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**Migrations in Latin America and the  
Mediterranean compared:  
Violence, state cruelty and (un-)institutional  
resistance**

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**Hosting the dead by migration. The treatment of lifeless  
bodies in Catania (Sicily)**

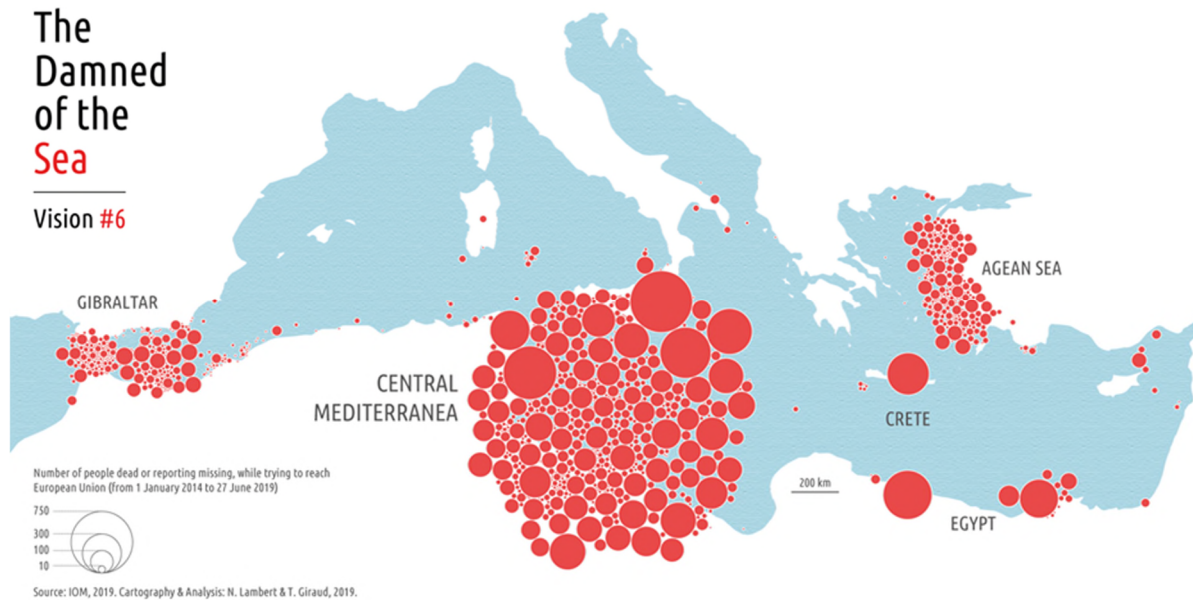
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## Hosting the dead by migration: The treatment of lifeless bodies in Catania (Sicily)

For almost 30 years, migrants have been dying at the [European borders](#) but the issue has only become widely publicised since the shipwrecks on the Lampedusa Coast in October 2013.<sup>1</sup> Numerous studies have shown that these deaths are a direct effect of hardline securitisation policies and techniques of migration control.<sup>2</sup>



Cartography & analysis: N. Lambert & T. Giraud (2019). <https://neocarto.hypotheses.org/5982>

We will not dwell here on this form of European sovereignty, expressed in the power to expose people to the risk of death and, incidentally, to allow people to continue living despite being unwanted. We will not talk either about the impact that these deaths have on border-crossers life. We will rather focus on a grassroots initiative intended to contribute to the identification of dead bodies.

The paper draws on an ongoing ethnographic fieldwork we have been working on since the beginning of this initiative among its designers and all the actors involved in the project in the Sicilian city of Catania, that is, since 2017.<sup>3</sup> This ethnography is part of larger (both NGO and research) projects on the contemporary border regime and the material and symbolic treatment of dead migrants (Kobelinsky 2019). In this paper we will (1) briefly explain the history of this initiative, which implies the development of a database project, and how it was born. (2) We will then focus on what the database contains, the rationalities at play, and (3) we will eventually raise some questions related to the politics behind and through this project.

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<sup>1</sup> For a critical study on the politics of counting migrant deaths in Europe, see Heller & Pécoud (2019).

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, the analysis provided by Migreurop in its latest Atlas (2019) and by Babels (2017).

<sup>3</sup> This research is being carried out with the support of the research programme MECMI: Morts en contexte de migration, ANR-I6-FRQC-0001.

## I. History and context

Between 2015 and 2018, Catania has become one of the main arrival ports for migrants trying to reach the European Union without the necessary authorisation from nation states – or at least this was the case until Matteo Salvini's refusal to allow the vessels to dock. When landings take place in the port (when the ships assigned for search and rescue operations bring back migrants to the port), several institutional actors – from state and international agencies, municipal authorities, and NGOs – are present to stem the tide of people. Some of the people in question are alive, but others are dead. Their lifeless bodies lie in the cold rooms of Italian Coast Guard ships or are sometimes even confused with those who are alive. These bodies are mostly examined in haste by on-site forensic doctors before then being transported to the morgue and ultimately – although the timeframe varies – taken to the cemetery.

Whether in the port, or beforehand, on the boats, living migrants are subjected to a range of procedures aimed at identifying them and ensuring their traceability. Conversely, the dead, negatively mirroring the living, are often buried without any official inquiry taking place to try to identify them. Prosecutors' investigations seek to determine whether a crime has taken place and if so to identify the perpetrator(s).<sup>4</sup> If a crime is suspected, the prosecutor can ask for an autopsy – which serves to determine the cause of death, but for deaths at sea an external examination suffices – and then proceed with an investigation allowing the victim to be identified. Such investigations are extremely rare, however.

Most of the time, no traces, no clues, and no evidence on the bodies allow these unknown foreign corpses to be forensically identified. Fingerprinting provides no information since the deceased have almost never been registered in a European database. DNA sampling is of no greater help, at this stage, as there are no ante-mortem profiles of the deceased or their relatives with which to compare samples.

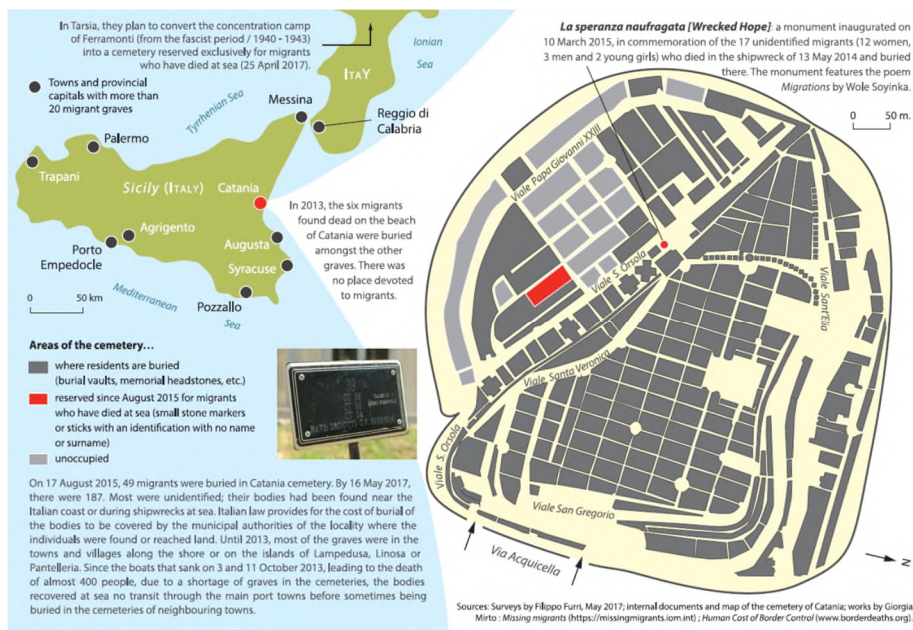
A couple of years ago, a small group of locals involved with the Red Cross in migrant reception in the port and within RFL, [Restoring Family Links](#), a programme aimed at connecting families separated, in this case, by migration, decided to organise themselves in order to 'respect' the dead. Silvia, the driving force of the project, once explained as a form of presentation of their idea that they 'could not just simply stand by and witness the tragedy', that they had 'to do something for these dead people for whom no one cries.' In addition, doing something soon became contributing to endeavours to identify the bodies and return them to their families. This led them to design a database compiling all existing information about the dead migrants buried in the municipal cemetery.

The cemetery is quite a particular one: there is a monument opened by the Mayor of the city in March 2015 to pay tribute to migrants who died while crossing the Mediterranean. And there is also a section of the land

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<sup>4</sup> In these cases, the Prosecutor is only interested in pursuing the smugglers, thought to be the only ones responsible for border deaths.

that is designed solely for migrants who have died while crossing the Mediterranean, called the ‘migrants’ square’, next to the ‘poverty square’ in which almost 270 bodies are buried.



Published in *Migreurop* (2019:119)



Picture of the ‘migrants’ square’. Credit: Filippo Furri (2018)





Picture of the monument erected by the City of Catania to commemorate the deceased migrants. Credit: Oskar Landi (2017)

## 2. The content

When Silvia, Riccardo, Davide and some other members of the *squadra* [RFL team] started exploring the situation, the first finding was that the information was scattered and therefore the need to find a way to put together all the data concerning a body became a priority.

Mapping the local cemetery was the first step in order to start somewhere. The idea of creating a database then emerged. The following step was to trace the backward trajectory of each one of the bodies buried in the 'migrant square' of the cemetery. Establishing links with the different institutions dealing with these dead has become central for creating the database. The *Banca dati* [database] requires the cooperation of all the actors involved in managing the dead: the undertakers, the cemetery, the civil registry, the forensics team, the court, and the different police forces. Impressively, the *squadra* managed to sign agreements with the different local administrations and the various police forces in order to access their data. Our guess is that this was possible because the persons behind the project were part of the local Red Cross, which has a very powerful positive image. All the actors involved in providing material for the database agreed to – and were even willing to – cooperate. In addition, it was quite a particular political moment as it was the last period of the former mayor, E. Bianco, who had already launched the monument and who agreed to sign a protocol that made possible to have access to all the institutions under the aegis of the city hall.

One of the main features and strengths of this database is in fact its broad perspective on identification that includes – or, at least, aims at including – all the actors involved in the process of returning the deceased to his or her family. That is to say, not only forensic scientists – which may determine identity through osteo-biographic or DNA analysis – but agents of the civil registry, undertakers, humanitarian activists, the relatives of the dead and disappeared, and border crossers themselves. The database was initially created based on the bodies buried in the municipal cemetery and with the goal of including all relevant data on these cases, that is information gathered by these different institutions and in different moments, through interviews and testimonies of survivors/relatives by different police forces, press clippings, cemetery records, etc.

The database involves different rationalities, types of material and classifications. Each of the institutions we mentioned produces documents concerning the deceased. For example, the police may have in their records the statement of a travel companion that was collected before he or she left the boat indicating that a particular body corresponded to a person of a particular nationality or who went by a particular name. This information is not identification as such, but it does offer clues that can be followed up and can potentially lead to a body being linked to a biography.

Of course, this piece of information is a detail of a bigger document, a statement collected by the *Squadra Mobile* [Flying Squad] in order to, to put it simply, identify the living and to track smugglers. So, this means that someone has to read the hundred-page document and try to see if there is any potential useful information related to the dead (disappeared or whose bodies are found) travelling with the living. In addition, it has to be noted that the police agent who did the record and interviewed the survivors was not interested at all in anything related to the dead. Therefore, for the person who extracts the information for the database, it is a slow and tedious activity.

However, coming back to the types of material interesting for the database, let us provide another example. Let's say for instance that another branch of the police may have an official record of a person who went to a police station a few weeks or months after the boat docked, because they believed that their brother, niece, or son was among the shipwrecked. Visual identification of the deceased may have taken place from pictures, such that the person recognised the body and gave it a name and a story but, for one reason or another, the justice system did not deem this to be conclusive proof of identity. In these cases, from a legal point of view, the body remains anonymous, and from a material point of view, it remains in Catania.

The database is intended to combine diverse approaches to identification. A forensic scientist, a jurisdictional authority, or a relative all have different conceptions of what constitutes identification<sup>5</sup> and the challenge is to

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<sup>5</sup> On the convergence of multiple definitions of identification in another context, along the US-Mexico border, see Latham & Strand (2018). K. E. Latham and R. Strand, 'Digging, Dollars, and Drama: The Economics of Forensic Archaeology and Migrant Exhumation', in K.E. Latham and A. J. O'Daniel (eds), *Sociopolitics of Migrant Death and Repatriation. Perspectives from Forensic Science*, pp. 99- 113.

make these different definitions converge. Through the database the idea is to explore hidden clues in documents produced by diverse institutions and then to be able to trace the dead. The database itself archives the identification tracks. In this sense, it is a dynamic tool as it is designed to evolve. The state of the dead might hopefully change from unknown to someone with a name and a surname. In addition, apart from that the idea is to train the agents of the different institutions to use the database and to be able to add new cases in real time. In this sense, the idea is to create a proper bureaucratic tool.

Compared to other databases of the kind – that is that are designed for identification purposes – the specificity here is that it mainly lacks ante-mortem data provided by relatives.<sup>6</sup> *La Banca dati*, at least for the time being, cannot reach the relatives in a systematic and direct way. Of course, there are tracing requests that are made from the office in Catania but these are not frequent.

It is not an open database and it is not intended to be open. From its inception, the *Banca dati* has raised some questions related to confidentiality. All the actors involved in this process have different ways of considering records, data, and professional confidentiality. It is conceived as a multilevel database containing information with different levels of confidentiality and registering subjects (institutions) with different abilities. Criminal information produced by the Scientific Police or the Tribunal is not meant to be read by the clerks of the civil registry. Our interlocutors conceive the database as a tool for communication between all of them, and, most importantly, as a way for someone else to profit from the job done – that is, the agents collected information but cannot treat it mainly because it is not their objective. The *squadra* can then use the data and ‘complete the files’.

### 3. Doing Politics

We would like to conclude the paper by pointing out some elements about what this database project represents and produces.

For Silvia, Riccardo, and Davide, the database embodies the hope of providing answers to families searching for their ‘disappeared’ loved ones, the hope of future identification, and the hope of providing the *accoglienza* [welcome] ‘that they were not afforded in life, but that we at least owe them in death’, as Silvia explained. This

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<sup>6</sup> We are thinking here of the tools developed by forensic anthropologists investigating political violence in Latin America since the mid-80s. Just to give an example, the database created by EAAF, the forensic team in Argentina relies on many different kinds of sources of information. And at the beginning, when they started putting together the data for their preliminary investigation (prior to exhumations and analysis of the remains) they could not ask the police or criminal investigators for assistance as they were in many cases part of the same system that had carried out the disappearances and perpetrated the crimes. The interviews with the relatives but also with survivors and witnesses became and are still extremely important.

question of hospitality is ubiquitous when talking with all the persons involved in the construction of the database. Hospitality as an endeavour, a goal, and a fundamental principle, at least for the dead.

Alive, men, women, and children trying to get to Europe are considered dispensable beings, whose lives are not worth safeguarding and valuing. Dead, they are still considered and treated as undervalued, marginal individuals, whose very existence is neglected and silenced. The lack of a standardised procedure to deal with the dead at the borders is viewed by our interlocutors as another way of neglecting, silencing, invisibilizing these persons. In addition, the database is meant to overcome this state of things. The database is a dynamic record, but it is also meant to provide a representation of the effects of the current border regime. The very act of putting together all this information is considered by our interlocutors as a way of resisting and contributing to making border deaths visible. The dead are then equipped with political life (Verdery 1999) as they become the place and the site for thinking about politics in new ways.

And in a tough political situation, a national (and even at some point European) context where activism in favour of migrants is frowned upon or even penalised, the database – or more broadly, as some put it, ‘doing something’ for the dead – is one of the rare forms of political mobilisation in favour of migrants that are carried out without any trouble in Italy today.

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