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► **To cite this version:**

Bidisha Banerjee, Judith Misrahi-Barak, Thomas Lacroix. Introduction: Thanatic Ethics: The Circulation of Bodies in Migratory Spaces. *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 2024, 26 (1), pp.1-20. 10.1080/1369801X.2023.2190917 . hal-04055466

**HAL Id: hal-04055466**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04055466v1>**

Submitted on 20 Nov 2023

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## **Introduction: Thanatic Ethics: The Circulation of Bodies in Migratory Spaces**

*Bidisha Banerjee, Judith Misrahi-Barak and Thomas Lacroix*

In : *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 28 March 2023  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2023.2190917>

### **Abstract:**

Postcolonial studies has long sought to understand migration and displacement as empowering without acknowledging the material realities of refugee migrations. This Special Issue responds to what the co-editors see as the urgent need for postcolonial and migration studies in general and diaspora studies in particular, to consider the consequences of restrictive migration policies. Perhaps an even greater scandal of postcolonial and migration studies has been the failure to engage with the urgent question of migrant deaths. It is estimated that since 2014, more than 50,000 migrants have lost their lives while making perilous journeys across land and sea; over 60 percent remain unidentified. The Thanatic Ethics project, from which this Special Issue emerged, seeks to make visible the bodies of the dead, or to understand why and how they are sometimes caught between hyper-invisibility and hyper-visibility. It attempts to memorialize the migrant dead and thereby do justice to them and ultimately to the living. It also considers the methodologies used in order to make these migrant dead visible, and the forms of representation that may bring about such visibility. Emerging from the eponymous trans- and interdisciplinary project, this Special Issue titled *Thanatic Ethics: The Circulation of Bodies in Migratory Spaces* moves away from the celebratory tone of transnational and migration studies and their focus on migrants' cross-border agency, instead shedding light on the fatal consequences of migration policies. This introduction begins with a brief overview of the extant scholarship on death in

migration. It continues with an attempt to define thanatic ethics and describe how it affects the relations between the dead and the living as well as between the living themselves. We conclude with a presentation of the articles curated in this Special Issue.

Keywords: ethics, migration, death, precarity, borders, mourning

“Flies.

I mostly remember the goddamn flies.” (De Leon, 1)

These are the opening lines of Jason DeLeon’s photo ethnographic study of deaths at the US-Mexico border. He is struck by how quickly flies have descended on the limp body of the migrant who has been dead for less than an hour. Migrant border-related deaths are not new. It is estimated that since 2014, more than 50,000 migrants have lost their lives while making perilous journeys across land and sea; over 60 percent remain unidentified.<sup>1</sup> Shocking images of migrant bodies washed ashore, epitomized in Ai Wei Wei’s re-enactment of the photograph of Syrian infant Alan Kurdi’s lifeless body on a beach in Bodrum, have almost become a macabre shorthand for migrant deaths on foreign shores as more and more refugees undertake dangerous sea crossings and other hazardous inland journeys, in search of a better life.

The arts are replete with representations of thanatic themes in migration ranging from Jason deCaires Taylor’s undersea sculpture, *Raft of Lampedusa* to Ai Wei Wei’s art installations; from graphic novels like *Illegal* by Eoin Colfer to Mati Diop’s 2019 film *Atlantique* and from

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<sup>1</sup> <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl601/files/publication/file/2022%2050k%20deaths.pdf>

Edwidge Danticat's depiction of migrating living bodies that are neither dead nor alive but remain in oceanic limbo in her short story "Children of the Sea" (*Krik? Krak!* 1991) to Michael Ondaatje's forensic fiction *Anil's Ghost* (2000) where the process of identification of the bones of the dead constitutes the heart of the novel. Likewise social scientists have studied migrant deaths from various perspectives including quantification of the dead (Heller and Pécoud 2020; Sapkota et al. 2006), the collection and (mis)use of data on migrant deaths (Brian and Laczko: 2013), neoliberal border policing, state violence and the failure of deterrence strategies (Jason de Leon: 2015), repatriation of migrant bodies (Félix 2011), etc. The urgency of the so-called refugee crisis has led to the publication of a number of books in the last couple of years. Vicki Squire et al argue in *Reclaiming Migration* (2021) that the crisis reflects the collapse of European humanism while *Governing the Dead: Sovereignty and the Politics of Dead Bodies* (2020), looks at the claiming and performance of sovereignty in the handling of the bodies of dead migrants.

Despite the recent attention paid to migrant deaths in the scholarship and the surfeit of thanatic representations in literature and artworks, migration and postcolonial studies have been slow to respond to these issues. With the collapse of the Eastern bloc and the advent of the age of globalization, two paradigmatic shifts took place in the 1990s: from exilic to diaspora literature and from immigration to transnational studies. During this time, exiled postcolonial writers like Salman Rushdie and Bharati Mukherjee, rejected the status of exile, embracing instead an (im)migrant identity. Similarly, in contrast with an earlier generation of Caribbean writers like Sam Selvon and George Lamming, second generation Caribbean writers like Edwidge Danticat, Michelle Cliff and Jamaica Kincaid no longer came to be discussed as exilic writers. In their literature, we also witness a concurrent move away from obsessively thematising the exilic.

Following this was a long period of theorizing diaspora and mobility mostly in celebratory terms as challenging racial stratification and engendering hybrid, cosmopolitan identities. As understandings of diaspora have moved away from earlier notions of a lamentable and “catastrophic” loss (Cohen, 6), some critics have cautioned against celebrating diaspora as the paradigmatic trope of postcolonial migrations (Gikandi), given how far diaspora and transnational theory have veered from their more somber beginnings. More recently, however, migratory movements characterized by trauma, violence and precarity, have somewhat belatedly prompted a further reconsideration of transnational mobility and the need to distinguish between types of diasporas (Tölölyan) in the field of postcolonial studies. As Simon Gikandi (2010) has noted, “missing the very states they fled in the first place, refugees do not want to be cosmopolitan because they have no idiom for this experience; instead they set out to demarcate a zone of ethnicity and locality” (26). Rahul Gairola, Sarah Curtis and Tim Flanagan coin the term “liminal diasporas” in their co-edited Special Focus for the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* titled “Liminal Diasporas in the Age of Covid-19.” They define liminal diasporas as “subjective bodies in motion that are dangerously marked by difference, otherness, alterity, and precarity” (4-5). There is therefore an urgent need for postcolonial and migration studies in general and diaspora studies in particular, to interrogate key concepts such as “diaspora” and “migrancy” yet again in the context of restrictive migration policies. David Farrier has famously declared the figure of the asylum seeker as a “scandal for postcolonial studies” (1) because the field has sought to understand migration and displacement as empowering without acknowledging the material realities of refugee migrations or “the (extra)legal forces that exclude asylum seekers” (Farrier, 13) and any discussion of their identity and belonging. The 2018 *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*’s Special Issue on Refugee Literature goes a long way in addressing this

belatedness. Claire Gallien, the guest editor of the issue, urgently calls for postcolonial scholars to respond to what she terms “a refugee poetics and aesthetics” by “confronting consensual yet politically, ethically, and ideologically problematic modes of representation of forcibly displaced people” (722).

Perhaps an even greater scandal of postcolonial and migration studies has been the failure to engage with the urgent question of migrant deaths. Neoliberal or illiberal necropolitics (Mbembe 2006) have often sought to erase the migrant body, not only through abjection and unrecognition, but primarily through death. Migrant bodies are left to “sink without a trace” (Mazzara and Ramsay) to the bottom of the sea or be consumed by vultures in the harsh desert terrain (De Leon). In response to these critiques, The *Thanatic Ethics* project[1] began in 2020. Led by the co-editors of this volume, two of whom are postcolonial studies scholars and one a social scientist, we started by raising several questions about migrant deaths, including and beyond the representational. What is the ethical and political role of literature and the arts in the process that takes us from accounting for the dead to accountability, and then to reparative practices and gestures? How is our relationship to the bodies of the dead in migration, revelatory of our relationship to the living bodies in migration and more widely to the community of the living? Can we go as far as to say that the former structures the latter? If so, how, to what extent and to what effect? We developed a network of Humanities and Social Science scholars working on questions of death and migration, but also included activists, community organizations such as The Last Rights Project[2], and artists like Arkadi Zaidis[3] in order to envision a “thanatic ethics” which we see as an ethic of resuscitation, visibilization and repair. Thanatic Ethics is necessarily an interdisciplinary project bringing together postcolonial scholars, urban geographers, art historians, filmmakers, anthropologists, visual artists, choreographers,

performers, and activists. The project attempts to develop a dialogue between scholarship and practice, between academics and activists. Thanatic Ethics seeks to make visible the bodies of the dead, or to understand why and how they are sometimes caught between hyper-invisibility and hyper-visibility. It attempts to memorialize the migrant dead and thereby do justice to them and ultimately to the living. It also considers the methodologies used in order to make these migrant dead visible, and the forms of representation that may bring about such visibility.

Emerging from the eponymous trans- and interdisciplinary project, this Special Issue titled *Thanatic Ethics: The Circulation of Bodies in Migratory Spaces* seeks to bring together multiple disciplines and develop ethical and political dimensions. It endeavors to build on emergent scholarship, while adding a holistic and interdisciplinary perspective that constitutes the originality of the Thanatic Ethics project.

Moving away from the celebratory tone of transnational and migration studies and their focus on migrants' cross-border agency, this collection of essays sheds light on the fatal consequences of migration policies. This introduction begins with a brief overview of the extant scholarship on death in migration. It continues with an attempt to define thanatic ethics and describe how it affects the relations between the dead and the living as well as between the living themselves. We conclude with a presentation of the articles curated in this Special Issue.

### **Studying Death in Migration**

Public awareness about death at the borders was initially raised by NGOs with the publication of lists of migrant dead (Heller and Pécoud 2020). United for Intercultural Action (since 1993)[4], the Fortress Europe blog (since 2006)[5], or the Migreurop map (since 2004)[6] are some of the initiatives giving public exposure to the lethal consequences of border control in the

Mediterranean. The “security turn” taken by immigration policies in the late 1990s, best exemplified by the proliferation of walls and detention camps, elicited a body of research on the consequences of migrants from the Global South attempting to arrive on European shores. Critical border studies (Parker and Vaughan-Williams 2012) highlight the transformation of the border, better captured by the performative nature of bordering practices than by geopolitical lines drawn on maps. The border is a reflection of the violent underpinnings of the state, designed to “exclude, abandon, and/or kill the ‘Other’ (Parker and Vaughan-Williams 2012, 731). In the same vein, some authors endorse a Neo-Foucauldian approach by addressing migration policies as biopolitical phenomena differentiating between those who have the right to be mobile and those who do not (Rygiel 2014; Tazzioli 2019; Vaughan-Williams 2015). Migrants reduced to their “bare life” (Agamben 1998), have become the target of a necropolitics drawing a de facto line between those who may live and those who may be left to die (Mbembe 2006; see also Heller and Pezzani 2012). In recent years, the public exposure of migrant casualties by media, researchers, activists and artists, has resulted in the authorities adapting their narrative. The “border spectacle” (De Genova 2013) produced by institutions and presenting migrants as a threat while crossing borders *en masse*, have gradually incorporated a humanitarian component: border controls meant to keep emigrants in their place are increasingly cloaked in a discourse about protecting migrants against themselves and smugglers. The “humanitarian reason” imbuing migration policies is a reaction to the growing politicization of the question of death at the borders (Fassin 2011). As shown by Pecoud and Heller (2020), this urged the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to establish their own system of counting migrant deaths: the so-called Missing Migrant Project (MMP)[7]. Using a more restrictive methodology than their activist counterparts, the MMP’s figures are systematically lower and



tend to locate the majority of migrant deaths at the Southern shores of the Mediterranean, thereby suggesting that this is not a European problem.

While works on migration policies and their bearing on migrants flourished, only a few paid attention to the bodies of the migrants that perished and asked what became of them. Beyond the aforementioned works on the counting of bodies, another strand of research addresses the efforts sharperto uncover the traces of those who have disappeared. These forensic studies of migration strive to retrieve the identity of these migrants in the thin remnants they leave behind (Kobelinsky and Le Courant 2017). Recent interdisciplinary collections such as *Sociopolitics of Migrant Death and Repatriation: Perspectives from Forensic Science* (Latham and O'Daniel: 2018), attempt to bridge social theory with bio-archeological applications to the problem of migrant death. In addition to the studies emerging from the European context, there is also considerable existing and new scholarship on the particularities of border crossings and migrant deaths in the Americas such as the collection *Migration and Mortality: Social Death, Dispossession and Survival in the Americas* (Longazel and Hallett: 2021).

Another strand of research sheds light on “commemorActions” (Stierl: 2021), i.e. the multiple grassroots initiatives designed to commemorate the disappearance of migrants, provide a space for grieving to the families, but also to challenge the violence of extant migration policies. Such mobilizations have been accounted for both in the Mediterranean and at the US-Mexico border. Some may take the form of cemeteries maintained by volunteers (Kobelinski and Le Courant 2017), others of memorials (Zagaria 2020) or of occasional gatherings and marches (Nienass and Délano 2016). Valerie Loichot proposes the term “Unritual” (Loichot: 2020) to consider what happens when the humanizing and memorializing acts of ritual in death are ignored, as is so often the case with migrants who perish on their journeys. The study of migrant death in the

context of the current migration crisis has much to learn from scholars like Christina Sharpe and Alan Rice, who study the afterlives of slavery, tracing the history, consequences and lingering impacts of much earlier, though equally perilous, migration. What has changed since the slave ships crossing the Middle Passage carried cargo described as “food for fish” (Fred D’Aguiar, 1998: 183)? Could the sea still be compared to a “grey vault” (Derek Walcott. 1986: 364) hosting the flesh and bones of enslaved Africans who had been thrown overboard or jumped into the sea of their own volition to end their misery? It is important to establish links between forced or semi-voluntary migrations in different contexts. An author like Gaiutra Bahadur endeavors to collapse disciplinary and geographical boundaries between historiographies of the Atlantic Ocean, the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea, the Aegean Sea, and the Mediterranean. Beyond the fact that all those voyages provided “a stage for high mortality, sexual assault and suicide”, becoming aware of how those “waterborne pasts still (send) out ripples” (Bahadur 2018) in an interconnected way, also contributes to a better understanding of the present day crises.

Some scholars working on deaths at the border focus on issues related to body repatriation. The cross border circulation of bodies is not a novel phenomenon. This has a traumatic history in the context of colonization when the remains of indigenous people from Australia or Canada were sent to overseas museums or collecting institutions. Governments have only recently begun to acknowledge indigenous peoples’ right to the repatriation of their ancestral remains (Fforde, 2020). In the current context, body repatriation garnered particular attention during the COVID 19 pandemic as the closure of borders impeded bodies of migrants from being sent home for burial. The research documents the variety of means migrants use to secure body repatriation. Françoise Lestage shows that a whole economy developed between Mexico and the US, with a range of brokers and businesses taking charge of the circulation of bodies (Lestage 2012).

However, most of the time, the task of repatriation falls on community organizations and leaders who cover transfer expenses via informal collections (Balkan and Masarwa 2022; Cleuziou 2021). By eliciting the creation of community organizations and leadership, informal arrangement and business activities, body repatriation becomes an important part of the social life of migrants. In this regard, it adds to the commemorations of dramatic events, the forensic investigations of the disappeared and the political mobilizations they spur: death therefore, opens up a vast social space and an obligation for the living. It is a buttress for community life; it reconnects migrants and non-migrants around common political concerns and frames the long-distance relations between migrants and those who remained in the home country. The thanatic ethics underpins a large part of the social and political life of migrants.

### **Defining thanatic ethics**

Armin Greder's wordless graphic novel *Mediterranean*, James deCaires Taylor's *Raft of Lampedusa* lying on the seabed off Lanzarote Island or the drifts out of the language chartered lands in Marlene Nourbese Philip's *Zong!* all account for, in their respective ways, the unspeakability of the spectacle of migrants' death. Nevertheless, beyond the horror of these tragedies, these artworks touch upon the universality of the mortal condition of the human, standing bare, confronting one's own death. And yet, confronted by the unspeakability of death, the living are to find a moral compass to forge meaning even when there is none. Ethics is "the realm of significant normative concerns, described by notions such as good or bad, right or wrong, justified or unjustified" (Proctor 1998). Thanatic ethics can be understood as a code of conduct that enables the living to overcome this blind spot of the human condition. It is not something new. The wish for homeland burial, the need for mourning and grieving the dead, the rituals and representations enabling the living to share their daily lives with the ghostly presences

of the deceased, are but a few examples of these practices that inform this thanatic ethics in daily life. They are all the more important that the relation to death and with the dead, inform the relations between the living. Generations of anthropological works have documented the multiple ways in which thanatic ethics constituted one of the fundamental building blocks on which societies developed. It buttresses a moral economy stratifying the relations between the various segments of a community (see De Heusch and Lacroix in this volume). It creates an elite of thanatocrats who edict what this moral code of conduct should be, what is a good death and who is entitled to a good death. In our advanced capitalist societies, Jean Ziegler (1975: 106) shows how thanatic ethics has been confiscated by a caste of who decide who will die and who will live thanatic ethics: death, under a capitalist gaze, is an unproductive force that has to be extracted from the collective body. Capitalism, it can be argued, sets the background for the emergence of necropolitics.

In the context of migration, this universal aspect of the human condition takes on a different and more painful valence. In the absence of thanatic ethics, migrants become particularly vulnerable. The latter has re-emerged with full force at the margins of Western nation states (Mbembe), undergirding the policy treatment of migration inflows. Since 1995, a provision in the Schengen agreements obliges airlines to check for the validity of visa requirements of passengers before they board their flights (Lacroix 2016). In the context of restriction to immigration, this has urged a growing number of migrants to travel to Europe and the US by land, exposing them to the predatory practices of smugglers. Research shows how the building of physical and digital barriers have diverted migration routes to ever longer and more dangerous pathways. The surge of migrants dying *en route* is not an unfortunate and collateral accident, but a deliberate consequence of necropolitics meant to tame unwanted immigration flows. It is part of a wider

deterrence policy targeting migrants as mortal bodies. On the one hand, it is a re-enactment of the horrific practices that humans inflict on others; it traces a line connecting the current crisis with darker historical times of transatlantic slavery and the Middle Passage. On the other, it exposes human beings to the unspeakability of our mortal condition, while emphasizing that migration and the tightened control of undesirable migration makes some more vulnerable, more mortal, than others. Thanatic Ethics therefore, links the past to the present, the universal to the particular.

In reaction to the securitization of borders and the ensuing surge of migrant deaths, activists, researchers and artists strive to redefine the contours of thanatic ethics. Since the early 2000s, civil society organizations have been counting the number of dead migrants and accounting for the missing; others maintain specific quarters in cemeteries to accommodate the unclaimed bodies of the dead; some organize memorials for the commemoration of sunken ships. Museums gather the collected traces of migrant passages, while marches and events commemorate those who have disappeared. The Humanities and the Arts have also played a key role in developing what we are calling thanatic ethics. Artists, writers and filmmakers, attempt to represent the unrepresentable as a way to make visible those who have been erased in death. Taken together these endeavors weave a form of counter-politics and even counter-forensics binding migrants, non-migrants and institutions together and ensuring that the countless migrant deaths do not fall into oblivion. Thanatic politics, the social response to necropolitics, supports claims for policy change and an alternative approach to migration.

This social response calls for a new definition of thanatic ethics. It is not solely a code of conduct and faultline of grievability edicted by an elite. The notion of thanatic ethics inspiring collective mobilisations around death is akin to a Levinasian ethics characterized by a firm commitment

and obligation to the Other. Levinas writes, “In the relation to the other, the other appears to me as one to whom I owe something, toward whom I have a responsibility” (101). Levinasian ethics is ultimately a personal call to responsibility based on relational ontology. In the face of necropolitics and the failure of governments in providing an ethics of justice to the migrant dead, thanatic ethics calls for a Levinasian ethics of care. In this Special Issue, we strive to draw a more granular sense of this code of conduct and its social, political and artistic outcomes. We examine the social practices, the political mobilizations and the role that artistic and literary representations can play not only in memorializing the dead, but also in changing the gaze of the living on the dead. We consider the relation that can thus be fostered, one that would take on a Glissantian (1990) meaning in its dynamic and constantly evolving, transmogrifying and multitudinous dimension that also takes on board an ethical relation to the Other.

Thanatic ethics is as much about the living as it is about the dead. In this context, this Special Issue is an invitation to probe the elements that separate and bring together, disconnect and reconnect the dead, the dying and the living, the human and the non-human. It is an invitation to *interact* and *interfere* in those migratory spaces that are always intimately connected to non-migratory spaces. In myriad ways it is an *intervention*, not only because of the title of the journal it is published in, but also because of the etymology of the term—something has to come (*venire*) between (*inter*) what has often been perceived as separate and impenetrable. How is the community of the living intrinsically connected to what happens to the dying and to the dead? How is it altered, for better or for worse, for a brief moment or forever, by the management and / or mismanagement of the unfound, unidentified, unritualized bodies of the dead? How does it change us? How can the study of death in migration help us recalibrate the modalities of living together in the same country or across the oceans in diasporic communities but ultimately on the

same planet? In raising these questions, we bring together thanatic ethics with planetary ethics or with Spivak's notion of "planetarity" which demands that we think of collectivity not in compartmentalized ways that divide us but that we reimagine new ways of being together despite alterity.

### **Thanatic Ethics in the Ecotone**

This *intervention* had to be an interdisciplinary one, bridging the gaps between the disciplines and adopting an inclusive approach, making sure we do not separate the Social Science essays from those in the Humanities and striving towards a more holistic vision. This organization reflects the way scholars have been working together in the conferences and workshops of the Thanatic Ethics Project, such that a new vision emerges, something new germinates, vastly different from the sum of the individual elements. Here, something needs to be said about the notion of the Ecotone that shepherds this whole collection of essays, alongside thanatic ethics. Using the ecotone as a geographical, social, political and metaphorical concept can help us understand how such an apparently paradoxical formulation can enhance a finer understanding of what we mean by thanatic ethics. We demonstrate below why we may indeed need the ecotone to think about thanatic ethics, and how it may be enlightening to bring together those two complex and novel notions.

Ecologists and geographers use the term "ecotone" to describe transitional zones between two ecosystems, relying on the etymology of the term derived from the Greek *oikos* (household) and *tonos* (tension). As the co-editors of the volume *Borders and Ecotones in the Indian Ocean: Cultural and Literary Perspectives* (2019) remind us in the Introduction, the ecotone was first conceptualized by botanist Frederic E. Clements, who defined it as "the tension line between two

zones” (316, quoted in Arnold, Duboin & Misrahi-Barak 2019, 12). Interestingly, as early as 1905, Clements insisted on the fact that “the ecotone between two formations is never a sharp line, but it is an area of varying width” (281, quoted in Arnold et al, 2019, 12). The concept has been broadened to become a space of meetings, encounters and crossings, but also as “a space that generates diversity through mixing, merging, overlapping, and shifting processes, cross-fertilization, exchanges, interferences, competition, disturbance, and resilience” (Arnold et al, 2019, 13). In turn, Florence Krall invited us to think of ecotones as complex cultural metaphors, “the pluralistic contexts out of which conflict and change emerge” (4, quoted in Arnold et al, 2019, 13).

We might conceive the vast expanses of time and space dedicated to the living and / or to the dead as an ecotone, with no area restricted only to one or the other, no border between the two that would not *also* be a *borderland* in the Anzaldúan (1987) sense, in its productive and creative dimension. There can only be circulation and connection between those times and spaces, interchange, relation and, ultimately, transformation and creation. Our awareness of the multiple ways those domains touch upon and influence each other transforms the milieus we live in. On the other hand, our refusal to reach such awareness, as too often happens in the context of death in migration, makes us run another risk, that of adopting a reductive approach not only to immigration but also to what it means to live together in a human community. They are far from being two separate entities— the living and the dead, the migrating ones and the settled ones, the ones who live in protected areas and the ones who are constantly on the brink of the abyss. Thinking thanatic ethics from the perspective of the ecotone compels us to recognize the fluidity of such spaces, the intermingling and the constant interaction(s) between the two, however hard some political groups or governments try to keep them separate. A liminal space such as the



beach, for instance, with the migrants stepping out of their makeshift rafts among the sunbathing tourists, is a case in point. One could also mention many other urban and non-urban heterotopian spaces such as harbours, parks, railway or bus stations, airports, construction sites, prisons, deserts or cemeteries. What used to be called “the environment” is part of the composition of our attitude to migration and to the deaths it generates, buttressing the comfort and wealth of the developed countries in the Global North.

Given these varied concerns, we have organized the essays in this Special Issue in four sections. Part I, *Liquidscapes and Borders*, considers the ways in which the natural world, particularly the oceans, have been harnessed in the service of necropolitics. The essays in Part II, *Politics of Death and Mourning*, are concerned with the acute politicization of the basic right of burial for the dead and the right to mourn for the living, in contexts of irregular migration. In Part III, *Visualizing the Thanatic*, we curate three essays that deal with the visual representation of migrant death and politics of looking while the concluding section Part IV: *Requiem: Respect, Restitution, Repair*, turns to what may be called thanatopoetics, a poetics of care and repair that is so essential in dealing with migrant death.

### **Part I: Liquidscapes and Borders**

The three papers opening this Special Issue all address oceanic waters as an active bordering agent. The sea must be regarded as a border zone in its horizontal extension. It is an ecotone where the limits between the dead and the living, the human and the non-human, are blurred. It is a “space of unthinking” as “the Ocean instills in the minds of the dispossessed befuddlement, consternation, and irrational fear” (Tse in this volume). In this regard, the ocean-border

reconnects with ancestral fears of the “Kala pani” (Black water) of Hindu mythology, or the sea of perpetual gloom depicted by the Arab geographer Al Idrissi.

For Edwige Tamalet Talbayev in the opening article, “The Residual Migrant: Water Necropolitics and Borderization,” the chemistry of water and its corrosive force on the human body has been fully incorporated in contemporary border assemblages. In this regard, the sea is no longer the “characterless space” overlooked by political thinkers (Schmidt, mentioned by Newns in this volume), nor the “espace lisse” (smooth space) depicted by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (Deleuze and Guattari 1980). On the contrary, oceans - and the same could be said of deserts (De Leon) and other no man’s lands dividing nations - have become interstices fracturing the world map and restricting human mobility. They enable governments to exert a liquid violence affecting migrants’ behaviors and fears as Talbayev illustrates, “(its) necropower turns the sea into a space of surveillance, apartheid, and decimation.” She reminds the reader that the sea, like a wall, must be apprehended in its verticality. Under water, the corrosive power of the water exposes the vulnerability of the human body. The migrant body is the *corps-frontière* (Mbembe, quoted by Talbayev in this volume), a biological organism whose vulnerability becomes a tool for policy control. The sea removes the very presence of migrants from the public gaze. In the abyss, the sea conceals the outcomes of border control into a space of unspeakability (Newns). Everything happens as if the sea was a barrier to language itself.

In their search to resuscitate the dead from oblivion, artists may not always try to defy this loss of language. As shown by Lucinda Newns in her article “Necropolitical Ecologies: Creative Articulations of Nature’s Death-Work in the Borderzone,” this is the case for Caroline Bergvall who exploits the aural qualities of language to convey the movement of water in *Drift*. Similarly, Armin Gerder has incorporated silence as a central tenet of his aesthetics in his wordless graphic

novel, *Mediterranean*. These ecocritical texts critique what Newns calls the “necropolitical ecologies” created by the capitalist exploitation of the natural world. Kelly Yin Nga Tse shifts our focus from the Mediterranean to the Pacific in her article “Perilous Pacific: Thanatic Archive and Vietnamese Refugees.” As her title suggests, she reads the Pacific as a thanatic archive, “an oblique record of deadly knowledge” that still bears the traces of the catastrophic Vietnam War. In her comparative reading of two short stories, Nam Le’s “The Boat” and Viet Thanh Nguyen’s “The Black-Eyed Women,” Tse, like Talbayev and Newns before her, continues to read oceanic water bodies (in this case the Pacific) as lethal matter. Akin to Newns’ discussion of Bergvall, Tse illustrates how Le’s prose rhetorically animates the ocean while Nguyen portrays it as a spectral force.

## **Part II: Politics of Death and Mourning**

The contributions included in this second section shed light on the politics surrounding mourning for the dead. An adequate burial is a central feature of thanatic ethics. It re-embeds death in the normality of a social order and provides to mourners the possibility to address their grief. Yet, not everyone is deemed grievable. As highlighted by Judith Butler, the distinction between who is grievable and who is not undergirds the bordering of belonging (Butler 2009). Various public and private actors constantly challenge the capacity to trace this border.

As shown by De Heusch and Lacroix in their article “Negotiating moral authority for body repatriation: the case of Senegalese migration,” the traditional authority of the Murids dwells on the management of the Necropolis of Tuba where the members of the brotherhood yearn to be buried. De Heusch and Lacroix argue that the capacity to decide grievability is a key attribute of thanatocrats. The control of the flows of bodies is a strategic aspect of their symbolic power, a

power they do not hesitate to exert when they deem the dead undeserving of a proper burial. This is the case for suspected homosexuals denied the right to be buried in the necropolis. The authors demonstrate that diverse actors dispute this thanatic authority because they aspire to reap the symbolic and financial benefits of body repatriation, be they community organizations, state officials or private actors.

Filippo Furri and Carolina Kobelinski investigate another form of mobilization surrounding the mourning of dead migrants in their article titled “Towards a New Kinship? Affective Engagements with Migrants Dead in the Mediterranean.” In Sicily, civil society activists have set up an organization that aims to collect as much information as possible on the migrants found dead at sea. They rely on the documents found on the bodies of the dead, testimonies of migrant survivors and data collected by medical and police services. In doing so, they forge a counter-forensic strategy using the archival potential of the Sea. Furri and Kobelinski show how the activists have created deep affective bonds with the dead whom they never knew in life. Their endeavor reincorporates, in some form of ecotonic move, the dead within the community of the living.

In “He wants me to bring him home, even in the form of a shell”: Criminalized Bodies and Repatriation in Kamila Shamsie’s *Home Fire*” Jaine Chemacherry examines through Kamila Shamsie’s 2017 novel *Home Fire*, the thanatic authority of the state confronted by the repatriation of citizens who have been labeled “terrorists.” The story is of a modern Antigone; Aneeka, the novel’s British Pakistani protagonist, attempts to return to London the remains of her brother, Parvaiz, who died while fighting for ISIS on foreign shores. As British authorities deny her the possibility of burial in the UK, they exclude the brother from the community of the grievable ones and, thereby, from the human community: “not only is (...) Parvaiz ...

dehumanized but he is also turned into a creature that has deviated from humanity because of his alleged deviant character” (Chemacherry in this volume). Aneeka’s fight to challenge this thanatic authority demonstrates that the limits of grievability are highly political.

### **Part III: Visualizing the Thanatic**

The articles in this section take up questions of visually representing migrant death as well as visuality and the gaze. Together they ask what the appropriate ways of representing migrant death are. How can art convey what words cannot? When and how do we look and when are we compelled to turn away? In what ways does our gaze as spectators seek accountability?

Visualizing the thanatic is a particularly fraught endeavor as has been demonstrated by the controversy surrounding some of Ai-Wei Wei works such as his re-enactment of Nilüfer Demir’s photograph of the Syrian infant Alan Kurdi’s lifeless body on a beach in Bodrum, Turkey. It could be argued that the process of aestheticization inherent in a work of art immediately diminishes the complexity of the experience of perilous migration and may even be seen as “an insidious form of exploitation” (Catherine Bernard in this volume). This disconnect is aptly captured in the title of Markus Arnold’s contribution “The pleasure of drawing while people are drowning.” Despite these difficulties, artists are often driven by a moral injunction to make visible through art the many invisibilizations and erasures of death in migration.

The contributors in this section return to Nicholas Mirzoeff’s book *The Right to Look* (2011), where he somewhat contradictorily urges us to think with and against visuality. He explains this contradiction by suggesting that visuality preceded the authority that comes with looking.

Visuality, or what Mirzoeff calls the right to look, claims autonomy. However, this autonomy runs counter to the authority that comes with looking, an authority that Mirzoeff reminds us, is

falsely rendered natural. Such a false sense of authority is easy to see in the visual representation of migrants in mainstream media as dehumanized masses and “speechless emissaries” (Malkki, 1996). Looking at and representing migrants and migrant deaths therefore urgently demands a countervisuality which for Mirzoeff requires “the recognition of the other in order to have a place from which to claim rights and to determine what is right” (2011, 1). In their article “When the people behind the scenes come to the fore: Mediterranean touristic venues as border zones of visual clash,” Elsa Gomis and Ana Mendes use Mirzoeff’s framework to analyze texts that embody what they call “visual clashes” between “antithetical human experiences” in the Mediterranean, such as between sunbathing tourists and newly arrived migrants occupying the same beach. Images that bear witness to such “unwanted encounters” perform acts of countervisuality by visibilizing a humanitarian crisis while also disrupting clichés of touristic sandy beaches.

Catherine Bernard’s contribution to this Special Issue titled “Contemporary Art’s Thanatic Work: Re-embodying the (Absent) Migrant Body,” studies several exhibitions that have attempted to aesthetically represent a collective response to mass migration. Focusing on the spectatorial experience of this confrontation, Bernard argues that art becomes “the contested site of an embodied unhinging of spectatorship endowed with a renewed, if paradoxical, sense of collective political accountability.” Finally, through his investigation of graphic novels by selected contemporary Francophone authors exploring mass migration, displacement and migrant death, Markus Arnold posits that the “scenographical implications” of representing these issues through illustrations, are strikingly different though no less powerful, than writing about them. His article, “‘The pleasure of drawing while people are drowning’: Graphic Literature and the Critical Engagement with Death in Migratory Spaces,” explores the suitability of the polysemic

medium and the ethical implications of fictionalizing and aestheticizing the experience of migrant death. Together, the articles in this section demonstrate that despite the paradoxes and complexities of visualizing the thanatic, artistic representations of migrant death can achieve a number of things - they can help to rehistoricize the gaze, restore visual agency, reclaim visibility and seek accountability - in doing so, they enact a powerful, albeit always fraught, form of thanatic ethics.

#### **Part IV: Requiem: Respect, Restitution, Repair**

We carefully designed the logo of the Thanatic Ethics project[8] to include an inverted torch, one of the symbols of Thanatos; it can be flaming or extinguished, symbolizing the flame of life or the extinction of life. It also brings to mind the Hippocratic Oath and the caduceus, referring to the dimension of care. In this concluding section of the Special Issue, we move towards thanatopoetics or the poetics of care, repair and restitution.

Judith Misrahi-Barak's contribution "Unburials and Skeletal Reconstructions: Narrative as Forensics in Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*" posits the healing power of the literary text itself. Exploring the fraught relationship between literature and forensics through a reading of Michael Ondaatje's novel *Anil's Ghost* about the Sri Lankan Civil War, Misrahi-Barak likens the workings of the text to the creation of a public "forum", interrogating the common etymology of the words 'forum' and 'forensis'.

In the penultimate article, "Spectrality and Thanatic Ethics of Care in *Atlantique* and *Biutiful*," Bidisha Banerjee considers the affordances of spectrality in two films about migrant life and death, Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Biutiful* and Mati Diop's *Atlantique*. She attempts to bring discussions in the ethics of care in close conversation with migration studies. Following Esther

Peeren's reading of the migrant as a spectral figure as much in life as in death, Banerjee demonstrates how spectrality (literal and metaphorical) in both films, offers a thanatic ethics of care while also mounting a critique on current care regimes in migration. Her reading of the films proposes, "newer models of care not based on feminine virtue or racial hierarchies but rather on dismantling care justice binaries and seeing the world in new ways through relationality and responsiveness."

### **Conclusion:**

Policies like those guarding "Fortress Europe" or the US government's federal border policy of "prevention through deterrence," have inflicted immeasurable harm and exacerbated the risks refugees are willing to take on their migrant journeys, often resulting in death. The Covid-19 pandemic and the border closures that ensued in its wake, have shed further light on issues of refugee border crossings and body repatriation. Rather than seeing a reduction in the number of border crossings and refugee deaths during the pandemic, IOM's Missing Migrants Project recorded 5,895 deaths on migratory routes worldwide in 2021. This figure is higher than pre-pandemic times and the highest number recorded since 2017. Phenomena like war, disease, food scarcity, rising temperatures, and ethnic cleansing will continue to displace millions globally. A project like Thanatic Ethics is therefore urgently needed to draw attention to refugee precarity and death. Counting and identifying the dead is necessary but not enough. Making art is necessary but not enough. Joining in activism is necessary but not enough. So, what is enough? What is it that makes it so crucial to engage with different disciplines, multiple perspectives and varied discourses? Along with the proliferating questions of social justice and human rights, the point of urgent concern is one that pertains to our capacity to live together and create a "kinship of humanity"[9] on our imperiled planet. The way we deal with questions of the migrant dead



and their remains, says something about that and steers us towards the right questions to ask - what binds us together as individuals and as a community? What do we lose when we dispose of the unidentified bodies of migrants? We hope the essays in this volume will provide an ethical compass to help us negotiate these difficult questions in our precarious times.

### **Acknowledgements:**

We wish to thank all the contributors to the special issue as well as the many reviewers without whose support this special issue would not be possible. Thanks also to the members of the wider Thanatic Ethics network who have participated in our workshops and conferences. These exchanges have enabled us to theorise Thanatic Ethics. Finally, a word of thanks to our Project Officer Marco Chan for his tireless assistance with all clerical matters and his meticulous attention to detail. The Thanatic Ethics project has been funded by a Faculty Development Fund from the Faculty of Humanities at the Education University of Hong Kong as well as Paul Valéry University Montpellier 3 in France ( research centre EMMA) and the Maison Française of Oxford.

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[1] [www.thanaticethics.com](http://www.thanaticethics.com)

[2] <http://www.lastrights.net/#Home>

[3] <https://arkadizaides.com/>

[4] <https://unitedfia.org/>

[5] <http://fortresseurope.blogspot.com/>

[6] <http://migreurop.org/rubrique455.html?lang=en>

[7] <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/>

[8]

[9] We owe this term to Mita Banerjee who used this phrase in the online webinar “Migration, Life Writing, and the Spectacle of the Migrant Body in Distress,” part of the “Thanatic Ethics” Webinar Series (March 4, 2022).