3. Representations of Border Deaths and the Making and Unmaking of Borders

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Abstract
In this chapter, we focus on representations of border deaths as expressions of ‘borderwork’ by state and non-state actors. Through (non-) representations, illustrations of border deaths produce specific meanings that extend the physical space in which bordering processes occur to a de-territorialized space. This chapter asks how different actors see and present border deaths. Who represents whom or what? Why, how and for which audience? Why are some deaths presented as border deaths, whilst others are not? The chapter highlights how every representation is partial and positioned. By unveiling the different underlying agendas of different actors, we conclude that the study of border death representations may contribute to a deeper understanding of how ‘borderwork’ contributes to producing, reproducing and transforming the border.

Keywords: irregular migration, politics of representation, counting, dead, knowing, visibility

In this chapter we deal with the representations of border deaths produced by various actors. Specifically, we consider such representations to be part of the work that constantly produces, reproduces and transforms the border, work that we refer to as ‘borderwork’. The term ‘borderwork’ indicates the increasing involvement of ordinary people in ‘processes of bordering and de-bordering’, which are traditionally carried out by nation-states and their institutions (Rumford 2008: 10). Besides state bodies and agencies, how do supranational organizations, NGOs, the media, artists, researchers, the general public, and migrants themselves see and represent border deaths? Following other authors who suggest that illegality is not produced by nation-states...
alone, but through ‘the creation of a transnational field of professionals in the management of unease’ (Bigo 2002: 64), we suggest that these questions bring to light the fact that representing border deaths constitutes a form of borderwork and that it is imbued with political normativity.

The victims of border deaths belong to a group of irregular border crossers – a distinct group within the broader category of irregular migrants – who die crossing a state border without authorization (Last 2018: 33). Crossing a border for irregularized migrants requires crossing an extended border space, which often involves a lengthy and perilous journey (Pickering and Cochrane 2012). State borders thus expand beyond the lines separating one state from its neighbour, not only in a strictly geographic sense, but also in an abstract sense, through their representations.

Following a thesis suggested by Balibar (1998), borders are everywhere: they increasingly shift away from the external borders of states to become widespread not only across territories, but also across societies. We argue that while border deaths occur in diverse border spaces, their representations also contribute to producing, reproducing and transforming the border: one that further extends the sphere of influence of a spatial border. Border death representations, moreover, may be generated not only by state institutions, but also by various other actors (see Chapter 1). The relevant question here, therefore, is not where border deaths occur physically, but rather how bordering is further exercised through their representations and who by. Put differently, how do different state and non-state actors contribute to the making and unmaking of borders through representations of border deaths?

Border death representations are unsolicited by those being represented. Yet the question here is not whether the lives and deaths of people irregularly crossing borders should be represented and by whom (for various arguments around how border deaths should be represented see Chapters 2, 4, 5, and 6). Rather, the question here is to explore what kind of borderwork those representations produce. Concretely, we venture to do so around a set of sub-questions: Who or what is represented and who or what is not? Who or what is rendered (in)visible? What are the ways of representing? Why are certain deaths presented as border deaths, whilst others are not? Which narratives are produced through these (non-)representations? Who is representing and for which audience? For what cause?

In this chapter, we do not provide extensive answers to these questions. Instead, we highlight that every representation is partial and positioned. As such, we argue, representations of border deaths are expressions of borderwork: they constitute veritable practices of the making and unmaking of borders. Through (non-)representations, illustrations of border deaths create
specific narratives that extend the physical space of the territorial border to an abstract, deterritorialized space. Representations are, by definition, ‘an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged’ (Hall 1997: 15). Writing, describing, documenting, speaking, photographing, publishing, exhibiting, performing are all forms of representing (other) people. As such, border death representations are an expression of the position of who is doing the representing and, thus, also politically laden (Vargas-Cetina 2013).

We have organized our argument as follows. In the next section, we illustrate the diversity of border death representations. Specifically, we showcase the diversity of voices in which certain deaths become more representative of border deaths than others. In the subsequent section, we look beyond this diversity of voices and elaborate on the multiplicity of actors – from state to non-state – involved in the representations of border deaths. We point to the different agendas of these actors and discuss how representations implicitly carry a political dimension. In a concluding section, we return to our main point that border death representations are part of the borderwork performed by multiple state and non-state actors.

Who or what is represented and how?

A representation focuses attention on something and, through implicit or explicit choices, it renders some things visible and others invisible. Who or what is represented is intimately connected with how someone or something is perceived by who is doing the representing. Furthermore, a representation shapes who or what is seen by its audience. The diversity of representations of border deaths, of borders, of people attempting to cross them and of their experiences in doing so is enormous. In this section, we illustrate some of that diversity.

In our inquiry of representations of border deaths, our gaze turned firstly to deaths suffered by migrants themselves. Migrant deaths occur in diverse physical spaces: in the Sahel or Horn of Africa, where first contact with smugglers takes place or in the heart of Europe, after entering local reception systems. Deaths also occur in the places in-between: for example, in the Mediterranean Sea, on the island of Lampedusa, or at the French-Italian border in Ventimiglia. The place where migrant deaths occur is a significant

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1 See Chapter 7 for a model framework for comparing the many different perspectives behind such representations.
factor in determining whether or not they are represented as border deaths and whether or not they are represented at all (see Chapters 1, 7 and 8). In Europe, deaths at sea are portrayed as particularly representative of border deaths, whereas less emphasis is accorded to deaths occurring in the proximity of internal borders or inside the European space. As Mainwaring (2016: 290) observes: ‘In the Mediterranean, migrants are rendered victims at sea, during rescues, and in death, where they can be pitied, rescued, and mourned as ‘good’ migrants; however, once ashore on EU territory, they quickly become risky, securitized bodies, possible villains, who must be detained’. As we discuss in this chapter, whether deaths are portrayed as border deaths or not, is reflective of implicit understandings of the messenger and evokes different meanings in the listener.

Some places where border deaths occur are considered as more ‘representative’ than others (see Chapter 5). Places gaining more attention than others through representations are more likely to attract humanitarian infrastructure, policing and monitoring and knowledge generation in all its forms, which end up in turn reproducing the asymmetry between more and less ‘representative’ places.

The means of representation also has a strong impact on the nature of the message. Representations through maps typically show the geography of a terrain void of the people in it (see Chapter 8). Numbers are another means of representing border deaths and are crucial for illustrating, for instance, the scale of the phenomenon of border deaths (see Chapters 4, 5 and 7). Quantifications of migrant deaths in the Mediterranean, however, do more than just report the numbers of people involved. On the one hand, they often appear in news articles and NGO reports and updates. Used in these contexts, they evoke a sense of a huge disaster unfolding at Europe’s frontier (Dickson 2018): they voice public outcry. On the other hand, numbers may also have the opposite effect: by glossing over the personal stories of migrants and refugees and depicting them as a mere figure, they may render people invisible and so reduce a sense of urgency.

Andonea Dickson (2018) articulates how much information is lost by representing border deaths merely through numbers. Besides the fact that the figures are often inaccurate (Last et al 2017), the exercise of counting erases the processes that lead to death and overlooks the embodied nature of loss and suffering (Hyndman 2017). People disappear in numbers: as we further illustrate in the next section, criteria for counting border deaths may generate different figures when not all deaths are included in statistics. Most importantly, border deaths are recursively constructed as the deaths of ‘others’ suffered far away. Dickson (2018: 5) argues that these erasures
produce a distance from both space and bodies that eliminates a sense of responsibility. ‘Out of sight, out of mind’ in common parlance: it is hard to evoke a felt sense of responsibility for something that happens far away. Some rare accounts advance such careful analysis of quantitative data that they do articulate valuable insights into the human experience behind abstract figures, precisely through their productive use of empirics (e.g. Last 2018). More often though, recursive distancing practices ignore geographies of logic in favour of specific representations. ‘The Mediterranean is increasingly constituted as a European frontier: not without European power, but nonetheless not within Europe’ (Dickson 2018: 20). Bringing this space closer means ‘to generate a more human and embodied understanding of this liquid terrain’, as opposed to further abstracting it with numbers (ibid: 20). Indeed, this also challenges the tendency, pointed out by some, to ‘naturalize’ border deaths or to present them as caused by the natural environment such as the sea or weather conditions (Stierl 2016; Schindel 2016).

Numbers are central in discussions about the island of Lampedusa. This Mediterranean island has become a symbol of the European border and the ‘migrant crisis’. It is one of the best-known border islands in Europe (Cuttitta 2014) and, by extension, it is central in discourses about migration in Italy. Based on an analysis of Italian newspaper articles (2009-2016) published in La Repubblica and Il Corriere della Sera (the two most widely sold newspapers in Italy), Giovanna Di Matteo (2018: 14) reveals a mismatch between the political rhetoric about irregular migration and official figures about border deaths. She notes that border-related death was at the core of media narratives about Lampedusa only in 2013. That year, while the overall number of recorded deaths was lower, 366 people drowned in a single shipwreck just half a mile off the Italian island on 3 October. Again, this suggests that where border deaths occur has an impact on whether and how they are represented. Politics of externalization, pushing borders far away from the physical boundary lines of destination countries, result in making border deaths invisible, since these mostly occur out of public view. However, when hundreds of corpses arrive at one time on European territory, obscuring them becomes impossible and different actors provide different interpretations and representations of the tragedy, as shown in the next section.

Large shipwrecks such as occurred off Lampedusa, mostly do not help to challenge the trend of making individual identities invisible: again, people tend to disappear in numbers. Some incidents however, make individual faces stand out amidst the ‘countless images, both impressive and deeply disturbing, [that] reach us daily’ (Ataç et al 2015: 1), as with the story of Josefa. In July 2018, Josefa was found barely alive at the scene of a shipwreck
by the rescue vessel of the Spanish NGO, Open Arms. Together with two other bodies that were found dead, she had been abandoned there by the Libyan coast guard that had carried out the ‘rescue’ operation that brought the other survivors back to Libya. In this and other stories that hit the headlines, one individual unexpectedly stood out from the abstract group of migrants and gave this group a face.

Interestingly, Josefa’s story emphasised her as a survivor. By foregrounding Josefa, the story portrayed European humanitarians as rescuers, Libyans as perpetrators and sub-Saharan African women (and children) as victims. The representations significantly centred around Josefa, not on her. The Spanish humanitarians saving Josefa were the protagonists of the tale. Like many other stories of this kind (notably the one of Alan Kurdi, the Kurdish boy found dead on a Turkish beach in the summer of 2015), Josefa’s story became popular because it enabled some readers to relieve themselves of any guilt associated with their awareness of borderwork, directing them to affiliate with the rescuers rather than the perpetrators. The story ends without us knowing anything about who Josefa is or what her life is like. What became visible of her individuality was only a stereotyped and anonymized image that (re)affirmed how certain roles are allocated. Migrants themselves, in fact, rarely have the opportunity to make their versions of their stories visible.

Josefa’s example shows that besides migrants, in border death representations, attention may also be paid to other actors. Rescuers for instance, become the main protagonists of representations in the case of humanitarian boats saving migrants in the Mediterranean Sea (Stierl 2018). Smugglers by comparison, are much less visible in the media and other representations and yet are prominently talked about in official policies. In official documents, state actors ‘blame’ smugglers for border deaths, arguably as a means to shift responsibility away from themselves for ‘causing’ border deaths as an outcome of their own securitization policies. Jackson Oldfield (2018) points out how, through the Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants, people

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3 See Chapter 1 for a critique of the term ‘survivor’.

smuggling has become associated with the United Nations Convention on Transnational Organized Crime. By adding this Protocol to the Convention, a legal link between people smuggling and transnational organized crime was established (ibid). Such a link may influence perceptions of migrant smugglers as subjects carrying out criminal activities that, in turn, may become connected to people’s deaths.

In this section, we have accounted for a great diversity in border death representations. What the examples highlight is that this diversity is the outcome of active choices about who is placed in the spotlight (migrants, rescuers, smugglers), how (through reference to aggregate numbers, or insight into individual stories), where (at the external gate of Europe or within it), and by whom (media outlets, state actors, migrants themselves). This diversity testifies that border death representations are a direct expression of how borders are conceived. In the next section, we link representations of border deaths and the particular form they take to the (political) agendas of the many state and non-state actors producing them. By so doing, we show that border death representations are a form of borderwork that contribute to the construction, contestation and renegotiations of borders.

**Who is representing to which audience, for what cause**

Who, how, and what is represented is primarily shaped by who is speaking about border deaths, to whom and why. This raises additional questions: Who is doing the representing, for which audience and in pursuit of what particular cause? In discussions about border deaths, migrants and refugees are represented in a plurality of ways by a multiplicity of actors. Bordering, as we have pointed out above, is not a mere prerogative of states, but sees also non-state actors engaging in borderwork (see Chapters 1 and 4).

Migration is a highly politicised issue and border death representations reflect the underlying understandings and aims of those representing. Some (including the authors contributing to this volume) represent border deaths in order to focus attention on humanitarian needs to avoid further deaths; others wish to invoke the adoption of restrictive measures against migrants. Daniela Trucco (2018) notes how people and organizations active along the Ventimiglia-Menton border between Italy and France talk about border

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5 Dearden, Last and Spencer (Chapter 2) argue that the multiplicity of sources and actors involved in monitoring (and, also, representing) border deaths is an advantage as the differences between them demonstrate their limitations and assumptions.
deaths in an attempt to call to action public powers at the local, national and European scale. Based on long-term fieldwork, she finds that various actors invoke border deaths to advance political arguments and she shows how varied these arguments can be. For example, the same border death may be evoked by some to argue for more humanitarian aid, and by others to argue in favour of migrant expulsions from the town (see Chapter 7).

The same border death can thus advance multiple meanings and agendas. Paolo Cuttitta (2018) further demonstrates that humanitarianism in the Mediterranean can be representative of both inclusionary and exclusionary mechanisms. It is invoked by institutional actors in support of policies to prevent migrants from risking their lives when embarking for Europe – thus excluding them from rights they would enjoy once there – as well as by civil society actors such as NGO and pro-migrant activist networks to enhance search and rescue operations that disembark migrants on European soil (Cuttitta 2018: 784). Along the same lines, Stierl (2016) shows how search and rescue NGOs use the argument of (preventing) border deaths to criticise restrictive border policies, while state actors working on the same Mediterranean border use the very same argument in their favour. Emblematic of the latter argument is the naval operation EUNAVFOR MED. This European Union Naval Force is tasked with the core mandate to ‘identify, capture and dispose of vessels and enabling assets used or suspected of being used by migrant smugglers or traffickers, in order to contribute to wider EU efforts to disrupt the business model of human smuggling and trafficking networks in the Southern Central Mediterranean and prevent the further loss of life at sea.’ The whole operation was re-named ‘Sophia’ after the name of a baby born on one of its ships to a mother who had just been rescued, showing how new life (and not just migrant deaths) at the border can also be used to carry a strong political message.

Another example of different actors providing different interpretations of border deaths is provided by the aforementioned 3 October 2013 shipwreck near Lampedusa. Ritaine (2015) shows how media outlets, political actors and activist groups interpreted those deaths. Depending on who was representing them and for what cause, the dead were represented as anonymous bodies to be treated materially and symbolically, as public policy issues, caught up in political controversies, or as individuals with fundamental rights, to be respected and remembered.

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6 See https://www.operationsophia.eu/
7 See Renske Vos’ PhD research at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, entitled Europe and the Sea of Stories: https://ceptl.org/index.php/people/faculty-staff/10-people/62-renske-vos
8 For the forensic response to the 3 October 2013 shipwreck, see Chapter 4.
In the previous section, we noted that borders can be seen as occupying an extended zone. Representations therefore also involve defining where the borders of the border are located. It thus becomes an active choice whether to circumscribe the border to clear-cut territorial lines between states, or to further extend it (see Chapter 6). Representations of border crossings and deaths may be staged far away from the physical border, during the longer journey of irregularized travellers. What is represented as a ‘border’ is determined in each instance, by what is seen as the site of contestation and representations of border deaths, which thus reflect the politics of the actors doing the representing. For example, is the state of being in limbo in a host country also an extension of the border? If so, the border space can stretch (e.g. in the case of the EU-Africa border) from Agadez to Amsterdam. The criteria for the definition of border deaths adopted for different databases are a noteworthy illustration of this point. In its list of deaths by migrants trying to enter the EU, the Dutch organization UNITED for Intercultural Action9 includes deaths occurring in detention centres, as well as other deaths that are only indirectly related to the act of border crossing. Conversely, the Missing Migrants Project of the International Organization for Migration (IOM)10, only includes deaths occurring while trying to cross a state-border (Al Tamimi et al forthcoming). The former initiative, driven by civil society activists, aims to ‘wake up Europe’s conscience’ and points the finger at state authorities and their border policies. The latter, a state-sponsored project run by an intergovernmental organization with an interest in orderly and managed migration, calls on the world’s governments to address ‘an epidemic of crime and abuse’, suggesting that the responsibility for border deaths lies on smugglers. Despite both pursuing denunciations, how different actors see the border is both shaped by and shapes their discussions about it.

We have just illustrated how representations of border deaths may differ on the basis of the actor doing the representing. So far, we have largely taken into account state-related actors and the non-state actors such as NGOs, the media, and pro-migrant networks engaging in borderwork. Yet, what about representations by migrants themselves? Their voices are largely absent from many platforms in the public domain. Migrants mostly rely on their own, often informal, channels of communication. An extensive survey documenting migratory journeys and experiences, for example, reports the ‘importance of information-sharing through networks of people on

10 See http://missingmigrants.iom.int/
the move, as well as through family members’ that often relies on private communication via mobile phones, social media and word of mouth, particularly along the central Mediterranean route (Stevens et al 2017: 69). Not all migrant-initiated communications are targeted at migrants on the move: some aim to reach broader audiences. Federico Oliveri (2016), for instance, has shown how families of Tunisian missing migrants demand truth and justice for their missing or disappeared relatives. Likewise, the Missing at the Borders\textsuperscript{11} project provides a platform to give a voice to the families of missing migrants from different countries, offering them the opportunity not only to publicly express their sorrow but also to make political claims. These examples show the potential for border deaths to be represented as political and legal issues for which states can be held accountable (see Chapters 1 and 8).

In this section, we have illustrated how representations of border deaths may differ on the basis of the actor doing the representing. We have shown that state actors are by no way the only ones engaging in the representation of border deaths. Examples mentioned in this section include EU operations such as EUNAVFOR MED, inter-governmental organizations such as the IOM, as well as NGOs involved in search and rescue operations, pro- and anti-migrant activist networks along intra-European borders, the media, as well as migrants themselves, through informal networks or more organized advocacy initiatives. What we argue here is that, despite pursuing very different agendas, all these actors generate a cacophony of migrant death representations, which in itself is a form of borderwork: a constant, fluid attempt to enforce, question and renegotiate the border.

Conclusion

Representations of border deaths direct our gaze to particular aspects, or locations, or actors. We are all, in different professional and private capacities, touched by these processes of representation. In this chapter, we do not wish to reconcile any of the dilemmas that arise from representations of border deaths. Nor do we suggest that a given representation can be inclusive of all aspects of border deaths. Instead, we illustrate how state institutions and agencies, supranational organizations, NGOs, the media, artists, researchers, the general public and migrants themselves see and represent border deaths. Specifically, we seek to emphasize that every

\textsuperscript{11} See https://missingattheborders.org
representation is partial and positioned, and we point to some of the resulting implications.

In the sections above, we have first shown that every representation of border death is different. Who is representing, who or what is represented, who or what is left out of the representation and how those elements are presented are the outcome of specific choices. We have then argued that different state and non-state actors base these choices on their audience and the cause they intend to pursue: border death representations, in short, are politically loaded. And while this chapter has largely drawn on examples from Europe, we eagerly underline that border deaths are not unique to this region (Popescu 2011; Khosravi 2010; Anzaldúa 1987; Stierl 2017). Following Andersson (2014: 2) ‘[g]ruesome tales of migrant deaths abound at the gates of the West, whether at the southern frontiers of Europe, at the US-Mexican border, or along Australia’s Pacific shores.’ Beyond the Europe-centred perspective presented here, we hope that this chapter can kick-start a discussion about the role of representation in border deaths as an issue of global relevance.

Based on these premises, we argue that, in Europe and elsewhere, representations of border deaths constitute a form of bordering that is exercised beyond the physical space of the territorial border. Most often, bordering is conceived as the prerogative of States. Yet the diversity of actors involved in the representation of border deaths illustrated in this chapter, testifies to the fact that people and organizations outside the state also engage in this process (described as the ‘border death regime’ in Chapter 1). While pursuing varied political agendas, all these actors engage in borderwork by contributing to ‘envisioning, constructing, maintaining and erasing borders’ (Rumford 2008: 2).

As such, representations of border deaths become abstract, de-territorialized sites in which state and non-state actors all contribute to the creation and contestation of borders. Representations of border deaths are an extension of territorial borders, in the sense that they are ‘places where the people interface with the state. The state imposes itself upon a territory and its population, whose cultural values and local activities may give legitimacy to the border or, alternatively, may erode that legitimacy’ (Rumford 2008: 5).

In the sense that borders are barriers for some and entryways for others, border death representations may also carry a differentiated message. In the previous section, we have shown that border deaths may be equally evoked to call for the need to intensify humanitarian assistance, and to justify the very restrictive policies that are causing border casualties. Border deaths
and their representations have thus become a locus around which debates take place about irregular migration. For multiple actors, representations of border deaths become instances for the contested politics of mobility. The politics of control and the politics of migration (Squire 2012) are based on representations of the same deaths hinging on different underlying meanings as well as in pursuit of different political agendas. Representations of border deaths are used to confirm and contest the filtering function of state-borders. They are used to condemn unwanted outsiders who are standing at the doorstep, and to evoke unjust treatment of excluded victims. As Rumford (2008: 2) asks: ‘who is doing the enclosing and who is in a position to create a border?’. To which we may add the reverse: who is doing the including and who is in a position to erase a border? How, in the interplay of different representations of border deaths, are bridges built and walls erected? These questions all call for a deeper understanding of underlying power-relations when states and their societies engage with the wider world. We argue that the systematic study of border death representations – of which we have only scratched the surface in these pages – may indeed contribute to such an understanding.

References


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