



Thanatic Ethics: The Circulation of Bodies in Migratory Spaces

Workshop #6: Mare Nostrum, Morte Nostra

A partnership between

IRCCS (The Education University of Hong Kong), EMMA (University of Montpellier Paul-Valery), MSH-SUD, MIRANDA / Poetry Talks, La Région Occitanie and CERI (Sciences-Po Paris)

Venue: University of Montpellier Paul-Valery, Montpellier, France

Dates: October 15-16, 2026

Language: English

Deadline for submitting proposals: 1 April 2026

Notification of acceptance: 1 May 2026

Guest of honor: Khaled Mattawa (TBC), poet, translator and William Wilhartz Professor of English Language and Literature at the University of Michigan.

“Thanatic Ethics: The Circulation of Bodies in Migratory Spaces” explores themes related to death in migration. After several series of webinars, five workshops, and four international conferences in Oxford, Kolkata, Hong Kong and Paris, between October 2020 and October 2024, this international, transdisciplinary project is now seeking proposals for Workshop #6, to be held at the University of Montpellier Paul-Valery in France, titled “Mare Nostrum, Morte Nostra”.

Workshop #6 will follow up on Workshops #4 and #5, expanding their focus on accountability and on the Mediterranean while shifting the attention to connection and communication. By invoking the Latin expression *mare nostrum*—reframed here as *morte nostra*—as its title, Workshop #6 situates the question of death within the migratory space of the Mediterranean Sea, a space that can be described paradoxically as both open and promising as well as closed and deadly. From the perspective of the exile, the sea represents the realm of openness, offering the horizon of a better future. Yet, the sea is a claustrophobic space marked by its insurmountable nature, turning both still and ever-moving waters into a cemetery. The paradox also applies to European nations that may see the Mediterranean as an opportunistic expanse of water to be enjoyed in all the connections it offers, but also as a “liquid frontier” (Heller and Pezzani 2017) safeguarding them from the so-called “invasion” of the Other who has conveniently been further otherized and illegalized beforehand to be deemed dangerous.

The possessive *nostrum* is no less paradoxical. To claim the Mediterranean as “ours” is not merely to name a geographical space which is by definition shared as it borders distinct regions or lands, but to impose upon it a symbolic gesture of appropriation, one that is bound to exclude populations and to reduce the complexity that characterizes the Mediterranean as “not one civilization, but a number of civilizations, piled one on top of the other [...]. [A]n ancient crossroads” (Braudel, tome I, p. 8-9). Such a claim turns *de facto* the Other into the same, within a common idea of shared heritage. Yet this appropriation is profoundly selective. While Europe lays claim to the Mediterranean as a cultural and historical space, it simultaneously refuses those who traverse it, illegalizing the very lives that embody

its contemporary interconnectedness. The word *nostrum* thus reveals its contradiction: it designates a shared sea only insofar as sharing does not entail hospitality, political responsibility or, more simply, humanity. What is claimed as “ours” in symbolic and historical terms literally becomes a site of exclusion where the figure of the exiled is persistently constructed as an intruder. Indeed, when it comes to the body lost at sea or washed ashore, the question of appropriation is even more critical for whose dead are they and to what extent is the foreignness of the illegalized migrant increased by his or her death?

In his chapbook entitled *Mare Nostrum* (2019) which deals with the migratory tragedies in the Mediterranean, the Arab American poet and translator Khaled Mattawa seeks to give a voice to the refugees who perished and those who, though they survived, “still fall into the sea” (Mattawa 2019). The title echoes the ancient imperial and colonial formula of the Romans but also the more recent Italian “military and humanitarian” sea rescue operation of the same name launched in 2013. Mattawa reappropriates the title of the operation and, in doing so, confronts Europe and the Western world at large with its responsibilities: if the Mediterranean is “ours”, implying Westerners, with all the neo-colonialist and nationalist connotations that the expression may carry, then the dead who litter its depths are also *our* dead. The “mare nostrum” is thus conceived as a “mortui nostri”. Mattawa intimates that art is more than ever needed to account for the dead and the disappeared, to ensure that their stories be told so that they can be kept alive in our memories and therefore resist against the oblivion brought about by the “desensitizing” (De Genova 2017) effect of mass media coverage of death in migration and its “border spectacle” (ibid.).

Workshop #6 aims to explore the dialectics of sameness and otherness as they relate to both the Mediterranean Sea and the dead. Extending the work initiated in the previous workshops with the translation of Gaspard Njock and Félicien de Heusch’s *Au-delà l’exil*, translation remains one interesting point of entry in terms of connection and communication. Translating has often been and is sometimes still understood through liquid metaphors that are themselves indexed to the smooth processes of assimilation and appropriation. Whether the terms be “flow” (Jakobson 1959; Pynn 2010), “circulation” (Venuti 1995), or “flux” (Berman 1985; Venuti 1995), it seems fair to say that they defy any sense of stasis or impediment and that they suggest a pacifying and seamless operation. But is such a metaphor accurate and is its implementation tenable or even desirable? Typhaine Samoyault reminds us of “the extent to which [translation] has exercised the power to appropriate and diminish otherness throughout the history of cultural encounters, which are themselves also histories of domination.” Recognising that language can separate as much as it can unite and that translation is a site of conflict, she urges us to recognize its violent power, one that “bring[s] back the dead and everything that is being silenced” (Samoyault 2020). Considering translation as an art of the collective, an art that re-members and re-calls, does not imply we should erase or ignore it as a space of confrontation and conflict, one that can facilitate communication and / or foreclose it.

Following this, Workshop #6 invites participants to reflect on the ethical, political and aesthetic implications of the Mediterranean Sea as it intersects with the dead through the lens of translation, art and other discourses. Dwelling on the question of appropriation as it underscores the negotiation between the same and the other, between free flowing and turbulent processes, between absorption and resistance, Workshop #6 seeks to investigate further the place of the dead and the demands they place upon our societies, and ultimately, upon our responsibilities.

Proposals may address, but are not limited to, the following topics:

- **Death in/and Migration:** How representations of mortality and migration intersect, and what these intersections reveal about the circulation of bodies in migratory spaces.
- **Translation and the Mediterranean:** How translation is useful as a tool and a process when it comes to speaking of death in migration, how it may recognize, rename and celebrate the dead, but also how it should be a means to fight back, to map anew, to redefine power relations in and around the Mediterranean
- **Representation:** The visual, performative, and narrative modalities through which migrant experiences and the realities of exile are articulated.
- **Poetry Talks:** What poetry modifies and augments in the discussions of death in migration.
- **Policy:** The interplay between grassroots practices and the political frameworks that shape, regulate, and police the representation of migration and exile.
- **Artivism and Engagement:** Strategies of social, cultural, and political engagement through literature and the arts, highlighting community-based and activist approaches.
- **Art Practice/Creation:** Innovative practices that challenge conventional notions of art and engage with lived experiences in transformative ways.
- **Education/Pedagogy/Translation:** How educational practices contribute to understanding migration, death and exile, including teaching methods, community-based learning, and public programming.

We invite contributions from academics, researchers, artists/filmmakers, individuals with lived experiences, community organizations, and educators to **send their proposals** (a 250-word abstract, title, author's name, a 150-word bio, and contact information) to the workshop email address: thanaticethics@gmail.com

Speakers can explore alternative ways of presenting their work and/or research that would be more sharing than presenting, adopting non-traditional modes of involving the participants. It may include open mic interventions, open discussions, artistic or staged presentations, creative workshops, performed talks, interactive and/or multilingual conversations, etc. In this case, a time requirement for consideration should be included in the proposal.

Proposals for group panels with participants coming from different disciplines who plan to prepare their panel collectively, are also welcome, including panels that would offer a follow up on papers/panels presented at previous Thanatic Ethics events. A selection of papers will potentially be considered for publication.

Speakers will be expected to pay for their travel, accommodation, and / or visa fees as applicable.

For more details on the Thanatic Ethics project: <https://www.thanaticethics.com/>

And also: <https://emma.univ-montp3.fr/fr/valorisation-partenariats/programmes-europe%C3%A9ens-et-internationaux/thanatic-ethics>

Workshop Organizers:

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- Dr Karim Daanoune, EMMA, University of Montpellier Paul-Valery
- Prof Judith Misrahi-Barak, EMMA, University of Montpellier Paul-Valery

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