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## Citation

Tazzioli, Martina. 2015. The politics of counting and the scene of rescue. *Radical Philosophy*, 192, pp. 2-6. ISSN 0300-211X [Article]

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# The politics of counting and the scene of rescue

## Border deaths in the Mediterranean

**Martina Tazzioli**

Border deaths are not a new phenomenon. Since the early 2000s, the Mediterranean Sea has been named a ‘maritime cemetery’ by activists<sup>1</sup> and critical migration scholars. However, over the last two years migrant deaths at the borders have gained more and more attention in the media and EU political debate after two deadly shipwrecks near the island of Lampedusa on 3 and 11 October 2013, causing the deaths of 636. Since then, the Mediterranean has become the focus for a practice of ‘counting the dead’ that has been at the core of databases set up by human rights groups, migration agencies and NGOs. The number of deaths is, however, difficult to ascertain: according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), for instance, in 2014 3,072 people died in the Mediterranean,<sup>2</sup> while UNHCR counted 3,419 dead migrants in the same year; in 2011, according to UNHCR’s statistics, about 1,500 migrants died in the Mediterranean,<sup>3</sup> but human rights associations estimate that the real number is around 3,000. The differences in statistics are very often the result of the choice whether to count missing persons; that is, those migrants who supposedly died but whose corpses have not been found. The Deaths at the Borders Database, for example, produced by an academic research team based at the University of Amsterdam, counts exclusively migrant deaths recorded by states in civil registries.<sup>4</sup> It is precisely in this gap between the countable deaths and the uncountable ones that, I suggest, it becomes necessary to put into place an alternative politics, one that accounts for border deaths beyond the logic of mapping and counting.

### **Our Sea**

October 2013 represents an important shift in the governmental approach to migrants at sea: the starting of Mare Nostrum, the military-humanitarian operation coordinated by the Italian navy for rescuing migrants in distress at sea inaugurated what can be called *the scene of rescue*. From the border spectacle of the migrant invasion, media attention shifted to the humanitarian tasks performed by military actors in charge of saving migrant lives. At the time of writing, May 2015, the political context has changed again: in December 2014, Mare Nostrum had been replaced by the EU operation Triton coordinated by Frontex, whose declared purpose is border control and not rescuing migrants. Nevertheless, the Mediterranean is by now seen as a scene of rescue that is at the core of the EU reassessment of a migration strategy to respond to the ‘refugee crisis’ provoked by wars across the world from which millions of people escape. This crisis, which migration agencies and scholars define in terms of ‘mixed migration flows’,<sup>5</sup> designates at the same time the crisis of states and

humanitarian actors in labelling and partitioning people deserving international protection from the others. Such a crisis, which is actualized dramatically in the increase of border deaths in the Mediterranean region, is also the result of a European space that is closed off for the majority of the people who seek asylum and who can enter it only illegally.

If the logic of counting and mapping has been the main response in terms of knowledge production, NGO campaigns and policy-relevant research, European states have instead reacted to the too visible and unbearable effects of their migration policies – namely, the high number of border deaths in the Mediterranean – by putting into place humanitarian-military operations for rescuing migrants in distress at sea. The political debate that has arisen around the military-humanitarian operation *Mare Nostrum* had been focused on the rescue politics enacted by military actors – the navy, with the support of the coastguards – in charge of humanitarian tasks, namely of rescuing migrants at sea: how much extended the patrolling area should be, how to improve the rescue capacity of the navy, how to distinguish between the ‘persons in real need of protection’<sup>6</sup> and the migrant smugglers or the possible terrorists, which actors have to save the migrants and at what costs. In the frame of rescue politics, people escaping wars become lives to rescue, shipwrecked persons. Thus, *rescue politics* designates the technical deployment of military vessels and monitoring tools for saving migrants at sea, and at the same time it indicates the implicit and unquestioned consideration of migrants as shipwrecked lives. To put it differently, people seeking asylum in Europe are people who in order to be safe have to put their lives at risk at sea and be rescued by military ferries.

The exclusive focus on the modalities of rescue has overshadowed the peculiar politics of life that underpins military-humanitarian operations: migrants seeking asylum become lives to rescue and their freedom – of movement and of choosing a safe place to stay – is dislodged from the outset. The mechanisms of capture and containment of unauthorized movements act simultaneously through border restrictions that cause border deaths and through the humanitarian channelling system. The risks to life that people who seek asylum in Europe take, being forced to cross the Mediterranean ‘illegally’, and rescue politics are not opposite mechanisms of migration government. This means that humanitarian measures hold a specific political technology over migrant lives by rescuing, sorting and channelling migrants,<sup>7</sup> one in which people escaping wars can seek asylum only by first becoming shipwrecked persons to rescue. Humanitarian and security measures are thus two intertwined political technologies of migration governmentality.

Caught in-between these apparently opposite poles – the security approach and the humanitarian one – even migration activist groups and researchers took the stand of the humanitarian solution to border deaths. Ultimately, rescue politics has saturated the political space of action, becoming the blueprint for campaigns and practices that deliberately challenge ‘the human costs of border controls’. In 2014 a Maltese couple launched the Migrant Offshore Aid Station (MOAS), a private rescue operation ‘to support vessels in need of assistance, coordinating its efforts with other search and rescue authorities around the Mediterranean’.<sup>8</sup> Equipped with vessels and drones, the MOAS team started as an alternative to state rescue operations, with the idea that saving migrant lives at sea should be an issue that also involves civic responsibility. Then, in a second stage, it worked in collaboration with the Italian navy, assisting them during rescue operations and detecting migrants in distress at sea. A private rescue operation was also started by a German entrepreneur who has recently put into place *Sea Watch*,<sup>9</sup> a rescue boat patrolling between Maltese and Tunisian waters. In April 2015, *Médicins Sans Frontières* (MSF) and MOAS launched a joint Mediterranean search, rescue and medical aid operation that received considerable attention

in European public debate after the huge shipwreck near Lampedusa on 18 April that caused the death of more than 800 migrants.<sup>10</sup> In autumn 2014, a transnational group of activists based in France, Germany, Italy and Tunisia set up Alarm Phone, an alarm number that migrants at sea can call in case of distress. Unlike MOAS, the Alarm Phone group is not equipped with vessels but acts according to a ‘watch the watchdogs’ strategy, calling national coastguards and ‘following up on the rescue operation on their response, making known to them that we are informed and “watching” them’.<sup>11</sup> The idea behind all these projects, given Europe’s irresponsibility in the face of migrant deaths, is to intervene in spaces that are usually reserved for state authorities, demanding that they operate in a prompt and adequate way to rescue migrants at sea and engaging in civic sea rescue to turn the humanitarian-military approach into an effective and urgent assistance to migrants in distress.

### **Freedom of movement?**

A phone call is received by J., a rejected refugee from Ivory Coast in Tunis who was previously at the refugee camp of Choucha close to the Libyan border. Three Eritreans who left the camp in September 2013, went back to Libya and took a boat to Italy died, along with 323 other migrants, in the big shipwreck near Lampedusa on 3 October 2013. Three months later, in March 2014, J. is informed by a refugee who is now settled in Germany that their friend from Ghana never arrived: although the Italian operation Mare Nostrum was in place at that time, a deadly shipwreck had probably occurred between Libya and Italy. For Italian authorities that shipwreck simply never happened.

Reflecting upon border deaths, the first image that comes to mind for many of us is a list of numbers: the weekly death toll in the Mediterranean, released by the vessels operating under the Triton operation; the number of estimated border deaths since the late 1990s that differs according to the source and the approximate number of missing people after a rescue operation in the Mediterranean Sea. The government of migration is grounded on a politics of numbers that sorts people into ‘risk’ categories, divides migrants into groups when they are disembarked at the harbour, and from time to time fixes the number of ‘authorized’ entries in a country. Counting border deaths is a mapping practice in which numbers proliferate while remaining approximate.

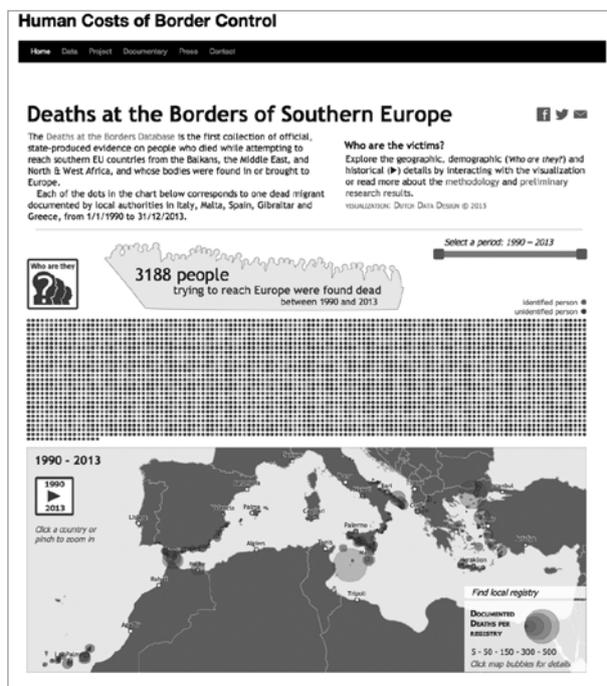
Border policies are the cause not only of recorded deaths but also of the ‘disappearance’ of migrants. In order to remain invisible and undetected, many migrants become untraceable even when they die during their journey. While for relatives and friends they are missing persons, for European authorities they are simply uncounted presences and unrecorded deaths.<sup>12</sup> When dead bodies are found, the number of deaths often remains approximate due to the impossibility of verifying exactly how many people were on the vessel.

On the southern shore of the Mediterranean, ‘border deaths’ are those persons – friends, sons, daughters, husbands, wives or travel mates – who, irrespective of whether their death has been certified by national authorities, are missing. The ‘ghost shipwrecks’ that have happened in the Mediterranean over the past decade have not stopped with the deployment of military-humanitarian operations; something escapes the death count that NGOs, activists, researchers and international organizations have started to pursue. Border deaths have become objects of recording, mapping and detection with an almost ‘real-time’ visibility that aims to produce an awareness of the situation in the Mediterranean, as with the Eurosur system, or through *a posteriori* data-gathering activities that aim to produce ‘archives’ of migrant deaths at sea. Indeed, most of the time the details of a deadly shipwreck can be retraced only by collecting information and testimonies from the survivals and reconstructing the event step by step, for instance by using radar and satellite images.<sup>13</sup> The proliferating

counting methods mirror the governmentalization of the Mediterranean, which is increasingly constructed as a space that can be constantly monitored by technological eyes and by patrolling boats. Yet the disappearance of so many migrants challenges the image of the Mediterranean as a ‘transparent’ sea, bringing to the fore the patchy visibility that is at play and the presence of shadow zones. In this regard, border deaths are the unavoidable outcome – and not the unintended or the side effect – of the visa regime that instantiates asymmetries in the functioning and effects of borders.

If border deaths are accounted for through a logic of counting, something remains undetectable from the political perspective of the northern shore of the Mediterranean. Moving beyond the logic of counting means refusing to look at border deaths from the standpoint of this governmental gaze – migration agencies or states – and taking into account what border deaths are for the friends and the relatives of the missing migrants. This means engaging in a decolonial move that challenges the logic of recognition that sustains political campaigns and research projects aiming to count and identify dead migrants. By moving from the northern to the southern shore of the Mediterranean we realize that these uncounted deaths not only have a name but are fully known by their friends and relatives. Rather than producing a more exact border

deaths population database, it is a question of bringing into visibility the reality of what the visa regime and the European mechanisms of border control generate: the ‘disappearance’ of women and men who die without being detected but who are counted as ‘missing’ in the countries of origin or of transit by those who know them. The logic of identification – giving a name to corpses found at sea – risks, paradoxically, reproducing the hierarchy that assumes dead migrants are people who, in order to exist, have to be recognized, counted and named from the northern shore of the Mediterranean. A politics that accounts for border deaths without reproducing this space of governmentality attends to what exists beyond counting and identification: unaccountable deaths represent the unquantifiable ‘cost’ of borders that cannot be assessed from the northern shore of the Mediterranean and that requires taking into account those people – friends and relatives – for whom they are missing persons.



The daily alternation between death tolls and the bulletins of rescued migrants that we have been witnessing since the start of the Mare Nostrum and Triton operations fashions us as spectators: migrants escaping wars become lives to save in the technical sense of being rescued at sea that ‘we’ can only observe and ‘count’. The friends of J. from the Choucha camp have become objects of a mapping gaze that crafts a new space of governmentality: bodies to count and name, to classify in order to assess the risk that migrants face in crossing the sea.

The expression ‘human costs of border control’<sup>14</sup> is used by NGOs, researchers and human rights activists to highlight the unwanted effects of borders in order to demand that states adopt a more humane approach in implementing migration policies. By challenging the costs-and-benefits perspective on border control, I am arguing that borders function in heterogeneous ways; far from acting only as barriers, killing migrants by giving them no other choice for moving than by risking death in the act of border crossing, they also filter and decelerate movements. Migrants who

die attempting to cross the frontier zone of the Mediterranean are not the involuntary targets of border restrictions. If 'without borders there would be neither citizens nor migrants',<sup>15</sup> it is also true that borders act on subjects' freedom in order to govern it by activating a complex regime of capture. In this way, freedom – the freedom to move and to find a safe space for living – is unthinkable in the narrative of rescue politics. Migrants at sea are not 'saved' in the sense of being free to move without once again risking death: on the contrary, once rescued they enter the juridical channels of asylum and only the luckiest among them will be granted humanitarian protection. Migrants crossing the Mediterranean are often depicted as subjects who choose to put their lives at risk, but such decisions are conditioned by the EU's programme of borders-at-a-distance.

Therefore, instead of demanding a stronger and more humanitarian European rescue system, reducing migrants to shipwrecked persons, we should move beyond the scene of rescue, looking at what happens to people seeking asylum before and after being rescued by military-humanitarian actors. In fact, the ongoing construction of pre-frontiers and of humanitarian spaces of containment that the EU is engaging in, negotiating bilateral agreements and the externalization of asylum with neighbourhood countries,<sup>16</sup> highlights the attempts by EU states to not let people leave. Moving beyond the scene of rescue also means insisting on the freedom of movement and the freedom to choose a safe space to live, excluded in humanitarian logic by the asymmetry between the 'beneficiaries' of protection and those who are in charge of saving and rescuing them.

## Notes

1. An important step in the construction of a collective movement for struggling against the militarization of the Mediterranean and against the visa regime has been the Charter of Lampedusa, a collective text produced by activists, lawyers and researchers during a meeting in Lampedusa that took place in January 2014; [www.lacartadilampedusa.org](http://www.lacartadilampedusa.org).
2. [http://publications.iom.int/bookstore/free/FatalJournays\\_CountingtheUncounted.pdf](http://publications.iom.int/bookstore/free/FatalJournays_CountingtheUncounted.pdf).
3. [www.unhcr.org/4f27e01f9.html](http://www.unhcr.org/4f27e01f9.html).
4. [www.borderdeaths.org](http://www.borderdeaths.org).
5. [www.iom.int/jahia/webdav/shared/shared/mainsite/microsites/IDM/workshops/return\\_migration\\_challenges\\_120208/mixed\\_migration\\_flows.pdf](http://www.iom.int/jahia/webdav/shared/shared/mainsite/microsites/IDM/workshops/return_migration_challenges_120208/mixed_migration_flows.pdf).
6. [http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration-background-information/docs/communication\\_on\\_the\\_european\\_agenda\\_on\\_migration\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration-background-information/docs/communication_on_the_european_agenda_on_migration_en.pdf).
7. That is, rescuing migrants at sea and then sorting them into those who deserve protection, those who are deported due to the bilateral agreements with their countries of origin – such as the agreements that Italy signed with Tunisia, Egypt and Nigeria – and those who will be left on European territory with no humanitarian protection.
8. [www.moas.eu/4/Our-Mission](http://www.moas.eu/4/Our-Mission).
9. <http://sea-watch.org/en/das-projekt/umsetzung/?lang=en>.
10. [www.msf.org/article/msf-moas-launch-mediterranean-search-rescue-and-medical-aid-operation](http://www.msf.org/article/msf-moas-launch-mediterranean-search-rescue-and-medical-aid-operation); [www.moas.eu/one-hundred-people-a-day-rescued-at-sea-by-moas](http://www.moas.eu/one-hundred-people-a-day-rescued-at-sea-by-moas).
11. [www.google.it/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CCIQFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.watchthemed.net%2Findex.php%2Fpage%2Findex%2F12&ei=yoUdVevfGsXoULbogMgl&usq=AFQjCNHmMc1QsXQNzv2whxHCMz8loGmogw&sig2=pANBJMiculbbk1o6iZLlyw](http://www.google.it/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CCIQFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.watchthemed.net%2Findex.php%2Fpage%2Findex%2F12&ei=yoUdVevfGsXoULbogMgl&usq=AFQjCNHmMc1QsXQNzv2whxHCMz8loGmogw&sig2=pANBJMiculbbk1o6iZLlyw).
12. In this regard it is important to mention the political campaign by the parents of the missing Tunisian migrants who left Tunisia soon after the revolution and are still missing. See Federica Sossi, 'The Phantoms of Truth', in G. Garelli, F. Sossi and M. Tazzioli, eds, *Spaces in Migration: Postcards of a Revolution*, Pavement, London, 2013.
13. On this point see the left-to-die boat case: [www.forensic-architecture.org/case/left-die-boat](http://www.forensic-architecture.org/case/left-die-boat).
14. [https://www.amnesty.nl/sites/default/files/public/eur\\_050012014\\_\\_fortress\\_europe\\_complete\\_web.pdf](https://www.amnesty.nl/sites/default/files/public/eur_050012014__fortress_europe_complete_web.pdf); [www.washingtonpost.com/posttv/video/onbackground/the-human-costs-of-a-more-secure-border/2013/08/13/5fe6d954-043e-11e3-a07f-49ddc7417125\\_video.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/posttv/video/onbackground/the-human-costs-of-a-more-secure-border/2013/08/13/5fe6d954-043e-11e3-a07f-49ddc7417125_video.html). See also T. Spijkerboer, 'The Human Costs of Border Control', *European Journal of Migration and Law* 9, 2007, pp. 127–39; P. Shield, 'The Human Cost of the European Union's External Border Regime', *Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2015, pp. 82–90.
15. N. De Genova, 'Extremities and Regularities and the Spectacle of Immigration Enforcement', in Y. Jansen, R. Celikates and J. de Bloois, eds, *The Irregularization of Migration in Contemporary Europe*, Rowman & Littlefield, London, 2015, pp. 3–14.
16. <http://italia2014.eu/media/3785/declaration-of-the-ministerial-conference-of-the-khartoum-process.pdf>; [www.statewatch.org/news/2015/mar/italian%20med.pdf](http://www.statewatch.org/news/2015/mar/italian%20med.pdf).