University of Dundee

Thinking through the death of migrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea

Mercieca, Duncan P.; Mercieca, Daniela

DOI:
10.1080/17449626.2022.2053187

Publication date:
2022

Licence:
CC BY-NC-ND

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Link to publication in Discovery Research Portal

Citation for published version (APA):
Mercieca, D. P., & Mercieca, D. (2022). Thinking through the death of migrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea: mourning and grief as relational and as sites for resistance. *Journal of Global Ethics*, *18*(1), 48-63. https://doi.org/10.1080/17449626.2022.2053187

General rights
Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in Discovery Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from Discovery Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain.
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal.

Take down policy
If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Download date: 29. Jun. 2022

JOURNAL OF GLOBAL ETHICS
2022, VOL. 18, NO. 1, 48–63
https://doi.org/10.1080/17449626.2022.2053187

Thinking through the death of migrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea: mourning and grief as relational and as sites for resistance

Duncan P. Mercieca and Daniela Mercieca

School of Education and Social Work, University of Dundee, Dundee, UK

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the issue of the death of migrants and invites us to recognise bodily vulnerability and precariousness when confronted with the faceless and nameless dead migrant. It explores mourning and grief as a political relational act between strangers (us and the dead migrant) in very difficult moments. There is an obliteration of identity which is furthered by the responses of receiving countries, whose struggle with masses of need causes them to deny individual stories of suffering and to respond with the opening and closing of borders, a large-scale system response that means nothing to the individual migrant story. Westernised societies have developed a 'forgetful memory.' We turn to the work of Judith Butler to help us start thinking of the possibility of a relational theory based on Butler's theory of grief and mourning.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 7 August 2020
Accepted 9 March 2022

KEYWORDS
Death of migrants; Judith Butler; grievability; mourning; vulnerability; precariousness

1. Introduction: dead bodies. Beyond responsibility?

Consider the following three stories of migration occurring around the Mediterranean Sea.

Death story 1

> It was undeniable: the trawler was sitting lower in the water than when they had left six hours earlier … . At 11 am, he [an English speaking migrant who happened to be a doctor] called the Roman Rescue Coordination Centre and gave them their position, reporting that there were 400 people on board including 100 children. The line was cut off. They got through again just after midday, only to be told by an officer in Rome that their coordinates placed them in the Maltese's search-and-rescue area and so they should call them instead … Mohanad Jammo's [the doctor making the calls] increasingly urgent calls to the Maltese Armed Forces at around 3 pm had elicited a promise that help would arrive in forty-five minutes. They were still waiting for the rescue boat at 5 pm when the trawler gave one last lurch in the swell and disappeared beneath the waves. A large wave tossed the boat onto its port side and disappeared beneath the waves first, dragging men, women and children down with it …

CONTACT Duncan P. Mercieca dmercieca002@dundee.ac.uk School of Education and Social Work, University of Dundee, Dundee, UK

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

> Mohammed [a young man of 22 years] was in the sea and being dragged down under the waves. One of his feet was tangled in a fishing net. His kicks became stronger, but just seemed to drag him further away from life and towards the seabed. No amount of struggling seemed to free his body, and the efforts to stay alive suddenly seemed futile. (McDonald-Gibson 2016, 130, 145)

Death story 2

> Alan Kurdi,
>
> Born: 2012, Kobani, Syria.
>
> Died: September 2nd, 2015, Bodrum, Turkey.
>
> Parents: Rehana Kurdi, Abdullah Kurdi
>
> Siblings: Galip Kurdi
>
> The image of the three-year-old Alan Kurdi, 'wearing a bright-red T-shirt and shorts, washed up on a beach, lying face down in the surf not far from Turkey's fashionable resort town of Bodrum' (*The Guardian*, 2nd September 2015), shocked the world in early September 2015. The bodies of the mother Rehana and the five-year-old sibling Galip were never recovered. The father's words 'they died in my arms,' echoed through the world. The father narrated that after fleeing war in Kobani (in Syria), he and his family decided to cross into Europe by boat.

Death story 3

> Relatives hold Malta responsible for migrants' death, demand payment of damages. Siblings claim breach of rights
>
> Relatives of two migrants who died at sea last month have filed a judicial protest against the prime minister, the home affairs minister and the armed forces commander about their failure to rescue them. Twelve migrants died before the group they formed part of was picked up by a fishing boat. The migrants' boat had allegedly been in Malta's search and rescue region for several days and the fishing boat was directed by the Maltese authorities. Fthawi Tesfamichael Welday and Asfaha Letenugus Amelesom, brother and sister of two of the deceased migrants called on authorities to pay damages over the death of their relatives, reserving the right to take further action at both local and international level unless their request is met. The siblings, who live in The Netherlands and Sweden respectively, claimed that the deaths of their brothers came about through failure by the Maltese authorities to honour their obligations under international law to ensure that rescue operations were conducted in a timely and effective manner. Serious shortcomings in the operations handled by the Maltese Armed Forces had resulted in breaching the migrants' right to life as well as their right to seek asylum, they said (*Times of Malta*, 20th May 2020).

According to Migration Data, since 1996 more than 75,000 migrant deaths have been recorded globally. Approximately 19,000 migrants have been reported dead or missing in the Mediterranean Sea since October 3, 2013, when over 360 people died in a shipwreck off the Italian island of Lampedusa. Recorded deaths of missing migrant children between 2014 and 2018 is 678. The available data indicate that the remains of almost 12,000 people who drowned in the Mediterranean since 2014 have not been recovered (see https://www.infomigrants.net/en/ and https://www.iom.int/). One must keep in mind that this is only a minimum estimate because the majority of migrant deaths around the world go unrecorded. Far from its traditional reputation as a desirable

holiday destination, the Mediterranean Sea is now known by some as the deadliest sea in the world.

Dead bodies are, as Katherine Verdery (1999) argues, material objects. They are not abstractions, but 'are indisputably *there*, as our senses of sight, touch, and smell can confirm' (305, emphasis in original). The concreteness of the dead bodies, whether recovered or not, are able to transcend time, 'making past immediately present' (Verdery 1999, 27). For Verdery, dead bodies are not only concrete, they are also 'protean' – 'they do not have a single meaning but are open to many different readings' (306). Although the first death story occurred some years ago, it is still present to us. It is 'in a state of suspended and thoroughly infinite grief' (Kaneti and Assis 2016, 298). Ernesto Schwartz-Marin and Arely Cruz-Santiago (2016) write that 'suspended grief is a nonspace' (485); it is as though it is a grief that we cannot come to terms with; it cannot be resolved.

This paper is based on stories of migrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea. We focus on the relationship between the dead migrants' bodies and our own (non-dead non-migrant bodies). We present the relation of our bodies to the dead migrants as a political and ethical relation. Verdery (1999) reminds us that the literature on 'the body' has been inspired particularly by feminists who have theorised the ways in which the performance and transformation of bodies are political acts. 'The dead body' also has this political and ethical becoming, as it 'is precisely its ambiguity, its capacity to evoke a variety of understandings' (306) that makes this relationship complex. Judith Butler understands that bodies are always in relation, in a community with other bodies. There is a 'primordial impingement by the other' (Butler 2004a; see Ruti 2017) on my body. Our corporeal 'relation to alterity' (Butler 2004b, 150) is constituted in and by relations to others. This is not something that we can consent to or refuse. The fact that we have a body puts us at the mercy of others whose presence interrupts our lives. These 'interruptions' are not necessarily negative. The 'forming and unforming' of 'bonds' with others (Butler 2009a, 182) constructs the subject (me, we):

> If I am confounded by you, then you are already of me, and I am nowhere without you. I cannot muster the 'we' except by finding the way in which I am tied to 'you,' by trying to translate but finding that my own language must break up and yield if I am to know you. You are what I gain through this disorientation and loss. This is how the human comes into being, again and again, as that which we have yet to know. (Butler 2004a, 94)

Our being corporal, being human, through relations with others demonstrates that we are vulnerable and precarious. On the one hand, relations with others continually challenge our very being. At times this might be a painful process, as argued in the above quote, since relations with others offer the possibility of transformation, 'for reimagining the possibility of community on the basis of vulnerability and loss' (Butler 2004a, 20). Our body in relation to other bodies is human when we experience loss and mourn for that loss, as these imply that a relationship with the other has been transformative in our lives. On the other hand, however, while experiencing this transformation through a relationship with some, we may ignore the existence of others, thus refusing the possibility of transformation, and denying our vulnerability and precariousness. This ignoring can be violent towards those we are ignoring (in this case, the migrants), in some cases leading to their death.

These contradictory processes coexist because vulnerability and precariousness depend on the norms of recognition that are developed in both processes. Norms of recognition are essential to the constitution of vulnerability as the precondition of the human (Butler 2004a, 43–44). In an interview with Butler, Rasmus Willig (2012) writes:

> schemes of recognition … determine in a relative sense who will be regarded as a subject worthy of recognition … if recognition is fully lacking, that is, a life is unrecognized, is refused recognition, and has no standing before the law, or is deprived of legal rights and protections, then that life is actually imperilled by the lack of recognition. In this sense, the life and death struggle remains internal to the struggle for recognition. Indeed, without certain substantial forms of recognition, our lives continue to be at risk. (140–141)

The three stories that open this paper provide the background against which we attempt to make sense of being in relation with the dead. We suggest that insights from Butler can reveal the relevance of concepts such as vulnerability, embodiment, relationality, precarity, and recognition. They can also help us develop new ways of thinking about mourning and grief in the case of the deaths of migrants. In Section 2, we discuss some of the dominant discourse around migration that prevents the possibility of understanding ourselves as in relationship with these migrants. This discourse sometimes renders the deaths of migrants invisible, de-emphasising and precluding the possibility of our being in relationship with them. In Section 3, we return to Butler's work where their view of mourning might be more useful for helping to highlight our relationships to those migrants who have died. We suggest the need to move towards a narrative informed by Butler's writings on mourning, in order to properly recognise and 'reimagine the possibility of community' (Butler 2004a, 20) following the death of these migrants. In Section 4, we give substance to Butler's ideas of mourning and grievability through the presentation of two stories that show how experiences of mourning allow the dead migrants to be seen as having been alive because they become grievable.

2. Discourse around migration: who is worthy of recognition?

This section discusses some of the dominant discourse around migration that prevents the possibility of understanding ourselves as being in meaningful relationship with these migrants. The death of migrants is often shrouded in forgetting in at least two ways. In the first sense, we tend to forget the larger context in which migration takes place, particularly the inequalities of political rights or of economic wealth in different decolonised states, that give rise to people migrating. Second, we tend to forget the crude reality that people have been crossing (and dying in this crossing) from North Africa into Europe for many years. Despite various attempts by states to deter migrants (such as sending them back to their point of departure, or closing ports), crossings still occur. Miriam Ticktin (2016) points out that the knowledge of migrants drowning creates in non-migrants a moment of crisis, but this crisis is short lived and seems to be only effective in the present, without a long-term effect. Non-migrants need to guard against de-sensitisation and seek to be constantly shocked. Yet, we fully agree with Ticktin (2016) who argues that being constantly shocked has its emotional toll and eventually one ceases to feel. This may be the current situation in Malta, where deaths of migrants are reported on a regular basis, and unlike a few years ago when

silent marches and protests were organised, now few people voice concerns or take action apart from the established non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Often, states try to look for external factors to grapple with the issue of the death of migrants. Marina Kaneti and Mariana Prandini Assis (2016) note that one of the understandings that is constructed around the dead bodies of migrants is that the migrants' deaths are caused by 'his [their] decision' (299) to cross the sea or the desert. There is, therefore, a detachment from any state – in our case North African and European countries – and the onus is placed on the decision of the migrant or group of migrants. Often there is a distinction between innocence and guilt: is the migrant innocent or guilty of the decision to cross the Mediterranean Sea? (Ticktin 2011, 2016). Ticktin (2016) argues that 'perversely, innocence is clearest in death' (261). The act of dying is an act of innocence (see Boltanski 1999). Ticktin gives the example of Alan Kurdi – his motionless three-year old body carried in the arms of the police officer (see story 2). Few would debate innocence or guilt when they see any three-year-old child. The image of the dead Alan is so strong and shocking that it even silences momentarily the debate of whether his father, who is still alive, is innocent or guilty for deciding to undertake the journey of migration with his family. The picture creates a pathos that forces us to recognise this family in a way that we did not when they were alive. They become our responsibility through the act of recognition. The picture challenges our absolution and reverses it, making us feel responsible. However, this moment of shock and grief, perhaps because of its overwhelming nature, is not generally long lived. It makes us too uncomfortable and we are easily distracted from it. We revert to the dominant discourse of looking for responsibility so that we are not disrupted or emotionally burdened for too long. We search for who is guilty: the parents, the state/s (which ones), the traffickers. This seems easier to handle than allowing a meaningful relationship to develop between ourselves and these migrants.

States, including the European Union (EU), contribute to the dominant discourse on the issue of migration by adopting attitudes or policies of surveillance and control. One manifestation of this is to minimise the tragedy of a shipwreck by expressing outrage and promising war on human trafficking and smuggling. The focus of a war on trafficking at times involves financing and organising operations at sea between Malta, Italy, and Libya, where boats are pushed back from the incoming states. Sometimes smugglers are paid to turn their boats full of people back from the point of departure. Another measure taken was the donation of fast patrol boats to North African countries to enable better control of their borders. States also try to negotiate migration containment and establish alternative routes of migration to keep migrants and refugees from national shores. All this happens 'out there' at the borders or in closed conference rooms, away from public eyes. This 'out there,' in nature – the deep sea – is where migrants die. Far away from the 'state designated borders; rather, they perish in nature' (Kaneti and Assis 2016, 299). When they are out of sight, recognition cannot happen. This contributes to the discourses that distance us from the migrants.

Maurizio Albahari also argues that particular states develop a moral economy of salvation, 'sovereign humanitarianism' (Albahari 2015, 114), 'that renders sovereign policies of containment incontestable, even when they turn lethal. It is, in other words, a way to do nothing while pretending to fight trafficking' (Albahari 2016, 278). In a provocative article Carole Vance (2011) lists twelve ways of doing nothing about trafficking while pretending

to do something (primarily the trafficking of women and girls into prostitution). She argues that fundamental contradictions and inconsistencies in state strategies are often hiding in plain sight (935). Vance argues that numbers of trafficked people are grossly exaggerated to justify new laws, while obscuring the more accurate figures that eventually emerge. 'The result is to create a sense of panic and urgency that rebuffs all criticism' (935). We argue that this also applies to the issue of migration. Consider, for example, the following quote issued by the Foreign Affairs Office in Malta, shortly before talks in Libya between the Maltese Minister of Foreign Affairs and Libyan Authorities focusing on migration:

> In a statement, the Foreign Ministry said the Libyan coastguard this year up to the end of July had rescued some 6,265 persons, of whom half would otherwise have drowned or ended up in Malta's search and rescue zone. (*Times of Malta*, July 2020)

The Ministry's statement calls for listeners to support policies that tend to hide what is actually happening by providing numbers and stating that half of these would have drowned, hence impressing upon them the importance of the talks taking place in the coming days.

In this section, we outlined some features of the dominant discourse around migration which sometimes render the deaths of migrants invisible, de-emphasising and precluding the possibility of our having relationship with them. In Section 3 that follows, we explore some of Butler's ideas that invite us to think of a possibility of a relationship.

3. Who counts as human?

In this section, our goal is to show how Butler's view of mourning might be more useful than those views considered above for helping to highlight our relationships to those migrants who have died.

> Let's face it. We're undone by each other. And if we're not, we're missing something. (Butler 2004a, 23)

> Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? … What *makes for a grievable life?*' (Butler 2004a, 20, emphasis in original)

> Who is left to die? And who is, as living, already considered good as dead? Who mourns those who live in the zone of social death?' (Butler see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=32oNrfqE8EY)

In the context of this paper that invites us to think about our relationship with dead migrants, these questions trouble us. Not only because they seem to be questioning all the sophisticated philosophical thinking that has taken place in recent years by asking for 'something' more fundamental, but also because, through the facts mentioned earlier, it is evident that vital points are still being missed in our dealings with migration and the death of migrants. The understanding of the human in humanity is not only being questioned, but is probably absent for some groups of people, particularly migrants. The language at this point is messy and complex: do we use the term 'humans', 'people', 'persons' or 'migrants'? We use the latter term but realise its de-humanising effect. We were greatly struck by a small story narrated by McDonald-Gibson in her book *Cast*

Away (2016), where she recounts how a young man**,** Ahmad Maruan Sahed, twenty-three years old, was shot by a sniper near his home in Damascus. He needed medical attention. His mother sent him to Europe with medical records. He arrived in Bulgaria, but there was no one to look at his papers. He had to borrow money to buy the medication needed to alleviate the pain and manage his high blood pressure, but the money was running out. '"Take me to another country to get medical attention," he pleaded. "Have some humanity". Nart [the friend accompanying Ahmed] was starting to realize that humanity in Europe was in short supply' (142). Hence, the title of the section of this paper.

We are caught in the struggle between becoming independent and autonomous and yet need to 'consider the demands that are imposed upon us by living in a world of beings who are, by definition, physically dependent on one another, physically vulnerable to one another' (Butler 2004a, 27). Butler reminds us of the human dimension of dependency and vulnerability, often seen as limiting aspects of being human. Not only does Butler argue that we need to acknowledge these, but these aspects are fundamental in engaging with others. Whether we want to or not we are implicated in the lives of others as others are implicated in our lives because of our bodily being. There is an amount of vulnerability and precariousness in this acknowledgment. What we often forget is that our lives are always in someone else's hands. Our lives depend on people we may or may not know and may even never come to know.

Butler's relational approach calls for reciprocity. This

> implies being impinged upon by the exposure and dependency of others, most of whom remain anonymous. These are not necessarily relations of love or even of care, but constitute obligations toward others, most of whom we cannot name and do not know, and who may or may not bear traits of familiarity to an established sense of who "we" are. (Butler 2009a, 14)

It is this corporal porosity to the other that is also the source of an ethical connection with the other. 'To be a body is to be given over to others' (Butler 2004b, 21). The corporal vulnerability opens a possibility for different and alternative ethics and politics. The emphasis here is not on knowing about the other's suffering, as this may not lead to different thinking and acting (Vlieghe 2010, 165), but on the corporality of experience, which we cannot always control – 'we cannot deny that something has happened in spite of ourselves' (Vlieghe 2010, 165).

For Butler, these aspects of corporeality open up ethical and political possibilities. Since our bodies are socially constructed through others: to their 'gaze, their touch, their violence' (Butler 2004b, 21), they have a level of vulnerability, precariousness, and exposure to the other/s, 'my body is mine and not mine at the same time' (Butler 2004a, 26). It is never the situation that 'I' exists independently of 'you' (the Other) over there. The autonomous and independent 'I' emerges only later after I engage with others in social contexts. In fact, Butler views the 'I' as accomplished rather than given:

> the very "I" is called into question by its relation to the Other, a relation that does not precisely reduce me to speechlessness but does nevertheless clutter my speech with signs of its undoing. I tell a story about the relations I choose, only to expose, somewhere along the way, the way I am gripped and undone by these very relations. My narrative falters, as it must. (23)

The 'I' for Butler (2005) is opaque to itself – one can never come to know oneself fully, thus, the Other becomes important for the 'I' (20). The relational approach that Butler

is arguing for challenges some of the basic notions of neo-liberalism, where individual independence and autonomy are foundational. Butler proposes a relation that is based on bodies, which often are vulnerable. But rather than hiding or trying to do away with this vulnerability, for Butler it is this vulnerability that enables relations.

One of the moments when this vulnerability emerges in us humans is in mourning. Thus, mourning is central for Butler. When one mourns another, we let go of our self-mastery, and agree to undergo a transformation, in Butler's words 'the full result of which one cannot know in advance' (2004a, 21). Mourning challenges and questions our assumptions of ourselves. Mourning the death of others, provides us with a possibility to escape (within limits), our embodied selves as we are not able to give a full account of who we are (Vlieghe 2010, 159). The act of experiencing loss and mourning opens a possibility for an alternative way of being with and for others, and provides us with 'dispositional supplements' (Butler 2003, 5). These dispositions for Butler are generosity, humility, and patience. As David Gutterman and Sara Rushing (2008) point out these dispositions 'might be cultivated not through force of will or mental and physical gymnastics, but simply by working to "develop a point of identification with suffering itself" (Butler 2004a, 30)' (138).

For the majority, people's lives are rooted and embedded within the idea of normative universality (see Zylinska 2004). We all are attached to others, and always at risk of losing these attachments through the other/s dying. This is the reason we mourn when the other dies. Butler points out that there is no life without an implicit understanding that life is grievable. For many, grievability comes at the end of the 'long' life, after a life that has been lived. Butler (2004a) argues, 'one mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly forever' (21). The transformative effect of loss cannot be charted or planned beforehand. Through experiencing loss, we live with not knowing, and our vulnerability is further revealed. In some way, your death is also my death, at least of a particular kind. Butler thus argues that grief can have ethical and political significance. Grief is not to be understood as passive and powerless, but grief can help us 'return to a sense of human vulnerability, to our collective responsibility for the physical lives of another' (30). Grief can rob us of the sense of control of what it means to be human. Through the introductory narratives at the beginning of the paper, we aimed to bring the dead migrant as a reality to the reader, hoping to enable an experience of grievability, becoming more attuned to the other in ourselves (Gutterman and Rushing 2008, 139).

Grievability precedes and makes possible the apprehension of vulnerable and precarious life (Butler 2009a, 15). Therefore, to stop grieving is to close the space where our and others' vulnerability is exposed and to return to a sense of security that does away with seeing oneself and others as vulnerable, precarious, and dependent on each other, even on those whom I do not know.

What is this vulnerability and precarity of life that grief exposes us to? Butler claims that there is a common human vulnerability and precarity that emerges with life itself (2004a, 31; 2009a, 13), a vulnerability and precarity that produces a sense of helplessness that others and society must attend to. This however is the crux of the situation:

> lives are supported and maintained differently, and there are radically different ways in which human physical vulnerability is distributed across the globe. Certain lives will be highly

> protected, and the abrogation of their claims to sanctity will be sufficient to mobile the force of war. Other lives will not find such fast and furious support and will not even qualify as "grievable". (Butler 2004a, 32)

Butler points out that this is not a matter of de-humanising a human, as that would imply that there was humanity before its removal. It is a matter that some (some could mean a hundred or thousands!) lives are not even grievable because they were never alive. For the lives that concern Butler, they are alive, in the sense that they breathe and need food, but they already live in a 'state of deadness' (Butler 2004a, 33) and are not alive for 'us.' The image of the spectre probably captures this best: living in-between the 'state of deadness and the actual death itself. Butler however warns us that vulnerability and precariousness cannot be properly recognised. They can be 'apprehended, taken in, encountered' (Butler 2009a, 13) as a shared condition of human life, but we ought not to think that the recognition of precariousness masters or captures or even fully understands what it recognises.

Considering the above-mentioned complicity in the deaths of migrants while attempting the crossing, what can be said about their deaths counting as deserving of public acknowledgement? Is there no place for grieving for the dead migrants? What happens to those who drown in the crossing and whose bodies are recovered from the sea or are washed up on the beaches after several days? In the case of Alan Kurdi, his father took the body of his son and buried him in Kobani, Syria. However, the other recovered bodies are photographed, examined, identifying marks recorded, and a DNA sample taken, resulting in a case number assigned and marking the grave.[1] This procedure is not always followed, however, and some bodies are just left for the community to deal with (see Hernandez and Stylianou 2016). A statement from Vittorio Piscitelli, from the Italian National Office for Missing Persons, captures it all: 'Every day we're trying to give a name to these men, women and children that are swallowed by the sea and lose everything: their lives, future, family and even their identity' (see Hernandez and Stylianou 2016). Sicily, followed by West Turkey, has the highest number of unmarked graves. Such evidence continues to make complex the issue of our (non-migrant non-dead) relationship to the dead migrants as often we only get glimpses of such tragedies, as reported through the media, making the moments of recognition short and indirect. Yet we argue that if we attune ourselves to narratives such as those reported in the introduction of this paper, there is almost a demand from the narratives on us to engage in an experience of grief. As Gutterman and Rushing (2008) argue, grief has the potential 'to equalise us' (139).

In the next section, we describe how Butler's account of vulnerability, precariousness, and grievability can be applied and extended to the death of migrants.

4. Points of identification with suffering itself: stories of "open grieving"

We now turn to examples of actions of resistance taken by citizens who engaged in collective grief and mourning. These examples help to elicit what the death of these migrants and collective grief has made visible that would otherwise be invisible. Building on Butler's account of mourning and applying it to an account of collective grief we argue that collective grief in response to the death of these migrants helps us apprehend our

own precariousness and vulnerability as points of connection and relation with each other and with the migrant.

> Open grieving is bound up with outrage, and outrage in the face of injustice or indeed of unbearable loss has enormous political potential. It is, after all, one of the reasons Plato wanted to ban the poets from the Republic. He thought that if the citizens went too often to watch tragedy, they would weep over the losses they saw, and that such open and public mourning, in disrupting the order and hierarchy of the soul, would disrupt the order and hierarchy of political authority as well. (Butler 2009a, 9)

While grief is often assumed to be a private affair, Butler argues that mourning, in particular public mourning, 'furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order' by foregrounding 'the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility' (Butler 2004a, 22). Butler suggests the development of a 'point of identification with suffering itself' (2004a, 30). The difficulty, of course, is that not all human lives are deemed to be worthy of grief; indeed, not all deaths count as deaths deserving of public acknowledgement. It depends on the social norms regulating the scene of recognition (Butler 2005).

In Section 2, we gave examples of how states may construct the migrant as non-human. Yet there are examples where the actions reflected social norms that showed recognition around the grievability of death of migrants. These examples also highlight some of the dispositions mentioned earlier. They are examined in this section where we discuss the possibilities created by events where resistance is expressed, or what Ami Harbin (2016) usefully describes as moments of disorientation, that is, temporally extended 'major life experiences that make it difficult for individuals to know how to go on' (2). These sorts of events can include recognition and relation through grief and mourning.

The experience of mourning allows the dead migrants to be seen as having been alive because they become grievable. Raffaela Puggioni (2015) and Maurice Stierl (2016) engage with these issues and give us two stories that show how grieving can have a political impact. The next paragraph provides a political context for the two stories.

The bigger picture we present concerns the management of EU southern sea borders and how they are patrolled. In December 2014, Mare Nostrum (Our Sea) was replaced by the EU operation Triton coordinated by Frontex, whose declared purpose is border control and not rescuing migrants. Both Mare Nostrum and Frontex function as a military-humanitarian operation enacted by military actors – the navy, with the support of the coastguards. Puggioni[2] (2015) makes a significant claim when she states that

> the intervention in sea patrolling by the EU border agency, FRONTEX, has increased the death toll because of its "quasi-military approach to border control", and of a de facto "war against migrants" … Border-related deaths are thus the direct consequence of border protection, carried out also with the assistance of governments from the south. (1146)

The island of Lampedusa has been at the centre of border crossings and border deaths. The situation that Puggioni (2015) is working through focuses on the migrants drowning on October 3, 2013, where more than 350 migrants died. She writes that the locals experienced the tragedy with increasing realisation and shock while listening to the stories of survivors and witnessing the dead bodies retrieved from the sunk boat. Their shock was echoed by other Italians and Europeans.

Puggioni reports that frustration and anger were added to the locals' shock and grief, and this found expression in a religious procession in which some locals also held banners and gave interviews to journalists. This 'transformed the praying procession into a moment of protest. People were not protesting to safeguard their island from unwanted influxes but because of the evident disregard for human life, as the many lifeless bodies testified' (Puggioni 2015, 1150). The messages on the banners, as reported by Puggioni (2015), were accusatory: 'once again you have not heard my scream', and 'you failed to rescue me, next time rescue at least my brother' *(La Repubblica*, October 5, 2013, in Puggioni 2015, 1511). Locals registered their rejection of government policy which saw the migrants as unwanted. The loss of the migrants seemed to be diminished, or indeed denied, because they were not seen by the State as fully human, or as human as non-migrants. However, the protesting locals resisted this stance (Puggioni 2015).

Resistance was also shown against the impression that the tragic deaths were unrelated to government policies about responding to migrant calls for aid, and this was termed as 'indifference'. The presence of government officials at the time of such tragedies was greeted with ' … go back. We do not accept visits'; '[Lampedusa is] an island full of grief, which carries the burden of indifference' (*La Repubblica*, October 5, 2013, in Puggioni 2015, 1511). The banners reflected what 'is … wrong in the picture, when something is not at the right place' (Rancière 2007, 560).

The second story draws upon Stierl's (2016) writing about the political project 'Traces Back 2013' organised by the activist networks Youth without Borders and Welcome to Europe. The project enabled migrants who had once passed through Lesvos as minors, mostly between 2005 and 2010, to trace their first steps in Europe. The importance of commemoration and the mourning of lost life were significant elements in this project, as Stierl writes. Commemorations had been organised in Greece in 2010 and 2011 at the borders, following the discovery of a mass grave of the remains of 200 people in the Evros region.

> Only a sign, riddled by many gun-shots, tells that this is the cemetery of the illegal immigrants where the corpses are buried. It is not immediately obvious that it is a mass grave. Upon closer inspection, one can however see holes that were excavated and again filled up by bulldozers and that can contain up to ten corpses. (Welcome to Europe 2010, in Stierl 2016, 180).

As Puggioni highlighted in the aforementioned story, Stierl (2016) writes how the growing attention of the public to the mass grave and undignified burial resulted in condemnation which led to the site being transformed to a cemetery consisting of individual graves. Mari Ruti (2017), reflecting on Butler, argues that a double act of brutality occurs: the original brutality is that some lives are deemed ungrievable because they are considered less human. This is followed by a second level of brutality as some are considered less human because they are deemed ungrievable (97–98). Opting for mass graveyards and the undignified burial without regard for traditional customs could be seen as this double act of brutality, where the dead migrant is caught in a closed economy of brutality. In an attempt to rectify the disregard for humanity, reminders of the loss of life were set up through commemorative plaques and a fountain built 'along a road frequently travelled on by refugees' (Welcome to Europe and Youths Without Borders 2014, 54, in Stierl 2016, 180).

In the same paper, Stierl (2016) also writes about the time in Thermi, a fishing harbour, when local fishermen found a lifeless body and deliberately went out to sea to search for and recover others. A large crowd gathered, consisting of locals and of Syrian relatives of the drowned and together they bore witness and mourned. They carried 'in their pockets the pictures and also the passports of their losses':

> [The relatives] were speaking about the tragedy of this whole incident: they had not been able to save their relatives through family reunion because even after many years in Greece they had not received papers. We made photos of the passports and we put them on the memorial. They went to look for plants and they prepared the place of the memorial (Welcome to Europe and Youths Without Borders 2013, 51, in Stierl 2016, 180).

> Some came already several times […] [to] protest against this deadly border regime. (Welcome to Europe and Youths Without Borders 2013, 45–46, in Stierl, 2016, 180)

Again, Stierl writes about commemorative structures and plaques, beside which were placed images of the deceased, including many children and young adolescents. Activists and survivors read out a speech of remembrance, punctuated by anger and shame, that 'we failed in our attempt to stop this murderous regime and to create a welcoming Europe':

> Here and today, at this place of failure and loss, we want to stop for a moment and create a space for all those who lost their lives. Remembering here means to save the stories of the uncounted who died at the borders of Europe. They had been on the way to change their lives on their own. Their death is the death in search for freedom. And that concerns all of us. […] This Europe is not safe, human rights and refugee rights have lost all relevance! The victims ask the ones alive to take action against this Europe of Frontex – borders and walls. They demand us to struggle and to invent a Europe of solidarity, overcoming the deathly migration regime. […] For the ones who will pass by in the future, the fountain that will be built later on should be a place to rest on their further way, providing them with water and the feeling that they are welcome. We invite you to have a rest – and then to move on: to tear down the borders and to build another, a welcoming Europe. (Stierl 2016, 47–50, 181).

Puggioni (2015) uses the idea of dissensus as developed by Rancière, a dissensus that comes about from the 'dis-agreement without reconciliation' (Arditi 2009) between the habitants of Lampedusa who were 'using words like death, brothers, "children", neighbours, safety, help and rescue' (1152) and the completely different language used by the Italian Government and the EU which focused on 'task-force, cooperation, FRONTEX and border patrols' (1153). The 'common people', the 'people without a voice', in this situation the inhabitants of Lampedusa were 'mak[ing] visible what had no business being seen, and mak[ing] heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise' (Rancière 1999, 30). Through their protest, they elevated what had hitherto been noise to a message that the structures could hear.

5. Conclusion

> My narrative falters, as it must. (Butler 2004a, 23)

Our focus in this paper is the dead migrants' body as an ethical and political force that has the ability to challenge and question us. This paper attempts to make use of Butler's ethics of grievability to help us question this harsh reality. Several narratives are brought

together in this paper. The initial three stories contextualise the arguments, but powerfully narrate the other in its most vulnerable and precarious moment, that of drowning and dying. We read Puggioni's (2015) and Stierl's (2016) writing in the previous section as a resistance to the initial three stories. Their writing shows us that those who protest are recognising the death of migrants as people who can be mourned and grieved, therefore acknowledging them as humans. How does this recognition occur and how does it last beyond the immediate? Butler's suggestion is to develop a living practice of critique: 'The question of how to live the good life, then, is already … bound up with a living practice of critique' (Butler 2012, 11).

Bringing the death of migrants into our vision forces us to acknowledge the vulnerability and precariousness of their lives, and the conditions of physical deprivation which spurred the journeys of migrants. The process of recognition can make us aware of our own physical vulnerability and precariousness as we understand how the conditions in which we live are an accident of time and geography. We have not earned the good conditions that we live in. Such corporal awareness of vulnerability and precariousness gives us the possibility to 'question the limits of our most sure ways of knowing' (Butler 2012, 5). We question our knowing through our bodily experience, not with our thinking, as is our want to believe.

For Butler, critique is about practicing the limits of our epistemological horizon itself, 'making the contours of the horizon appear, as it were, for the first time, we might say, in relation to its own limits' (Butler 2002, 8). If we think about ourselves (non-dead non-migrant bodies) in relation to the dead migrant, we can use Butler to ask: 'what, given the contemporary order of being, can I be?' (Butler 2002, 13). This question challenges us, but that very challenge is also empowering, 'as a resistance to a part of the self that seeks to join with what is wrong, an internal check against complicity' (Butler 2012, 17). The question brings about a new way of life, one that can oppose our non-recognition of migrants. This is performative, in the sense that it has the 'potential to re-do norms' (Lloyd 2015, 8) and remake 'reality along new lines' (Butler 2009b, i). Butler gives examples of such resistances ranging from large protests to small body gestures such as being silent or refusing to move (see Butler 2012, 18).

As authors, we have been struggling with the issue of migration and with the death of migrants for some years now, especially since we come from the Mediterranean region. We struggle to make sense of the no-sense of this situation, and of the many narratives that we have encountered over the years. Our encounter with Butler has helped us experience the possibility for reimagining a community based on vulnerability, precariousness, loss, mourning, and grief. Through Butler we allow ourselves to make sense by acknowledging the body as vulnerable and precarious within a globalised discourse that fixes the body as self-sufficient. The body is not customarily seen as a possible source of resistance. Such an acknowledgement is a complex process that needs constant critique of systems of knowledge to which we contribute, which systems are often based on the institutionalisation of neoliberal and capitalist norms, practices, and policies. However, the crude reality of the death of migrants challenges our non-recognition of those who have hitherto remained non-human, and calls for acts of resistance on our part, ranging from organising silent protest walks, to sharing pictures and narratives, to writing papers like this. These acts of resistance put us in relation with the dead to tell their

stories and have those stories heard. Yet, we still fail those migrants who died and are dying in their crossing, and we must live with our failure.

Notes

1. This information is then sent to police stations and NGOs to facilitate identification.
2. Similarly, Luisa Marin (2013) writes that current border controls are 'protecting the EU's borders from … fundamental rights', by making the 'integrated management of external borders … increasingly disconnected from the 'Europe of responsibility, solidarity and partnership' (76). Similarly, Leanne Weber and Sharon Pickering state that 'border deaths, far from being random and unforeseen events, are shaped significantly by specific border policies and practices' (2011, 15)

Acknowledgements

As authors, we would like to acknowledge the valuable support of the anonymous reviewers as well as editors Ami Harbin and Christine Koggel. Their feedback, suggestions, and recommendations greatly helped us in the formation of this paper.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Daniela Mercieca is a practising educational psychologist in a Local Authority in Scotland and a lecturer in the School of Education and Social Work at the University of Dundee. Her research interest is in critically problematising the assumptions that underpin educational practice with children and deconstructing situations in which decisions are made concerning children in schools.

Duncan P. Mercieca is a senior lecturer in the School of Education and Social Work at the University of Dundee. His research draws upon French post-structuralist philosophers to think through educational issues, in particular those related to diversity and otherness, inclusion and disability, and critiquing education research and its methods.

ORCID

Duncan P. Mercieca http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4071-9522
Daniela Mercieca http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6609-1302

References

Albahari, M. 2015. *Crimes of Peace: Mediterranean Migrations at the World's Deadliest Borders*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Albahari, M. 2016. "After the Shipwreck: Mourning and Citizenship in the Mediterranean, Our Sea." *Social Research* 83 (2): 275–294.

Arditi, B. 2009. "Disagreement without Reconciliation: Democracy, Equality and the Public Realm." *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 12 (2): 167–181.

Boltanski, L. 1999. *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Butler. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=32oNrfqE8EY.

Butler, J. 2002. “What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault’s Virtue.” In *The Political*, edited by David Ingram, 212–228. Oxford: Blackwell.
Butler, J. 2003. “Interview.” In Judith Butler: Philosopher edited by J. Stauffer. *The Believer* 1 (2).
Butler, J. 2004a. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. New York: Verso.
Butler, J. 2004b. *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge.
Butler, J. 2005. *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press.
Butler, J. 2009a. *Frames of War. When Is Life Grievable?* London: Verso Books.
Butler, J. 2009b. “Performativity, Precarity, and Sexual Politics.” *Revista de Antropología Iberoamericana* 4 (3): i–xiii.
Butler, J. 2012, Nov/Dec. “Can One Lead a Good Life in a Bad Life? Adorno Prize Lecture.” *Radical Philosophy Archive* (176): 9–18.
Gutterman, D., and S. L. Rushing. 2008. “Sovereignty and Suffering: Towards and Ethics of Grief in a Post- 9/11 World.” In *Judith Butler’s Precarious Politics: Critical Encounters*, edited by Terrel Carver, and Samuel A. Chambers, 127–141. London: Routledge.
Harbin, A. 2016. *Disorientation and Moral Life*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Hernandez, V., and N. Stylianou. 2016. “Buried without a Name: The Untold Story of Europe’s Drowned Migrants.” *BBC*, May 10. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-91f3683c-5e3c-4a2e-92eb-7d7f6a024c02.
Kaneti, M., and M. P. Assis. 2016. “(Re)Branding the State: Humanitarian Border Control and the Moral Imperative of State Sovereignty.” *Social Research* 83 (2): 295–325.
Lloyd, M. 2015. “The Ethics and Politics of Vulnerable Bodies.” In *Butler and Ethics*, edited by Moya Lloyd, 167–192. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
Marin, L. 2013. “Protecting the EU’s Borders from … Fundamental Rights? Squaring the Circle Between Frontex’s Border Surveillance and Human Rights.” In *Freedom, Security and Justice in the European Union: Internal and External Dimensions of Increased Cooperation After the Lisbon Treaty*, edited by R. L. Holzhacker, and P. Luif, 75–99. New York: Springer.
McDonald-Gibson, C. 2016. *Cast Away: Stories of Survival from Europe’s Refugee Crisis*. London: Portobello Books.
Puggioni, R. 2015. “Border Politics, Right to Life and Acts of Dissensus: Voices from the Lampedusa Borderland.” *Third World Quarterly* 36 (6): 1145–1159.
Rancière, J. 1999. *Dis-agreement: Politics and Philosophy*. Translated by Julie Rose. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
Rancière, J. 2007. “What Does it Mean to be Un?” *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 21 (4): 559–569.
Ruti, M. 2017. “The Ethics of Precarity: Judith Butler’s Reluctant Universalism.” In *Remains of the Social: Desiring the Post-Apartheid*, edited by Maurits van Bever Donker, Ross Truscott, Gary Minkley, and Premesh Lalu, 92–116. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.
Schwartz-Marin, E., and A. Cruz-Santiago. 2016. “Pure Corpses, Dangerous Citizens: Transgressing the Boundaries Between Experts and Mourners in the Search for the Disappeared in Mexico.” *Social Research* 83 (2): 483–510.
Stierl, M. 2016. “Contestations in Death – the Role of Grief in Migration Struggles.” *Citizenship Studies* 20 (2): 173–191.
Ticktin, M. 2011. *Casualties of Care: Immigration and the Politics of Humanitarianism in France*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
Ticktin, M. 2016. “Thinking Beyond Humanitarian Borders.” *Social Research* 83 (2): 255–271.
Vance, C. 2011. “States of Contradiction: Twelve Ways to Do Nothing About Trafficking While Pretending To.” *Social Research* 78 (3): 933–948.
Verdery, K. 1999. *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
Vlieghe, J. 2010. “Judith Butler and the Public Dimension of the Body: Education, Critique and Corporeal Vulnerability.” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 44 (1): 153–170.
Weber, L., and S. Pickering. 2011. *Globalization and Borders: Death at the Global Frontier*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Welcome to Europe. 2010. Mass Grave of Refugees in Evros Uncovered. http://infomobile.w2eu.net/stories/accidents-and-death-at-the-border/.

Welcome to Europe and Youth Without Borders. 2013. Journey Back to Lesvos. http://lesvos.w2eu.net/files/2014/02/Lesvos2013-Screen-DS.pdf.

Welcome to Europe and Youth Without Borders. 2014. http://lesvos.w2eu.net/files/2015/02/Doku-Lesvos-2014_web.pdf.

Willig, R. 2012. "Recognition and Critique: An Interview with Judith Butler." *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory* 13 (1): 139–144.

Zylinska, J. 2004. "The Universal Acts." *Cultural Studies* 18 (4): 523–537.