

BORDER DEATHS PROJECT

Counting, Discounting and Accounting for Border Deaths

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OVERVIEW

There are a number of ways in which border-related deaths may be normalized by populations and denied by governments. This is an important step in understanding the systemic processes that prevent these deaths from being recognized as large-scale human rights abuses that can be linked to the border protection policies consciously adopted by states of the Global North. Counting deaths has been identified as an important 'truth recovery process' (Jamieson & McEvoy, 2005, p. 521). This process has the potential to transform the 'war on migrants from the metaphorical level to a context where consequences must be documented' (Blanchard et al., 2008, p. 33). Still, Cohen argues, '[t]he empirical problem is not to uncover yet more evidence of denial, but to discover the conditions under which information is acknowledged and acted upon' (Cohen, 2001, p. 249). Although Cohen attributes denial to the 'subversion of logic by belief', privileging logic may not be all that is needed to make the deaths of illegalized border crossers 'count'. Their deaths must not only be knowable through logical and systematic processes of counting and the construction of explanatory narratives. We contend that they must also be made grievable. It is to that complex and essentially human question that we now turn.

COUNTING DEATHS

Providing a quantitative count of border-crossing deaths has also become an important function of both academic research and the advocacy work carried out by NGOs. Being able to measure deaths at the border implies a need for action (Andreas and Greenhill, 2010). It is also increasingly used by government agencies in crafting and recrafting migration and security policies. While the enforcement of any border creates conditions conducive to border-related deaths (Nevins, 2003), not all states quantify or classify deaths at the border.

How deaths at the global frontier have been counted has overwhelmingly been shaped by who does the counting and the political purpose of the count. As noted by Rose (1999, p. 208): 'The apparent facticity of the figure obscures the complex technical work that is required to produce objectivity'. A range of methodologies have been used by government and non-government agencies to count the deaths of illegalized border crossers. Some counts depend on bodies found; some on reports of departures that have no corresponding arrival information; some on bodies found and the conclusions reached about the cause of death, and whether or not such causes may reasonably be attributed to the border; while others use complicated estimates of apprehensions, entries and the extrapolated estimates of border-related deaths (Cornelius, 2001).

In Europe, the NGO UNITED Against Racism and Fascism publishes an online 'list of deaths' arising from border controls which is regularly updated and openly available on its website.¹ The organization adopts an expansive view of border control that aligns closely with the 'functional border'. Drowning and other causes of loss of life at sea dominate the list. However, deaths arising from the internal border, such as suicides in detention, loss of life through lack of access to medical care, suffocations during clandestine crossing of land borders, deaths arising from dangerous work conditions directly associated with illegal status, and violent deaths during deportation or in other circumstances involving border control officials, are also included. No death count across these disparate contexts can ever hope to be complete. The UNITED list is compiled primarily from media reports and information

exchanged across a network of 550 NGOs in Europe and North Africa. Although the reports are cross-corroborated where possible, it would seem that coronial reports or the findings of other official inquiries are rarely available.

Blanchard et al. conclude that activists and researchers have no choice but to brandish these imperfect figures in the hope of being heard. To capture attention, large headlines on the home page of the UNITED campaign website showing the latest total of known border deaths convey the sheer size of a slowly and relentlessly unfolding tragedy. Further instructions on the site inform individuals and groups of how they can campaign and raise awareness of border deaths by focusing on one specific death or fatal event. As of 20 January 2011, the death count on the UNITED list stood at 14,037 since the collection began in 1993. Blanchard et al. (2008) claim that the total number of victims of this 'ignored massacre' may be two or three times that number. While there are few markers of the location of these deaths, there are some exceptions. The 'no man's land of Tinzaouatine' that lies on the border between Mali and Algeria has a cemetery that houses the 'tombs of migration's anonymous victims' (Blanchard et al., 2008, p. 31). Calais, Toulon, the Canary Islands and Lampedusa Island are all sites with 'discrete gravestones [that] remind us of the huge cemetery that the borders of the European Union are today' (Blanchard et al., 2008, p. 30).

DISCOUNTING DEATHS

Despite all the effort undertaken to quantify and measure, the counting of border-related deaths is too easily discounted. While the intellectual and political wrestle of the acts and omissions of counting border-related deaths is important for the sociological insights they yield as well as informing platforms for social, legal and political action, both government and non-government sponsored counts of border-related deaths often end up counting for little. This is not an argument against undertaking such counting, but rather a call to carefully consider *why even when we do manage to count border-related deaths a series of processes discounts them*. These include processes of neutralisation, dehumanisation and distancing.

The work of Stanley Cohen (2001) on the 'sociology of denial' provides further insight into how it can be possible for governments and populations to know, and yet at the same time not to know, about border-related deaths. Cohen observes that governments, faced with reports of atrocities or suffering, and allegations of state responsibility for them, often resort to some form of denial. Strategies of denial include: *literal* denial, i.e. claiming that the reported events simply did not happen; *interpretive* denial, i.e. acknowledging the events but seeking an interpretation that absolves authorities of blame; and/or *implicatory* denial, which downplays the significance of the reported events or subordinates them to higher imperatives. Elements of each of these strategies are likely to coexist, even when they are seemingly contradictory. Collectively they constitute what Cohen calls a 'deep structure' that is 'ideological' rather than 'logical'. The subversion of logic by belief makes it possible, he argues, to simultaneously 'know-and-yet-not-know' about atrocities and human suffering. This represents a significant challenge to the project of counting border-related deaths.

ACCOUNTING FOR DEATHS

What are the possibilities of developing a richer picture of death at the border to counter predominant managerialist methods of counting death, one that may not be easily co-opted by those invested in promoting conditions that allow such deaths? Is it possible to identify counter-narratives of death at the border, and explore the extent to which they might *account* for deaths? Many of the key planks that underpin the process of accounting for deaths (including processes of naming, grieving and memorializing) do not necessarily challenge official knowledge production of the nature, causes and consequences of deaths at the border; however, they do lead to the beginnings of developing powerful counter-narratives of border deaths.

Accounting for deaths at the border based is the first step towards identifying chains of accountability. While it does not deny the agency of those who risk their lives, this approach does acknowledge the role played by governments and their agents in shaping this global matrix of risks. From the standpoint of a weak, but developing, global human

rights framework we will consider the obligations that governments owe to those who are not their citizens or lawful residents, and consider what claims can reasonably be made by those who seek to cross the global frontier in the face of determined efforts to keep them out.

Accounting for bodies is not the same as accounting for the lives that are lost and the human desire to grieve and honour those lives. This includes the need to bear witness both for juridical functions of culpability around harm and crime, but also social and communal needs to memorialise.

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ⁱ Available at <http://www.unitedagainstracism.org/pdfs/listofdeaths.pdf>