

GRIEF ACTIVISM AND THE CREATION OF COMMUNITIES ACROSS BORDERS

WHILE EUROPE'S HOSTILE BORDER REGIME KILLS THOUSANDS OF MIGRANTS EVERY YEAR, "GRIEF ACTIVISM" SEEKS TO BUILD CROSS-BORDER COMMUNITIES THROUGH THE COMMEMORATION OF BORDER ATROCITIES AND THEIR VICTIMS. TO ENGAGE THE TRAUMA OF DEATH AND DISAPPEARANCE AND PROTEST BORDER VIOLENCE, "COMMEMORATIONS" HAVE EMERGED, THROUGH WHICH FAMILIES OF THE DISAPPEARED AND ACTIVISTS BUILD COMPLEX COMMUNITIES ACROSS BORDERS.

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You have coined the notion of grief activism. What do you mean by this term?

When thousands of people die at Europe's borders every year, there are many thousands more who mourn their loss: relatives, loved ones, friends, and also entire communities, usually in the Global South. There are also others who may have never known the person who died or disappeared, but who are still struggling against the regime of borders that killed or disappeared them. Over the last years, or really decades, people and groups that are affected in these different ways by border violence have come together to collectively remember and mourn those who are no longer with us.

So, I tried to find a word or an expression to characterize practices that combine grief and protest. I thought of the term "grief activism". Of course, Judith Butler's work has been very important for me. She has written about how grief does not need to be something that is just done in private and hidden away, but that can furnish, in fact, as she writes, "a sense of a political community of a complex order".

In my work, I tried to sketch out some of the ways in which these sorts of complex political communities can come about as a response to the dying and disappearing at Europe's borders.

Could you tell us more about the emergence of “CommemorActions”?

“CommemorAction” is a term that combines the notions commemoration and action. It’s about remembering collectively and it’s about taking action together. Where exactly this term first emerged is difficult to say. But what is clear is that it emerged out of a lived practice. So, through activists and political networks that have engaged and organized around border violence and death already for a very long time, even if they have not used this particular term.

Over the last years, the term has become used very widely and in very different places and contexts. These “CommemorActions” have been done on specific days that are anniversaries of border atrocities. We can think of the 6th of September 2012, for example, when a ship that left from Tunisia capsized near Lampedusa. Or we can think about the 6th of February 2014 when the Spanish border police killed dozens of people who tried to enter the Spanish enclave of Ceuta. These are important days that highlight the violence of European borders. And on these days, people and groups have come together. How they organize and how a commemoration can look like really depends on the local actors.

And it’s often also a reflection of local traditions of mourning and local traditions of protesting. But I think what is really crucial about these practices is their translocal connection. As painful as this sort of political practice is, this is also its strength: in a moment of grief, we collectively try to overcome the borders that have caused this suffering in the first place.

What future perspectives do you see for research and advocacy around the issue of border deaths and disappearances?

I’m quite pessimistic at the moment, because if we look around us and see how migration has been turned into such a politically toxic issue and how border violence and border deaths have become so normalized, I fear that we are further away from ending border deaths than we ever were. This means that there will be a desperate need for much more engagement.

Over the last decades, a lot of research has already been produced on

this issue. By now we know quite well how the mechanics work that ultimately kill people on the move.

But what I feel is lacking is a real transnational effort and a real structure to help the relatives to identify the dead, to search for the missing. I am very much aware that this is an extremely difficult task, of course, because border deaths often occur in remote spaces. But still, international organizations have failed to find really effective ways to collaborate across institutional and other borders. This has meant that it’s often left to activists, social movements, and relatives who are searching and who are trying to find answers. And given the incredibly low chance of finding someone either alive or dead, and the immense trauma that relatives experience, this is an incredibly hard task that should not be left to activist groups.

There is a real failure to do justice to these relatives and their immense pain. And this is a task for the future that a lot of different actors need to take seriously.

REGARDER L’ENTRETIEN VIDÉO :



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<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCZPV5GIVMTDE8Hb6-77O2lg>

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Pour aller plus loin

Stierl, M. (2020). *Migrant Resistance in Contemporary Europe*. Routledge

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