tamara Last & Thomas Spijkerboer, “Tracking Deaths in the Mediterranean,” dans *Fatal Journeys. Tracking Lives Lost during Migration*, Genève: International Organization for Migration, 2014, p. 85-106; Tamara Last, Giorgia Mirto, & Orçun Ulusoy, et al., “Deaths at the Borders Database: Evidence of Deceased Migrants’ Bodies Found along the Southern External Borders of the European Union,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 43 (5), 2017, p. 693-712.

²⁵ Charles Heller & Antoine Pécoud, *Counting Migrants’ Deaths at the Border: From Civil Society Counter-Statistics to (Inter)Governmental Recuperation*, Oxford: International Migration Institute Network, 2018.

²⁶ M. Tazzioli, “The Politics of Counting and the Scene of Rescue: Border Deaths in the Mediterranean,” *Radical Philosophy*, 192, 2015, p. 1-5.

problems using statistical data and survivor interviews to precisely reconstruct the circumstances surrounding fatal sinkings.²⁷

Beyond producing quantitative knowledge and its politicization, the growing number of border-related fatalities and disappearances, as well as expanded mediatization of the subject, researchers have also begun to question practices used to identify, repatriate, bury, and commemorated migrants' bodies. Regardless of the geographical space under consideration, studies that analyze these issues reveal an absence of systematic, specific procedures for finding and identifying migrants who "disappear" and for determining who is responsible for the bodies of the dead. Some of this research centers on human rights, examining the question of the rights of the dead. These studies essentially constitute a plea for a systematic policy that requires the identification of migrants' bodies.²⁸ Under the impetus of the project "Mediterranean Missing. Understanding Needs of Families and Obligations of Authorities" (under the leadership of Simon Robins of the Center for Applied Human Rights of York University and co-financed by the IOM), disappeared migrants' families and how they are affected have gained some attention. In addition to publishing prescriptive reports intended for Member-States and the European Union,²⁹ the project has sponsored studies of the impacts of disappearances on their societies of origin. These studies ultimately suggest rethinking the notion of borders as mechanisms of inclusion or exclusion while also questioning distinctions between living migrants and those who have died.³⁰

Collective mobilizations associated with border-related deaths and disappearances reinforce these conclusions, while also illuminating other dimensions of this complex social phenomenon. Frederico Oliveri analyzes the depoliticization--and repoliticization--of dead bodies based on social movements among the families of disappeared migrants in Tunisia,³¹

²⁷ See in particular the study "The-Left-to-Die Boat" that was part of the research project Forensic Oceanography of Goldsmith's University London (<https://www.forensic-architecture.org/case/left-die-boat/>) (consulted on April 5, 2019).

²⁸ Stefanie Grant, "Migration and Frontier Deaths. A Right to Identity," in Marie-Benedicte Dembour & Tobias Kelly (Eds.), *Are Human Rights for Migrants? Critical Reflections on the Status of Irregular Migrants in Europe and the United States*, Oxon: Routledge, 2011, p. 48-70; S. Grant, "Recording and Identifying European Frontier Deaths," *European Journal of Migration and Law*, 13 (2), 2011, p. 135-156.

²⁹ These reports may be consulted on the project's website (<http://www.mediterraneanmissing.eu/>) (Consulted on January 24, 2018).

³⁰ Iosif Kovras, Simon Robins, "Death as the Border: Managing Missing Migrants and Unidentified Bodies at the EU's Mediterranean Frontier," *Political Geography*, 55, 2016, p. 40-49.

³¹ Frederico Oliveri, "Where Are Our Sons?": Tunisian Families and the Repoliticization of Deadly Migration across the Mediterranean Sea," in Lynda Mannik (Ed.), *Migration by Boat: Discourses of Trauma, Exclusion and Survival*, New York: Berghahn Books, 2016, p. 154-177.

while Kim Rygiel studies transnational solidarity movements in support of migrants and their families in response to border-related fatalities.³² Farida Souiah explores similar issues in her contribution by shedding light on the way in which the absence of a body and uncertainty about the fate of the disappeared shape Tunisian families' claims and how they are expressed. In the absence of physical proof, death becomes euphemized and even denied because families refuse to reduce disappeared family members to anonymous, invisible bodies that have left no trace.

Subscribing to an indexical paradigm developed by Carlo Ginzburg, Carolina Kobelinsky mobilizes ethnographic methods to investigate the traces left by dead and disappeared migrants. Such traces represent clues for identifying the bodies and reconstituting their stories and are as well tools for the production of symbols. They are present in the stories of border violence told by fellow-migrants of the disappeared, in the stigmata left on their bodies by border-related violence, in attempts to officially register the disappeared in official spaces, and in interactions with the families of the deceased. This contribution puts in perspective the sophisticated methods used for identifying, sorting, and controlling living migrants, the lack of a specific official protocol for identifying those who die near borders, and the search for activists and migrant persons who reside in border zones in order to follow traces and identify the dead and disappeared.

Finally, the question of death along borders allows the investigation of burial practices. Françoise Lestage provides overview of recent critical studies devoted to dead migrants' bodies, revealing the extent to which their cadavers have become sociological objects. Two contributions by Laurence Pillant and Valentina Zagaria examine how the bodies are managed in cemeteries for unidentified migrants. These studies support and enrich reflections initiated by Vicki Squire, who analyzes how the dead are managed in the Sonora desert between Mexico and the United States and in the Mediterranean. According to Squire, identification and burial practices that claim to return dignity to migrants are in fact compensatory measures that have limited effects, because death has become another instrument to govern migrations.³³

³² Kim Rygiel, "Dying to Live: Migrant Deaths and Citizenship Politics along European Borders: Transgressions, Disruptions, and Mobilizations," *Citizenship Studies*, 20 (5), 2016, p. 545-560.

³³ Vicki Squire, "Governing Migration through Death in Europe and the US: Identification, Burial and the Crisis of Modern Humanism," *European Journal of International Relations*, 23 (3), 2017, p. 513-532.

The Growing Diversity of Actors Facing Migrant Deaths

The contributions to this collection reflect the diversity of the authors' disciplines and approaches (anthropology, geography, political science, and forensic architecture³⁴), as well as the empirical richness and variety of the data on which they are based (including ethnographic observations, directed and undirected interviews, municipal archives, and maritime surveillance data). The studies span in a broad range of geographical spaces, from the entire Mediterranean basin to metonymic European border sites (such as Melilla and the Greek-Turkish border) and spaces that represent spaces of EU border externalization (including Tunisia). Through fine-grained descriptions of physical and geographical spaces, some supported by photographs, satellite images, or drawings, these studies also portray the spatial dimension of the social and political domains. Their analytical scales--from the individual and local to the national, regional, and transnational--intersect with and complement each other; They reveal interactions between actors and practices, representations, and relationships with death that achieve their ultimate expression in the treatment of migrants' bodies.

These researchers focus on both individual and collective actors, a dual focus that is exemplified by Carolina Kobelinsky's study, which studies the perspectives of the travel companions of migrants who died or disappeared during migration. She provides a detailed view of the lives of members of the Malian community in transit to Morocco. This ethnographic perspective helps us understand how travel companions take charge of the dead and disappeared along the border and attempt to ensure that friends and family members do not vanish without a trace. Her study reveals how the organization of daily life along borders is influenced by national origins.

The article by Valentina Zagaria reveals how Chamseddine, formerly a fisherman in Zarzis, a coastal city in southeastern Tunisia, took responsibility for providing dignified burials for dead migrants, a crucial role that he fulfills in constant interactions with journalists, researchers, documentalists, members of the local Red Crescent, photographers, and activists. Farida Souiah's article analyzes interactions between an association of families

³⁴ Forensic Architecture is a research agency as well as an emergent discipline developed at Goldsmiths, that concentrates on the production and presentation of legal proofs based on the architectural field – more extended constructions or environments – and their media representation. (<https://www.forensic-architecture.org/>) (Consulted on January 12, 2019).

of the disappeared in Tunisia – La Terre pour Tous – and other actors involved in supporting the cause. Drawing on a comparative study of two islands at the Greek-Turkish border, Laurence Pillant contrasts the perspectives of various actors, including coroners, undertakers, local authorities, activist and associative leaders. She reveals how these actors co-created a mortuary policy that raises identity-based, cultural, economic, and religious questions that are closely intertwined with local sociopolitical and cultural contexts. Charles Heller and Lorenzo Pezzani openly position themselves as activist researchers in their article, which focuses on the regional level. As critical researchers, they conduct engaged studies as a means of co-producing “alternative” knowledge to that provided by those who implement technologies of control in the Mediterranean. Their study provides a detailed view of the extent to which Mediterranean mobility is a site of struggle over the production of knowledge and discourses that different actors then use for various purposes.

The researchers whose work features in this special issue are making powerful contributions to the debate surrounding the relationship between research and activism. Their collective reflection integrates methods and perspectives from various disciplines and diverse sociopolitical contexts.³⁵ The profoundly political nature of migrations and the European security context ensure that migration studies have been and remain at the forefront of reflections on activist research. They explore its perimeters and transformative ambitions,³⁶ simultaneously interrogating its objects, terrains, and positive applications. The question of political epistemology forms the core of these reflections.³⁷ These debates are also fueled by knowledge created by militant collectives such as Migreurop that also include many researchers. Inevitably, this proximity between research and activism raises ethical and methodological questions, including the risk of avoiding close examination of certain actors’ contradictions in order to maintain the image of the activists. How to study a group of which one is a member?

Through their commitments as citizens, particularly during their empirical fieldwork, the contributors to this issue continuously interrogate the synergies and limitations of

³⁵ Glenda Garelli & Martina Tazzioli, “Challenging the Discipline of Migration: Militant Research in Migration Studies, an Introduction,” *Postcolonial Studies*, 16 (3), 2013, p. 246.

³⁶ V. Squire, “Researching Precarious Migrations: Qualitative Strategies towards a Positive Transformation of the Politics of Migration,” *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 20 (2), 2018, p. 441-458.

³⁷ G. Garelli & M. Tazzioli, “Challenging the Discipline of Migration: Militant Research in Migration Studies, an Introduction,” p. 246.

academic research and activist commitments. Some researchers limit their activism to their private lives, while for others, the boundary between commitment and research remains relatively porous. For still others, however, research and activism represent completely co-extensive commitments.

The research that is presented here—and its focus on migrant deaths—participates in the critical current of the social sciences by generating new knowledge about the structural violence of border regimes and its lethal consequences.

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