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## Foreword

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# Foreword

*Judith Misrahi-Barak and Bidisha Banerjee*

Three stories open *Death in Migration: Foregrounding Loss, Grieving and Memory Out of Place*. Verónica arrived in Italy from Ecuador in the late 1990s and was able to access a regularization scheme, which eventually led to family reunification. When she fell ill and died, the families decided to repatriate her body so that she could be remembered by her community at home. Jimena, also from Ecuador, had made it clear she wanted to be buried in Italy where her husband and children would be able to keep her close. As for Rola, a Kurdish girl child fleeing conflict, she travelled all the way from Iraq to Germany and then to France. She died while trying to cross the English Channel to reach the United Kingdom. Her funeral was held in Grande-Synthe, near Calais.

These stories are more than introductory vignettes. They are revealing of the myriad ways death and migration intersect, on the migration routes, at the border, or in the host countries, whether one still is an undocumented migrant, an asylum seeker, or already a settled immigrant. They hint at the complexities of burial or cremation choices, here or there, provided the body has been found, identified and handed back to the family. Not only do they highlight the power of familial bonds and how mortality shapes the migrant experience, but they also shine a crude light on how migration reshapes our understanding of death more generally speaking, our comprehension of dying and burying, of the afterlives of migration, and of mobility as it is extended after death.

As *Death in Migration* seeks to explore the experience of emigrants, migrants and immigrants who die in countries other than their own, it goes further and raises questions that pertain to the community of the living when confronted to what can be called 'death in transit', a phrase that covers unsuspected diversities and inequalities. How do we reclaim the dignity of those who die far from their home? Isn't it our own humanity that is jeopardized if we prove unable to address the issue of death in migration, even more so when it concerns the anonymous and the vulnerable? Wouldn't it be the very

community of the living that would be shaken to its core if we were not able to uphold the dignity and rights of all people when death has been reached?

If this Foreword had been written a few years ago, it would probably have started with the observations that dying on the routes of migration was not taken into consideration, that it was kept away from the mainstream media and from the public eye and was under-researched in academic circles. It would have underlined how death in migration was marginal in the scientific conversations and societal debates in Europe, across the Atlantic and worldwide; it would have pointed out how *Death in Migration* was taking stock of the invisibility and unaccountability that were rife at all stages of the migration process; it would have denounced the fact that anonymous deaths in migratory contexts were a deliberately neglected topic in public policies, and declared that the book was a trailblazer. In many ways, this is still true – all these observations can still be made, even if the context has changed. The subject of death in migration has grown even more complex due to its multilayered and intricate aspects. The urgency of a political response is more acute than ever; accountability is a high priority as much as ever.

*Death in Migration* is indeed more crucially needed by the day, as it provides keys to understanding and making sense of death in migration on many different but interconnected levels. It covers the varied configurations of death during and after migration, but also the mobilities after death, which are so often invisibilized. What happens to the body of the dead migrant while it is still unidentified? What happens once it is found and identified, if at all? What is the journey it then undertakes, not only in space but in time too? The dead are not immobile. They go places, local and global; the bodies of the dead also have a social life, which involves a movement in time too, as this volume makes clear by using the phrases ‘posthumous mobilities’ and ‘transnational afterlives’. Dying, just like living, is a process in which everyone is not necessarily equal. Disposing of the dead is another process, only made more complex by the realization that it is after death that one can be most seen as out of place, denied the right to die where one was not entitled to live.

Death in migration has increasingly been at the heart of an expanding interdisciplinary field, at the crossroads of sociology, political sciences, migration and diaspora studies but also humanities and the arts. It endows death studies with a new dimension, too, as it brings in contact disciplines that used to be kept separate. There has been continuous research on the different forms of mobility of human bodies and remains between the place of death and the expected site of disposal, burial and remembering, possibly commemoration.

Though shining a torch on very specific aspects of dying – dying while migrating, dealing with the death of one’s companions of migration, surviving the death of one’s closest kin or loved ones, or sometimes having

to bear the uncertainty of their life or death – this slim and important book by two social scientists who are used to working across disciplines contributes to unraveling many of the threads that compose the community of the living – what tears us apart and what ties us together, in local contexts that are always already linked to the global context.

By foregrounding loss, grieving and memory out of place, the authors of this book aim to foster a deeper understanding of the human, political, social, individual and collective costs of migration when states and governments have made the choice to consider it a threat and a movement to be restrained, when it does not matter that human lives are lost and ethics shattered. The book forces us to engage with questions that gain political relevance by the day regarding the spatialities and temporalities of death in migration, whether it concerns end-of-life situations for long-time immigrants, people who have lived in the diaspora for generations, or people who died in the country they were born in. The complexities of transnational death and dying, including palliative care, make us see our own end-of-life situations in a different light. Can we contemplate in tranquility the end of our own life and our eventual death if we know that others are not granted a space of their own to rest and be remembered by their community? How can there be a natural and organic place to die for some of us while others remain out of place, in life and in death? How can we consider the ethical implications of our collective responses to death in migration, in the impact it has on the non-migrating communities? ‘Emplacing death’ and territorial belonging are no less problematic in death than in life, and no less complex when speaking of undocumented migrants or of documented immigrants.

*Death in Migration* by Paolo Boccagni and Thomas Lacroix would probably still have been written even if the Thanatic Ethics Project had not existed, but it is a source of great pride for the co-investigators that it has been written from within the project, benefiting in such a fruitful manner from the work of all the members of the project who, directly and indirectly, contributed to the Thanatic Ethics network. The project, now in its sixth year, has been a catalyst for dialogue and collaboration between scholars from a range of disciplines, artists and activists. Bringing together migration scholars, ethnographers, social geographers, anthropologists, literary scholars, musicians, performance and visual artists, choreographers, doctoral and postdoctoral students, community organizers and activists, the Thanatic Ethics Project has gone a long way to ‘(re)humanize the migrant dead, against their ungrievability, irrelevance, or downright disappearance’, as Boccagni and Lacroix call for in their Conclusion. It has been a genuinely creative project, leading to the production of academic articles (including two special issues), a sound installation and a graphic novel. The transnational reach and scope of the project, bringing together scholars from Europe, North America as well as the Global South, has been particularly productive given

the urgency of attending to migrant death on a transnational scale and the multi-sited entanglements of migrant networks and communities in life and death. The discussions at various Thanatic Ethics events have generated new ideas and responses to the urgent questions of migrant death. The authors of this book have worked through many of these questions, providing fascinating interconnections between the myriad issues related to death in migration.

In *Death in Migration*, Boccagni and Lacroix write: 'If death means losing one's place in the world, whatever and wherever that was, coping with death means reclaiming that place, materially and symbolically, for the loved ones and for the larger society'. This question of emplacement threads through the book in powerful and moving ways – how do migrants, once removed from their spaces of belonging, traverse through warsapes and border zones to occupy marginalized spaces and what happens when they cross the final boundary between life and death? What spaces do the remains of the deceased travel through via the networks of migrant death until a final resting place is found? By shining a light on the many diverse and complex issues pertaining to death in migration such as rituals of death and mourning, death and the politics of community building, commemoration and grief-activism, and the representation of migrant death in arts and humanities, *Death in Migration* makes a timely and urgently needed intervention, and symbolically reclaims a space for the many migrant dead.