Chapter 4
Managing Migrant Border Deaths in Southern Italy: Medico-Legal, Ritual and Burial Practices

Daniela Stauffacher and Avril Maddrell

4.1 Introduction

> We don't cross for pleasure. We cross knowing that death is out there, but we do it anyway. Not because we don't know the value of life but because we are forced to do it. We are forced to do it. (19-year-old man rescued from the Mediterranean, cited by Gasperini, 2021).

The Mediterranean Sea, associated with seafaring ports, fishing communities and holiday resorts, acts as a 'blue border' between Southern Europe (and the wider European Union) and neighbouring countries. Irregular migrants who die attempting the high-risk crossing are referred to as the 'border dead' (Last, 2020). These border dead as a group and as a concept are at the heart of this chapter. By its very nature, the exact number of unauthorized migrants crossing the Mediterranean are unknown, likewise international records of those who died crossing the Sea lack compatibility (Brian & Laczko, 2014) and likely underestimate the total (Last & Spijkerboer, 2014). The most prominent effort to count the dead is made by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) *Missing Migrants Project*, and by researchers analysing death certificates (Spijkerboer, 2013) and documenting burials in cemeteries (Last et al., 2017). The Missing Migrants Project report the deaths of 25,351 people crossing the Mediterranean 2014–22 (International Organization for Migration (IOM) 2022). The Central Mediterranean Route (CMR) between Libya/Tunisia and Italy (see Fig. 4.1) is considered to be the most lethal migration route in the world. Since 2014, over 17,000 people have died and at least a further 12,000 are estimated to be missing on this crossing to Southern Europe (IOM, 2022). In the light of these figures, the Mediterranean Sea constitutes a mass

D. Stauffacher (✉)
Science des religions, University of Fribourg, Fribourg, Switzerland
e-mail: daniela.stauffacher@unifr.ch

A. Maddrell
Department of Geography and Environmental Science, University of Reading, Reading, UK
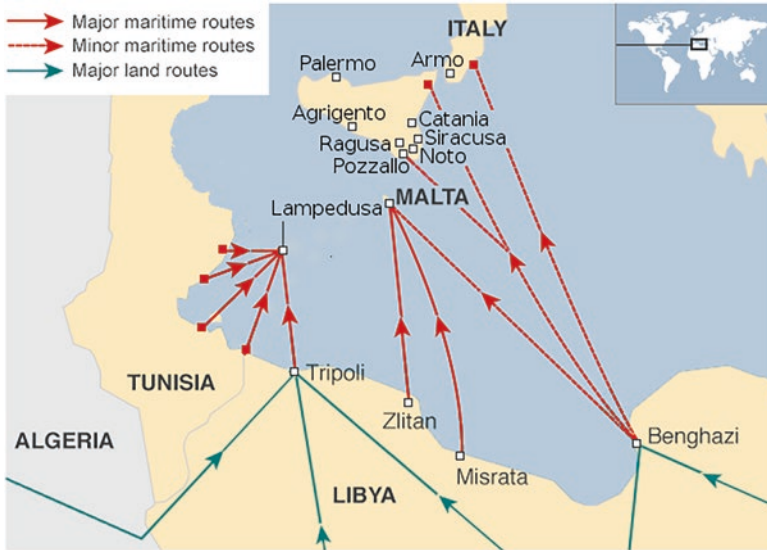e-mail: avril.maddrell@reading.ac.uk

Fig. 4.1 Central Mediterranean Route (CMR). (Source: BBC, 2015; adapted by Daniela Stauffacher)

deathscape (Stevenson et al., 2016, p.156). As the quote above from a 19-year-old man who had been rescued on the Mediterranean by an NGO makes clear, people who engage in these irregular crossings are well aware that their lives are at peril, but, as is widely documented, they feel they have no choice in the face of poverty, debt, discrimination, war, abuse or other forms of violence (Crawley et al., 2016; MacMahon & Sigona, 2018; Press, 2017; Squire et al., 2017).

   According to figures of the UNHCR (2020, 2021) Tunisians (38%) and Bangladeshis (12%) constituted the largest group of arrivals by sea in Italy in the year 2020, followed by Egyptians, Sudanese, Moroccans, Iranians and Afghans. Many arrive from Sub-Saharan Africa departing from Nigeria, Eritrea, Guinea, the Ivory Coast, Senegal, Mali, Somalia, and Ghana. 75% of the 34,154 arrivals to Italy during this period are listed as male, and only 7% as women; 20% of arrivals are children, 15% of whom travel unaccompanied. Between 2018–2020 between 30 and over 50% of all travellers on the CMR embarked from Libya (UNHCR, 2020). However, the crossing of the Mediterranean Sea is typically only one section of a broader and complex mobility pattern for many irregular migrants, which may take months or even years. As Crawley & Skleparis (2018, p. 49) point out, the notion of a linear, uninterrupted migration flow of people heading from the country they were born towards Europe represents a specific European migration 'crisis' discourse, rather than the lived experience of these migrants. People engage in much more complex "fragmented" or "disjunctive" mobility patterns (McMahon & Sigona, 2018) in which motivations, destinations and means of travel are adjusted over time and in response to shifting circumstances.

Both these non-linear migrant mobility trajectories and subsequent deaths on the CMR are the outcome of a dense border apparatus which are controlled and regulated by different actors, enablers and enforcers, who together constitute an assemblage of colliding interests and conflicting strategies on the part of migrants, people smugglers, security forces, local communities and humanitarian agencies. In order to understand how nameless graves of dead migrants in Southern European cemeteries become a reality, or even a normality, it is crucial to highlight the border and wider migration regimes (Horvath et al., 2017) that necessitate such risky mobilities for those excluded by official routes. The human cost of unauthorized Mediterranean mobility needs to be contextualized in terms of what has been called the 'illegality industry' (Andersson, 2014) or 'border industry'. According to Cuttitta (2020, p. 15) this requires attending to: "The entire range of activities related to the control and management of irregular migration", such as the private security industry, the military, the smuggling industry (see Triandafyllidou, 2015), and the governmental and non-governmental care for migrants. Terms such as 'illegal', 'undocumented', 'clandestine'; 'migrants'/'refugees' have been used to categorize the status of people on the move. These terms are "deeply politicized" (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018, p. 49). For the purposes of this chapter the terms 'irregular' and 'unauthorized migrants/migration' seem most appropriate since they distinguish between 'approved' and 'unapproved' migrants as reflected in border governance and associated discourses.

In terms of border governance and securitization, the Strait of Sicily is one of the "most patrolled straits in the world" (Campesi, 2018, p. 64). The CMR is part of a contested and "hybrid border management system" (Cuttitta, 2018a, p. 651) that, besides migrants and associated people smugglers (and traffickers), involves and connects a multitude of different actors: (1) the EUROSUR surveillance system; (2) Italian border assistance missions (Mare Sicuro, formerly Mare Nostrum); (3) EU security patrols (Frontex); (4) European Fisheries Control Agency vessels; (5) the EU Common Security and Defence Policy mission EUNAVFOR Med Irini (formerly 'Sophia'); (6) NATO's Sea Guardian mission; (7) coast guards and navies of regional coastal states; (8) the Irish Operation Pontus; (9) commercial vessels that get drawn into search and rescue (SAR) operations; and (10) humanitarian NGOs (of which Cuttitta (2018b) counted 13 engaging in SAR missions, among them Sea Watch and Médecins sans Frontières). Thus, beyond the motivations of the people on the move, migration on the Mediterranean must be understood in the context of a nexus of ongoing tension between efforts of securitization (e.g. Operation Triton/ Themis), criminalization (Operation Sophia/ Irini) and humanitarian engagement (e.g. Mare Nostrum and NGOs). This nexus produces an effective 'crisis' mode of governing human mobility in which humanitarian and security techniques are co-producing, resulting in potentially deadly border control activities (Perkowski, 2016), in what is critiqued as the inherent violence of Europe's bordering practices (Mainwaring, 2020). The border apparatus which causes death "reaches unapologetically beyond national and EU boundaries" (Albahari, 2015, p. 15; cf. also Gaibazzi et al., 2017; Raeymaekers, 2014).

For many of the people dying *en route*, the journey ends at sea, their bodies never reaching land. It is estimated that only 14% of the bodies of those dying on the Mediterranean make it to Southern European shores where they are buried in cemeteries in Spain, Italy, Malta or Greece (Baraybar, 2020). Data from the Death at the Borders Data Base indicates that 1184 bodies were accommodated in Southern Italian cemeteries between 1990–2013, and in Sicily alone, between 2013–2018, 1000 bodies were buried in local cemeteries (Last et al., 2017). The identity of these dead people who cross borders post-mortem is in most cases unknown, their identities lost with their lives, meaning that even for those recovered, names, family connections and any religious affiliations of the deceased are typically unknown to the authorities dealing with the bodies (Perl, 2016). In North Africa, different community initiatives have led to private cemeteries for the border dead recovered there. The most prominent figure in this initiative is the Tunisian fisherman Chamseddine Marzoug who has himself buried "around 400" dead bodies between 2011 and 2019 (Amnesty, 2019). Further, following the initiative of Rachid Koraichi, an Algerian artist, UNESCO recently inaugurated a non-denominational cemetery in Tunisia containing a morgue, an interfaith prayer hall, and a DNA database (cf. Hadani, 2021).

What happens to the often unidentified 'border dead' in southern Italy is the focus of this chapter, which contributes to the wider body of work on border death on the Mediterranean through its detailed analysis of personal and community responses to, and official management of, the bodies of the dead recovered in southern Italy. It analyses community and religious interventions and evolving burial and cemetery practices for the border dead in Sicily, going on to discuss the ways in which these institutionalised processes, burial and rituals reflect humanitarian and charitable versus othering and exclusionary values and practices. In addition to "everyday bordering" (see Yuval-Davis et al., 2019), the theoretical framing of the following analysis centres on 'border deaths'. "In the broadest sense, 'border deaths' or 'migrant deaths' describe the premature deaths of persons whose movement or presence has been made irregular and unauthorized as they navigate or interact with state-made boundaries." (Last, 2020, p. 21). Analysis also draws on Butler's (2009) distinction between "grievable" and "non-grievable" lives in order to reflect on the treatment of the border dead.

4.2   Methodology

Data was collected by the lead author between 2018–2022 as multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995) in 14 southern Italian research sites. Namely, data was collected in Agrigento, Augusta, Catania, Favara, Lampedusa, Pozzallo, Ragusa, Reggio Calabria, Santo Stefano Quisquina, Scicli, Sciacca and Siracusa. Following Schatzki (1991), these research sites were assigned to five settings, whereby settings are understood as "loosely or tightly bundled totalities of places" demarcated by an organisational structure - in this case the units of Italian state administration. The focus of the data collection was on *practices* in the sense of Schatzki's (1996)

"doings and sayings" produced by participants and relevant institutions. The dominant organisational structure in the case of the border dead was identified as the Italian state administration, insofar as it has authority over the mobility of a dead body on land. Those practices that related to the official processing, funeral, burial and commemoration practices were of particular interest, as these are central to understanding what (and who) are considered to be "grievable" or "non-grievable" lives.

Twenty-seven interviews and participant observation of local practices were conducted across the field work locations. Interviewees were selected because of their central roles in the respective structures and events relating to the border dead. This included occupational dealing with the dead migrants in the context of their professional activities, such as cemetery workers, undertakers, administrative and medical staff, social workers, law enforcement officers, clergy; and those who had special knowledge of the migrant dead due volunteering with NGOs or being involved with funeral or commemoration activities. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken and analysed following Mayring's (2021) double strategy of inductive category formation on the one hand and the contextualisation of interview passages in relation to the wider setting in which they arose and are to be understood.

The theme of management of the border dead was selected as a "limited slice of action" (Falzon, 2009, p. 13) that constitutes a horizontal research path through space and led to a multi-sited ethnography. The participant observation followed Breidenstein et al. (2020) in terms of focus and documentation methods. Mobility is both a context and method for this research: "fieldwork as travel practice" (Clifford, 1997, p. 8) was exercised in the mode of following (in this case following the body), as proposed by Marcus (1995). This ultimately translated into the principle: *follow the dead, follow the thing, follow the metaphor*. The data sample concentrates on Italian management of the dead; the perspective or practices of survivors or relatives is beyond the scope of this piece. Focusing on Italy was chosen in order to document the meaning and status of the dead within one national territory and associated regime of governance. Relevant secondary data such as maps, images, artefacts, newspaper articles and tweets were also collected and analysed using Diaz-Bone's "interpretative analytic" (2010, p. 203) in order to detect connections, regularities and dissonances relating to the migrant dead in funerary practices and public discourse.

4.3 Mediterranean Mobility and the Border Management Apparatus

People crossing the CMR typically die through drowning, asphyxiation, dehydration, exposure, being crushed, or burnt by a toxic mixture of fuel and salty water. Migrants also reputedly die because of neglect or violence exercised upon them by border agencies, and cases are reported where migrant vessels have been fired on with live ammunition by the Libyan Coast Guard when they were intercepted (cf. Sea Watch, 2021).

Even if the authorities are informed about a vessel in distress, a SAR case on the Mediterranean Sea does not necessarily lead to intervention (see Heller's & Pezzani's, 2014 study of the so-called 'left-to-die' boat, which was left adrift for two weeks causing the slow death of 63 passengers), prompting the creation and interventions of NGOs. Marco, Lifeguard for a SAR-NGO in Sicily, explained the challenges faced during shipwreck rescue attempts, as well as the emotional legacy of the trauma of rescuers watching someone drowning in sight but out of reach:

> I've seen people die in front of me, you see. I've seen people drown at 15 meters. There's nothing you can do. You can't do anything. I couldn't reach them. Because there were other people floating between that person and us, we couldn't go with our boat over the living. So hey, I saw this guy, this person drowning in front of me. That's something I have to carry (Interview with Marco, Lifeguard for a SAR-NGO, Sicily).[1]

There are several options for the disposition of those bodies recovered from the sea. Some may be left or thrown back into the high seas; this may appear to be uncaring, but for seafarers, burial at sea is a common practice, and the decision to leave or throw back bodies or body parts may be necessitated by the lack of refrigerated on-board-storage fishing or rescue boats, or the prioritization of the needs of the living over the dead during rescue. Only shipwrecks causing the death of a great many people, or those which occur in the immediate proximity of the coast lead to extensive operations with a specific focus on the search and recovery of the dead, as was the case in Sicily in October 2013 and April 2015. If recovered from the sea, the border dead are transported ashore either by a NGO, coast guard, police, military or cargo ship. The following section turns to following the border dead on land.

4.4   Burial and Funeral Practices

Upon arrival ashore, the treatment of the dead takes place in a professionalized setting in which medico-legal and bureaucratic structures frame the different phases of specialized 'deathwork' (Moon, 2018). These procedures which are central to Italian state processes include (i) bureaucratic processes such as inquiry into the cause of unknown death by the *Procura della Repubblica* (Public Prosecutor's office); (ii) certification of death; (iii) forensic investigation and recording of data; and (iv) burial (the latter being the responsibility of the municipality where the body was brought ashore) (Mirto, 2019). These medico-legal practices result in recovery documentation, death certification, forensic reports including records of DNA and other identifiers, storage and burial records. However, the involvement of multiple agencies in data management and storage frequently leads to a situation where information about the dead is critically disjointed, and data may be altered, lost or destroyed. Further, details about the dead known to their companions may be

---

[1] All interviewees have been given pseudonyms. All direct quotations from interviews have been translated from Italian into English by the main author.

ignored by the authorities, and the dead may be buried anonymously or under a name allocated by officials (Mirto, 2019), adding to the transnational trauma and barriers to be surmounted by family and friends trying to find their loved ones (Kovras & Robins, 2016; Brian & Laczko, 2016). However, while procedures for the dead are legally codified, their practical implementation is highly varied, and the following section discusses data management and storage, the practical and ritual treatment of the dead, and burial practices.

In the case of shipwrecks or sinkings, the large number of migrant dead thwart local infrastructure and protocols for dealing with dead bodies. In an incident described by cemetery workers in Avola, four dead people were deposited at the cemetery without any prior notification during a national holiday, and, left in an un-refrigerated space, were found in a highly putrefied state the next day. Inadequate cold storage facility is a recurring problem when a large number of dead bodies to be stored simultaneously, as was the case in the shipwrecks that occurred near Lampedusa on the third and 11th of October 2013, where a total number of 366 (or according to other sources 368) bodies had been recuperated (Nicolosi, 2016; Comitato Tre Ottobre, n.d.; International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2021; La Repubblica, 2018), or in the Sampieri accident of September 30th, 2013 where 13 dead bodies got washed ashore near the small fishing town. Airport hangars and commercial refrigerators for fish were used in these cases to temporarily store the dead. A police commander in Sicily described his conflicting feelings when resorting to storing dead migrants in a refrigerated vehicle used to transport fish:

> It's not normal when 45 [dead people] arrive. You don't know where to put them. I had to find a place to put them. I [hired] a refrigerated truck, the kind they use for fish. […] Refrigeration was what we needed. From a technical point of view [its] the same thing. To prevent the body from rotting. It's the same for fish. Nothing changes. From a technical point of view. From a human point of view, it is devastating (Roberto, police commander, Sicily, 2018).

Such logistical inadequacies have been counterbalanced by civilian community responses which typically focus on the religiously-inspired compassion and respect-ful treatment of the dead. In the case of the shipwreck on the third of October 2013 at least two families of the town of Agrigento are known to have accommodated two women and a child in their family tomb (Russello, 2013). In the town of Pozzallo the labour union hosted two border deaths in the *loculi* usually reserved for their members and their wives. But the union president attached a condition to this hos-pitality: he didn't want graves without names, since he found this to be aesthetically jarring, so, he requested that the mayor "give him two with names". In the case of Sampieri, local Catholic women were instructed in appropriate funeral preparations by an Eritrean missionary and engaged in what they referred to as "Eritrean" burial procedures by providing bed linen to wrap the bodies. According to the then mayor of the neighbouring town of Pozzallo, his own wife had donated their finest bed linen, which she had previously used to wrap up their new-born son. Anna, the guardian of the cemetery further explained, that there was a "solidarity race" to provide shrouds for the 13 deceased which eventually lead to a modification in the wrapping of the bodies: "I had only requested 13 bed sheets. And then there arrived 48 of them! So many that we decided to double wrap them in two sheets."

4.5   Formal and Informal Religious Practices

Priests have been called on by officials to offer prayers for the dead when they were
brought to shore. Father Gino, a priest from Modica described one occasion when in
between the hectic activity of the medico-legal investigative practices that dominated
the scene, officials allowed him only thirty seconds to pray for the dead at the port
facility before they were moved: "30 seconds. Let's just say it's probably the shortest
funeral rite I've done in the history of my life as a priest. 30 seconds" (Father Gino,
Catholic priest, Sicily, 2018). In other public institutions such as hospitals, other
Catholic religious actors felt compelled to improvise rituals to honour the human dig-
nity of the corpse, in the absence of formal rituals. Father Gino described a case when
a social worker at the local hospital orchestrated a detour of the coroner's vehicle that
was supposed to transport a dead migrant's body directly to the cemetery after the
autopsy. Instead, the body was taken to the local Catholic church where the priest
conducted a short funeral service. The detour was never authorized by the mayor as
prescribed in mortuary law (cf. D.P.R. 285/1990), but was agreed on, "not secretly, but
privately" between the social worker and the undertaker (Interview with Father Gino,
Sicily, 2018). For this priest these humans deserved recognition regardless of faith or
migration status. When asked about the importance he attaches to the prayer for an
unknown border dead Father Gino explained:

> It means that we accompany him anyway, we accompany him even if he didn't make it,
> even if he is dead, that he doesn't... Our concern for them is that they are children of no
> one [local], they come here children of no one [local], no one knows them, no one wants
> them, no one follows them. Okay, they are dead, we wrap them up and bury them". He went
> on to describe how he wanted to see the faces of the dead in order to stress their humanity
> but was frequently refused because of the state of the body: "Because prayer is valid […]
> even if I don't see him. But it seemed more humane to me to be able to see his face and say:
> OK, brother look we are accompanying you." (Father Gino, Catholic priest, Sicily, 2018).

In contrast to this limited but expected access to the border dead by Roman Catholic
institutions and practices in the region, Muslim community representatives struggle
to gain access to dead migrants. Even though the local Muslim community of
Reggio Calabria specifically asked to be informed about the imminent death of a
young man from Mali in the local hospital, in order to perform prayers to comfort
the dying, they were called only when the body was already on its way to the cem-
etery. The local imam hurried to the cemetery – only to find a prepared grave which
was not orientated to Mecca. This is indicative of a poor communication between
local public services and Muslim communities, especially in rural areas. This poor
connection can be understood at least in part as a result of class-occupation differ-
ences rather than simply as a lack of cultural integration per se. Many Muslim cler-
ics in these migrant communities of necessity earn a living through other full-time
paid work and undertake religious duties in their spare time. For example, one imam
interviewed in Sicily is an agricultural worker and is not connected to port authori-
ties or medical doctors, he thus remains at a distance from official protocols and
although wishing to offer spiritual support to the dying or funeral prayers for dead
Muslim migrants, is frequently rendered immobile by his work obligations and/or
lack of communication from officials.

4.6 Evolving Burial Practices for the Border Dead

Legally the responsibility for the burial of an unidentified body lies with the town nearest to where they were found, and more than 20 people are buried in each of the coastal towns of Agrigento, Augusta, Messina, Palermo, Porto Empedocle, Pozzallo, Reggio Calabria, Siracusa and Trapani (Kobelinsky & Furri, 2020). However, over time coastal villages and towns, either unable or unwilling to accommodate additional border dead at their cemetery, try to 'spread the burden' (a phrase associated with refugee dispersal (Robinson et al., 2003)), through delegating the task to other towns. Requests for burial are placed with other mayors, creating a cascade-like distribution system characterised by high numbers of border dead in coastal cemeteries and decreasing numbers at inland burial sites. This distribution pattern reflects the complex coordination effort between the *Procura della Repubblica*, forensic doctors, mayor's and cemeterial offices, coroners and cemeterial personnel. Initiatives to set up a cemetery especially designated for the border dead have started in Armo (Reggio Calabria) (see Fig. 4.2) and the small town of Tarsia but, the latter has stalled.

Cemeteries are the permanent solution to accommodating the border dead. But variation in practice at cemeteries is significant, with the border dead being either buried in *loculi*, niche graves commonly used in Southern Italy, or in the ground, with or without names (see Fig. 4.3), and typically without a priest to conduct funeral rituals. An unidentified corpse cannot be cremated since this would hinder

Fig. 4.2 Basic graves with laminated paper signs, labelled: *Croce N. 15/2017; Qui giace LERWIN, Uomo, Ghanese, di anni 20 circa, trasportato dalla Nave "U. Diciotti CP 941" m-1-11-2017* (cross n 15/2017; Here rests Lerwin, man, Ghanese, around 20 years old, transported by the ship "U. Diciotti CP 941" m-1-11-2017). (Located in Armo, Reggio Calabria. Photo by Daniela Stauffacher)

Fig. 4.3 Soil graves, labelled *immigrato* (imigrant), numbered, date of burial, Scicli, Sicily. (Photo by Daniela Stauffacher)

any future traceability and DNA testing; burial is also the dominant local practice, as well as being required for Muslims. The type of grave chosen often reflects time-consuming local negotiations with the cemetery officers, as was the case of an unknown recovered corpse which was been brought to shore at the city of Pozzallo, southern Sicily, in June 2018. The man's body was taken some 20 kilometres to the hospital at Modica for an autopsy; but the body remained lying in the mortuary for almost two months, because, as the cemetery officer explained: "no one wanted to pick him up" (Stefano, cemetery officer, Sicily, 2018). Coroner services had been refusing to transport the border dead since impoverished municipalities responsible for compensation have deferred payment for months, if not years. The hospital even filed a complaint with the cemetery office of Pozzallo which was, according to the D.P.R. 396/2000 still responsible for the dead. The dead had been put, as customary in Modica, into a coffin destined for interment. However, the cemetery of Pozzallo, mainly uses *loculi* (see Fig. 4.4), which requires different type of coffin, constituting a further barrier to burial. After consultation, the mayor ultimately decided ad hoc that, given bodily decomposition, it was necessary in this case to bury the dead in the ground, contrary to cemetery norms. As identified elsewhere (see Kovras & Robins, 2016 on Greece), such shortcomings in cemetery infrastructure and services are often a consequence of lack of funding. Whether in extraordinary or everyday circumstances, such inadequate services prove to be harmful to both the dignity and spiritual wellbeing of the deceased, as well as their mourners (Maddrell et al., 2021, p. 685) and can be considered as forms of infrastructural violence (Rodgers

Fig. 4.4 *Loculo* (niche graves) labelled *sconosciuto* (unknown); Pozzallo, Sicily. (Photo by Daniela Stauffacher)

& O'Neill, 2012, p. 404), insofar as they contribute to additional "marginalization, abjection and disconnection" of the dead. This was the case for the cemetery of Sciacca (Sicily) where the remains of the migrants were removed from the *loculi* and were moved to a *fossa commune* (communal graveyard) – without informing known relatives who only discovered the removal during a subsequent visit. Although the relatives were traveling from other European countries and were unlikely to be familiar with the local cemetery system in Sciacca, they were ultimately held responsible for the unwanted transfer of what the local cemetery warden perceived as corpses "who did not have an identity, who did not have a first or last name. [...] The relatives did not communicate the name to us, so we did not know. Otherwise, we would not have done it, or rather: we would have asked for consent." (Damiano, cemetery warden, Sciacca, Sicily).

Particular spatial regimes are evident within cemeteries. In many cases dead migrants and Italians may be buried in the same sites in southern Italy, with the same method of disposal, and in the same individually marked graves or *loculi*. This spatial integration produces a sense of the equality of the dead. The dead migrants are diffused into the existing topological order of the cemetery and local the state agencies are not interested in their spatial segregation. At first glance this can be seen as a – perhaps surprising – annihilation of group boundaries, and an expression of 'integration'. In contrast to living migrants, who are systematically located 'outside' of public spaces in border regions through their transfer to so-called 'hot spot' facilities far away from town centres, the dead are accommodated amidst local

Fig. 4.5 Soil graves, partly labelled *Ignoto* (unknown), numbered, partly labelled with names in Arabic writing and age at death; Ragusa Ibla, Sicily. (Photo by Daniela Stauffacher)

residents in local municipal cemeteries, and are therefore spatially 'in'. As a consequence of this, however, they cannot be easily identified, as they are absorbed in local cemeteries, and ultimately rendered invisible through this process of assimilation.

Despite the cases of the integration of the migrant dead in existing cemeteries and family graves discussed above, there has since been a tendency in various cemeteries towards the spatial segregation of burial grounds for the border dead. A small number of the cemeteries studied have created dedicated Muslim burial areas, principally for the border dead. In the case of the Ragusa Ibla cemetery (see Fig. 4.5) where gravestones were inscribed in Arabic, the cemetery warden had no idea who had sponsored the stones, nor who was responsible for the inscriptions, and did not know the local imam. He did not want to discuss the fact that the graves were not oriented towards Mecca. The spatial separation of the border dead, for instance through creating a dedicated cemetery appears to offer an acknowledgement of collective identity and to render them more visible. However, this depends upon the location of the dedicated burial ground or cemetery: a peripheral location with poor access such as Armo or Giardina Gallotti in the hinterland of Agrigento arguably serves to further marginalise and obscure both the dead and the human cost of migration and border regimes.

Further, grave allocation can be quite arbitrary, for example cases where all of the border dead are buried in burial areas which have previously been reserved for Muslims (e.g. in the cemetery of Ragusa Ibla and in the Condera cemetery of Reggio Calabria), regardless of any known (non)religious identities. This attempt to

separate the border dead into designated areas led to confusion among the cemetery staff, based on homogenizing assumptions about dead migrants. For example, a Vietnamese woman, a long-standing resident in the city of Ragusa was buried in the graveyard reserved for the border dead – as a result of assumptions made by a cemetery worker. The "mistake" was officially documented on the map of the burial ground, which bears the title "riservato ai profughi" [reserved for refugees]. The names or numbers of 22 dead are highlighted in yellow, only one name is on blank paper and marked "NON PROFUGO" [no refugee]. (cf. field notes, Ragusa Ibla, 2018; cf. cemetery plan of campo commune n.10, dated 26.07.2014).

Another issue relates to grave markers. Throughout Southern Italy, there is no stable and consistent system for grave marking. There are different ways of numbering the tombs for the dead between different cemeteries, and even within a single cemetery. Sometimes the graves of the border dead are not marked at all, as in the cemetery of Avola, where according to the cemetery worker '3 or 4' border dead have been laid to rest in anonymous graves. In other cases, unidentified bodies were given arbitrary Christian names on their tombs as it is the case in the cemetery of Favara where a *loculo* of an unidentified migrant is marked with "Samuel" and others are registred under the names "Vito", "Emmanuele", "Giovanni" and "Giovanni 2" . In the financially challenged city of Reggio Calabria, no money is allocated for grave marking for the border dead and information on laminated paper becomes illegible as it weathers over time. A wealthy coroner in Siracusa on the other hand, donated the gravestones for six unidentified border dead, adding the logo of his firm in a prominent position on each of the gravestones. As with impromptu funeral ritual discussed above, the absence of normal signifiers of dignity for the dead, such as names, prompt vernacular interventions. For instance, a cemetery worker in Pozzallo added a cross to each number he had to carve into the wet cement of a *loculo* in order to show respect for the dead. However, he stopped the practice when he became aware that the deceased might be a Muslim and he or his family might be offended by a Christian symbol on the grave (Interview with Giuseppe, cemetery worker, Sicily), indicating a growing understanding of and sensitivity to cultural difference (Fig. 4.4).

The 'equalization' of the border dead through integration in local cemeteries means taking people as individuals and rearranging them in an order that is compatible with the existing local social order. When dead migrants are diffused in local cemeteries, their deaths and presence are normalized and neutralized, and the responsibility of the state completed with their disposition.

Throughout these processes, grievability and mobility can be seen as intertwined parameters in the case of the border dead. In this context, distinguishing between "grievable" and "non-grievable" lives (Butler, 2009) can be seen to be at play, not necessarily as an explicit binary categorisation that some people merit grieving, while others don't. Rather, the distinction is the result of the specific interests of the actors (e.g. workload, official duties) and often seemingly random flows of information, which in their interaction lead to the selection of certain lives as grievable and others as non-grievable.

This distinction can be seen in the differential treatment of two groups of border dead the Agrigento cemetery. Firstly, in the aftermath of a shipping accident on 23 November 2019, seven unidentified bodies were deposited in an unrefrigerated back room of the mortuary in the cemetery. Their burial didn't take place until they were quietly interred in February and March 2022, without any members of the public in attendance. Multiple sources indicate that at that time a public burial ceremony was not favoured by the local administration, as it would have brought attention to the all too frequent delays in the overburdened and corruption-ridden burial system (*Agrigento Notizie* 2022; DIA 2017–2021). By contrast, the bodies of another seven men, brough to the same mortuary room in January 2022, became the subjects of public grief. For them, the identification of nationality and religious affiliation prompted the Bangladeshi Consulate in Italy to organise the immediate performance of Islamic religious rituals in Agrigento and the repatriation of the dead to Bangladesh. The attribution of nationality and the cooperation of the local authorities with the consulate placed the seven Bangladeshi dead in a realm of publicly 'grievabable', while the other seven remained unknown and stateless, and hence unclaimed by their kin and apparently ungrieved by locals.

That system of governance also influences civic attitudes, both of which are part of a wider processes described by Yuval-Davis et al. (2019) as "everyday bordering". Bordering constitutes a form of governance that sets parameters for diversity and constructs hierarchies of exclusion (cf. Yuval-Davis et al., 2019, p. 162). Bordering processes thus "always differentiate between 'us' and 'them', those who are in and those who are out" (*ibid*., p. 7); not only at the margins of territories and states but also within them. "Any place can become a borderland" (*ibid*., p. 17) – and this includes morgues and cemeteries.

Through the different ways in which the dead are treated – for example ignored, assimilated or de-materialized in a narrative of transcendence – different types of lives are produced for the border dead; some of them, in Butler's (2009) terms are deemed more grievable than others. Media reports and interviews evidence the ways in which the death of children in unauthorized boat crossings remain grievable and therefore merit particular hospitality and care. One interviewee described dressing a dead youth in age-appropriate clothing she thought he might have worn or aspired to in life. Anna, a cemetery warden, provided a place for the body of a young Nigerian boy in her family tomb. The boy is understood as both a guest and a family member, made kin despite death, grieved and cared for by his host family, as well as grieved by his own family elsewhere:

> And then we looked at each other in the face: Where do we put it? Where do we put him? I said: OK, he's coming with me. So he will keep us company for the whole future. So we immediately phoned the prefecture and said that Great would be a guest in the family chapel. [...] Yes, in the family chapel, where my husband is, where all the relatives are. Yes, he [my husband] would be very happy. He loved children very much and he experienced the problem of migrants firsthand as a journalist. We have followed this issue for decades. And so he would be happy to have this child and it is... it keeps him company. [...] We adopted him, it was an adoption. (Interview with Anna, cemetery warden, Sicily).

However, within European discourses national belonging and age are variables in the creation of a hierarchy of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' migrants (Stevenson et al., 2016) and at the time of data collection for this study, 'not-Syrian', and 'not-refugee' migrants were deemed to be *non-grievable* and their deaths were unproblematically obscured by assimilation in local cemeteries or secluded in a purpose built cemetery on the periphery of the town, in Kobelinsky's (2020) terms, present yet absent.

Due to the unstable identities and records of the border dead, it is frequently impossible for relatives to trace their kin, to be sure whether they are missing or dead, and to exercise their 'right to know' where their loved ones are buried, leaving them with ambiguous and unresolved grief which stretches across transnational borders (Kovras & Robins, 2016). Legal implications may also ensue, for example when the absence of a death certificate obstructs remarriage or an orphan's entitlement to state benefits. Expressions of grief for the border dead – and the assertion of their grievable lives – are only publicly expressed through forms of ritualized moments and mobilities, such as the annual memorial for survivors and relatives of the hundreds of shipwrecked dead of October 3rd, 2013. This highly mediatized event has been described as a "border spectacle" (Cuttitta, 2012), and it is within the time-space of this spectacle that grievability is 'allowed', and even promoted and mainstreamed.

4.7   Conclusion

Cemeteries can be considered as spatial fixities along the route of irregular transnational migration. During interviews, cemetery wardens referred to the border dead in their care as "*poveracci*" and "*disgraziati*", meaning a poor, miserable person, another human who merits charity and care. Such care has been evidenced in varied accounts of the treatment of the border dead. While that spiritual and practical care for the dead evidenced by professional death care workers, clergy and local residents underscores the humanity and grievability of the border dead, some practices such as proving space in family tombs and the attribution of Christian names or symbols on the graves of the unidentified dead, however well intended, are also indicative of (un)conscious processes of assimilation. However, representing the border dead as exceptional victims – of circumstances, people-smugglers or shipwreck – is in tension with the twenty-first-century Italian (and wider European) political discourses which make a highly normative distinction between 'refugee' and irregular 'migrant', i.e., 'good' and 'bad' migrants (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018; Perkowksi, 2016; Sigona, 2018). This discourse, including labelling 'good' refugees as victims, places the phenomenon of the border dead in the realm of the extraordinary that can be combatted only with exceptional means (such as harsher border controls). This keeps unauthorized migrants in the liminal zone of the border and those who die as a consequence of attempting to cross that border on the margins, either at sea or in the coastal zone either side of the border. While the mass

shipwrecks and loss of life in southern Italy in 2013 and 2015 prompted widespread community and political response, the deaths of unauthorized migrants crossing the Mediterranean have not stopped.

Taking the approach of 'following the body' in southern Italy reveals the different and shifting ways in which borders block and divert migrant flows; and how those who die making high risk border crossings – the border dead – are viewed and treated in the particular setting of the combined Italian-EU southern border, and its associated evolving socio-economic, political and cultural contexts. Arguably, over time, the border dead, once seen as extraordinary in this region, have come to be viewed as more commonplace or 'everyday' deaths. Following the bodies into local cemeteries illustrates the ways in which the border dead are mediated through local culture, mechanisms of governance and the materiality of infrastructure, which frequently render the border dead, and the wider causes of their deaths, invisible. Where integrated within local cemeteries, they may be made invisible through a process of assimilation whereby they are dispersed within the resident community. This ultimately leads to an obfuscation of the structural violence of the border apparatus and the normalization of the border dead.

The lack of identifying papers on many of those found at sea is compounded by underfunded and disjointed forensic, death registry and cemetery record systems. In these cases, despite legal processes, forensic testing etc., this lack of 'traceability' makes it hard or even impossible for relatives to 'follow the body' of their loved ones, adding to their grief. In contrast, those who can ultimately be identified (as a result of papers, witnesses and/or DNA) can be traced and named, relatives and governments informed, bodies repatriated or graves located and visited. The frequent anonymity of the dead, due to the absence of information or mis-recorded identities, adds to their invisibility, and a lack of adequate and adequately-funded infrastructure can result in sub-standard care for the dead, further evidence in Agamben's (2005) terms of the 'bare lives' status attributed to unauthorized migrants in many states. Italians who contest current border regimes, stress the grievability of the unauthorized migrants and seek to give them dignity and assert their visible presence in cemeteries and cemetery sections dedicated to the border dead. However, whilst these dedicated burial grounds can ostensibly render those migrants and the cost of border regimes visible, much depends on the *location* and *accessibility* of those cemeteries or burial areas, as peripheral sites can further marginalise the border dead and the cost of their constrained mobilities.

References

Agamben, G. (2005). *State of exception*. The University of Chicago Press.
Agrigento Notizie. (2022, November 10). *Cimitero di Piano Gatta, lo sfogo di una figlia: "Dopo due anni non ho ancora una lapide su cui piangere"*. https://www.agrigentonotizie.it/cronaca/emergenza-loculi-cimitero-piano-gatta-agrigento-denuncia.html
Albahari, M. (2015). *Crimes of peace: Mediterranean migrations at the world's deadliest border*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

Amnesty. (2019). *Der Fischer von Zarzis*. https://www.amnesty.de/informieren/amnesty-journal/tunesien-die-fischer-von-zarzis

Andersson, R. (2014). *Illegality, Inc. clandestine migration and the business of bordering Europe*. University of California Press.

Baraybar, J. P. (2020, June 10). *Missing at the borders* [video]. Festival Sabir. https://www.festivalsabir.it/edizione-2020/

BBC. (2015, April 21). *Key migration routes from North Africa*. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-32383126

Breidenstein, G., Hirschauer, S., Kalthoff, H., & Nieswand, B. (2020). *Ethnografie: die Praxis der Feldforschung*. UVK Verlag.

Brian, T., & Laczko, F. (2014). *Fatal journeys volume tracking lives lost during migration*. International Organization for Migration Global Migration Data Analysis Centre.

Brian, T., & Laczko, F. (2016). *Fatal journeys volume 2. Identification and tracing of dead and missing migrants*. International Organization for Migration Global Migration Data Analysis Centre.

Butler, J. (2009). *Frames of war. When is life grievable?* Verso.

Campesi, G. (2018). Italy and the militarisation of Euro-Mediterranean border control policies. In K. Williams & E. Burroughs (Eds.), *Contemporary boat migration data, geopolitics, and discourses* (pp. 51–74). Rowman & Littlefield International.

Clifford, J. (1997). *Routes: Travel and transition in the late twentieth century*. Harvard University Press.

Comitato Tre Ottobre (n.d.). *Memoria, Dialogo, Accoglienza.* https://www.comitatotreottobre.it

Crawley, H., & Skleparis, D. (2018). Refugees, migrants, neither, both: Categorical fetishism and the politics of bounding in Europe's 'migration crisis'. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 44*(1), 48–64. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1348224

Crawley, H., Düvell, F., Jones, K., McMahon, S., & Sigona, N. (2016). *Destination Europe? Understanding the dynamics and drivers of Mediterranean migration in 2015*. MEDMIG Final Report. http://www.medmig.info/research-brief-destination-europe.pdf

Cuttitta, P. (2012). *Lo spettacolo del confine: Lampedusa tra produzione e messa in scena della frontiera*. Mimesis.

Cuttitta, P. (2018a). Repoliticization through search and rescue? Humanitarian NGOs and migration management in the Central Mediterranean. *Geopolitics, 23*(3), 632–660. https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2017.1344834

Cuttitta, P. (2018b). Inclusion and exclusion in the fragmented space of the sea actors: Territories and legal regimes between Libya and Italy. In K. Williams & E. Burroughs (Eds.), *Contemporary boat migration data, geopolitics, and discourses* (pp. 75–94). Rowman & Littlefield International.

Cuttitta, P. (2020). Preface: The increasing focus on border deaths. In P. Cuttitta & T. Last (Eds.), *Border deaths. Causes, dynamics and consequences of migration-related mortality* (pp. 9–20). Amsterdam University Press.

D.P.R. 396/2000. *Regolamento per la revisione e la semplificazione dell'ordinamento dello stato civile* (Decreto del Presidente della Repubblica No. 396/3 novembre 2000). https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2000/12/30/000G0442/sg

D.P.R. 285/1990. *Approvazione del regolamento di polizia mortuaria* (Decreto del Presidente della Repubblica, No.285/ 10 settembre 1990). https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/1990/10/12/090G0312/sg

DIA. (2017–2021). *Relazione del Ministero dell'Interno al Parlamento sull'attività svolta e sui risultati conseguiti dalla Direzione Investigativa Antimafia*. https://direzioneinvestigativaantimafia.interno.gov.it/relazioni-semestrali/

Diaz-Bone, R. (2010). *Kulturwelt, Diskurs und Lebensstil*. VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

Falzon, M.-A. (2009). Multi-sited ethnography. In *Theory, praxis and locality in contemporary research*. Ashgate.

Gaibazzi, P., Dünnwald, S., & Bellagamba, A. (2017). *EurAfrican Borders and migration management political cultures, contested spaces, and ordinary lives*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-349-94972-4

Gasperini, F. (2021). Sur l'Ocean Viking, misère en haute mer. *Le Temps*. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sxfGV34f-lQ

Hadani, D. (2021, July 13). *Jardin d'Afrique: A moving memorial to forgotten migrants*. Middle East Institute. https://www.mei.edu/publications/jardin-dafrique-moving-memorial-forgotten-migrants

Heller, C., & Pezzani, L. (2014). Case: Left-to-die boat. In Forensic Architecture (Ed.), *Forensis. The architecture of public truth* (pp. 637–656). Sternberg Press.

Horvath, K., Amelina, A., & Peters, K. (2017). Re-thinking the politics of migration. On the uses and challenges of regime perspectives for migration research. *Migration Studies, 5*(3), 301–314.

International Organization for Migration (IOM). (2021). Missing migrants. *Tracking deaths along migratory routes*. https://missingmigrants.iom.int

International Organization for Migration (IOM). (2022). Missing migrants. *Migration within the Mediterranean*. https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean

Kobelinsky, C. (2020). Border beings. Present absences among migrants in the Spanish enclave of Melilla. *Death Studies, 44*(11), 709–717. https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2020.1771849

Kobelinsky, C., & Furri, F. (2020). *Hosting the dead by migration. The treatment of lifeless bodies in Catania (Sicily).* COMPAS Special Working Paper series on Migrations in Latin America and the Mediterranean compared: Violence, state cruelty and (un-)institutional resistance, halshs-03038850.

Kovras, I., & Robins, S. (2016). Death as the border: Managing missing migrants and unidentified bodies at the EU's Mediterranean frontier. *Political Geography, 55*, 40–49. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2016.05.003

La Repubblica. (2018, July 6). Palermo, la ragazza che conta le tombe per dare un nome ai migranti morti [video]. YouTube. Accessed September 30th 2021, via: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wGIZWFfQdB0

Last, T. (2020). Introduction: A state-of-the-art exposition on border deaths. In P. Cuttitta & T. Last (Eds.), *Border deaths. Causes, dynamics and consequences of migration-related mortality* (pp. 21–33). Amsterdam University Press.

Last, T., & Spijkerboer, T. (2014). Tracking deaths in the Mediterranean. In T. Brian & F. Laczko (Eds.), *Fatal journeys. Tracking lives lost during migration* (pp. 85–106). International Organization for Migration. https://ssrn.com/abstract=2607478

Last, T., Mirto, G., Ulusoy, O., Urquijo, I., Harte, J., Bami, N., Pérez Pérez, M., Macias Delgado, F., Tapella, A., Michalaki, A., Michalitsi, E., Latsoudi, E., Tselepi, N., Chatziprokopiou, M., & Spijkerboer, T. (2017). Deaths at the borders database: Evidence of deceased migrants' bodies found along the southern external borders of the European Union. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 43*(5), 693–712. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2016.1276825

Maddrell, A., McNally, D., Beebeejaun, Y., McClymont, K., & Mathijssen, B. (2021). Intersections of (infra)structural violence and cultural inclusion: The geopolitics of minority cemeteries and crematoria provision. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, 46*(3), 675–688.

Mainwaring, C. (2020). At the edge: Containment and the construction of Europe. In T. Scott-Smith & M. E. Breeze (Eds.), *Structures of protection? Rethinking refugee shelter*. Berghahn Books.

Marcus, G. E. (1995). Ethnography in/of the world system: The emergence of multi-sited ethnography. *Annual Review of Anthropology, 24*, 95–117.

Mayring, P. (2021). *Qualitative content analysis: A step-by-step guide*. SAGE Publications.

McMahon, S., & Sigona, N. (2018). Navigating the Central Mediterranean in a time of 'crisis': Disentangling migration governance and migrant journeys. *Sociology, 52*(3), 497–514. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038518762082

Mirto, G. (2019). La sepoltura delle vittime delle frontiere in Italia. *Lares, Rivista quadrimestrali di studi demoetnoantropologici, 85*(1), 49–84.

Moon, C. (2018). Politics, deathwork and the rights of the dead. *Humanity*. http://humanityjournal.org/blog/claire-moon/

Nicolosi, G. (2016). *Lampedusa. Corpi, immagini e narrazioni dell'immigrazione.* Franco Angeli.

Perkowski, N. (2016). Deaths, interventions, humanitarianism and human rights in the mediterranean 'Migration Crisis'. *Mediterranean Politics, 21*(2), 331–335. https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2016.1145827

Perl, G. (2016). Uncertain belongings: Absent mourning, burial, and post-mortem repatriations at the external border of the EU in Spain. *Journal of Intercultural Studies, 37*(2), 195–209.

Press, R. (2017). Dangerous crossings: Voices from the African migration to Italy/Europe. *Africa Today, 64*(1), 3–27.

Raeymaekers, T. (2014). Introduction Europe's bleeding border and the Mediterranean as a relational space. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies, 13*(2), 163–172.

Robinson, V., Andersson, R., & Musterd, S. (2003). *Spreading the 'Burden'? A review of policies to disperse asylum seekers and refugees*. Polity Press.

Rodgers, D., & O'Neill, B. (2012). Infrastructural violence: Introduction to the special issue. *Ethnography, 13*(4), 401–412.

Russello, F. (2013, October 19). Gelardi e Scolaro, chapeau. *Agrigento Notizie*. https://www.agrigentonotizie.it/blog/colonne-d-ercole/agrigentini-offrono-cappelle-cimitero-vittime-naufragio-fabio-russello.html

Schatzki, T. R. (1991). Spatial ontology and explanation. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers, 81*(4), 650–670.

Schatzki, T. R. (1996). Social practices. In *A Wittgensteinian approach to human activity and the social*. Cambridge University Press.

Sea Watch. (2021, July 5). *So-called Libyan Coast Guard firing shots at migrant boat in distress*. https://sea-watch.org/en/libyan_coast_guard_shots_fired/

Sigona, N. (2018). The contested politics of naming in Europe's "refugee crisis". *Ethnic and Racial Studies, 41*(3), 456–460.

Spijkerboer, T. (2013). Moving migrants, states and rights: Human rights and border deaths. *Law and Ethics of Human Rights, 7*(2), 213–242. https://doi.org/10.1515/lehr-2013-0009

Squire, V., Dimitriadi, A., Perkowski, N., Pisani, M., Stevens, D., & Vaughan-Williams, N. (2017). Crossing the Mediterranean sea by boat: Mapping and documenting migratory journeys and experiences. *Final Project Report*. https://www.warwick.ac.uk/crossingthemed

Stevenson, O., Kenten, C., & Maddrell, A. (2016). And now the end is near: Enlivening and politizising the geographies of dying, death and mourning. *Social & Cultural Geography, 17*(2), 153–165. https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2016.1152396

Triandafyllidou, A. (2015). Migrant smuggling. In A. Triandafyllidou (Ed.), *Routledge handbook of immigration and refugee studies* (pp. 346–353). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315759302

UNHCR. (2020, January 21). *Italy sea arrivals dashboard – December 2019*. https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/73536

UNHCR. (2021, September 21). *Italy sea arrivals dashboard –August 2021*. https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/88683

Yuval-Davis, N., Wemyss, G., & Cassidy, K. (2019). *Bordering*. Polity.