



## Thanatic Ethics: The Circulation of Bodies in Migratory Spaces

### International Conference #3

#### Death “Matters”: The (Im)material and the Sensory in Death in Migration

**Venue:** The Education University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

**Dates:** January 7-9, 2024

**Language:** English

**Deadline for submitting proposals:** Oct 1, 2023

**Notification of acceptance:** Oct 15, 2023

- This conference will be held in person and participants will be expected to travel to the venue and book accommodation at their own cost, obtaining their visa as applicable.

**Full description of the Thanatic Ethics Project and past events:** <https://www.thanaticethics.com>

#### **Project Co-convenors:**

Dr Bidisha Banerjee, International Research Centre for Cultural Studies, The Education University of Hong Kong

Dr Thomas Lacroix, Sciences Po-CERI / Maison Française d’Oxford

Prof Judith Misrahi-Barak, EMMA, Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3, France

**We are delighted to announce that the conference will open with an immersive sound installation titled *Spaces of Exception* by the award winning, NYC based sound artist Freya Powell. Highly relevant to the conference themes, the installation uses the voice as a medium to speak to the ambiguous loss experienced as a result of ‘Prevention Through Deterrence’, a US immigration policy along the US-Mexico border.**

“Thanatic Ethics: The Circulation of Bodies in Migratory Spaces” explores themes related to death in migration, such as the longing to be buried at ‘home’ for diasporic people, body repatriation in the context of migration, or the difficult identification of bodily remains in the context of the current migrant crisis. The conference will also consider the individual and collective stakes of migrant death under surveillance, as well as the politics of ‘grievability’, of spectrality and (un)accountability.

After several series of webinars, online and on-site workshops, and two international conferences between October 2020 and October 2023, this international, transdisciplinary project is now seeking proposals for Conference #3 to be held at the Education University of Hong Kong, Jan 7-9, 2024, entitled ‘**Death “Matters”: The (Im)material and the Sensory in Death in Migration**’.

This conference builds on work done during the first two conferences in Oxford and Kolkata in 2022, the focus of which was, respectively, “Bodies on the Edge: Life and Death in Migration” and “Response, Repair, Transformation”. We will also follow up on the Workshops, particularly Workshop #4 entitled “In Search of Accountability” while also developing new insights.

In the sustained attention given to the political and social, individual and collective dimensions of death in migration, one sometimes neglects aspects that pertain to the materiality of the bodies engaged in the process of migration, whether the migrants reach their destination or not. Whether dead before arrival or

very much alive, bodies will often bear the marks/wounds of migration (skin, organs, limbs). If the body is a vector of the de-territorialization at stake, it is also a vector of the anticipated re-territorialization. But what if the re-territorialization doesn't happen, if the body cannot be found? What if the physical rituals of burial or cremation cannot be performed, if the corpse cannot be touched and embraced one last time and the funeral music cannot resound? If food cannot be shared during the wake?

In this third conference, we wish to examine the complexities attached to the materiality / immateriality of the body as those concepts are ensnared in death in migration. Moving beyond the body of the dead, we want to address the sensory dimension of death in migration at large, the ambiance of rituals, remembrance and mobilisation and how they have been addressed in art and research. This may pertain to the sensory experience of dying a violent death; or it may involve the act of witnessing - through seeing or hearing - death in migration. Whether in the process and representation of dying in migration, or in the response that is provided by the families and the community of the deceased, senses play a crucial role. In the present context of increased surveillance at sea and on land, of digital, virtual and dematerialized processes at all levels, to what extent might a sensory approach to migrant death provide a radical new lens that may force us to adjust our perspectives and renegotiate our relationship to the world? We seek to revisit issues pertaining to death in migration such as rituality, art exhibitions and 'happenings', activists' mobilisation or grieving using the lens of the sensory (visual, auditory, haptic, and the subjective states they generate).

Here, we build on a crucial question that was also raised at the previous conferences: how can literature, film, theatre and the arts prevent the bodies of the dead migrants from being reduced to *immaterial* objects in all senses of the word? Are artists and writers able to re-endow the bodies of the migrants with a certain form of extended life, albeit not breath? How can they contribute to the necessary and urgent re-foundation of our presence in/to the world?

Whether in the context of contemporary migrant deaths or that of enslaved people, finding and reclaiming objects that belonged to the deceased, objects one can hold in one's hand, seems crucial. But what are the stakes of preserving the (im)material archives? How are survivors and descendants grieving today, aided by personal objects and bodily movements? We will also focus on different methodologies for re-translating immateriality back into material presence. Such a retranslation, we argue, is crucial to defy a regime of border-policing that works through the denial or even the disappearance of migrant bodies lost at sea or on land. Connecting the role of the senses to thanatic ethics, we ask whether sound or visual studies, or even digital humanities, can be pertinent in bearing witness to migrant deaths and working towards more accountability and social justice.

We welcome contributions from the Humanities, Social Sciences and related disciplines, including archeology, environmental studies, thanatology, museum and archive studies, on the following themes in the context of death in migration, though not exclusively—multi and trans-disciplinary perspectives will be favoured as one of the best possible ways to understand how migrant deaths are deeply entangled with our political, social, individual and collective identities:

- Perception and reception; the sensory approach in the narratives and representations of death in migration;
- The echo vs the spectacle of migrant death in the media: what differences, what stakes?
- Hearing the narratives of death in migration vs reading them;
- Listening as an inclusive mode of attention, as connecting with the voices of ancestors and sharing with the living;
- The poetics, ethics and politics of sound and listening;
- The poetics, ethics and politics of touch and haptic modes of care;
- The visibility/invisibility of bodies, modes of seeing and recognition;
- The creation of artistic soundscapes as resistance and awareness raising;
- The audio and/or visual ambiance of collective mobilisation and rituals;
- The use of one's senses and body in the solidarity movements at the local, national and international

levels:

- The physical body vs the memorialized body; the sensitive approach;
- Body parts; organ trafficking as another denial of the integrity of the human body;
- The physicality of the mourning process as care and repair, as transformative process (individual and collective practices, healing rituals, memorials, commemorations);
- The (im)material archive (shipwrecks, abandoned objects etc.);
- Creating safe spaces to reflect individually and collectively; working towards social and historical justice;
- The legal, individual and collective dimension of the digital connection in the context of death in migration; the legal and civil stakes of past actions in the present;
- How would the sense of justice be framed within an approach through the senses?
- The stakes of the dematerialization of the processes;
- The challenges of restoring the materiality of the body and performing burial rites when the bodies themselves are absent?
- Bio-politics, Necropolitics, and the uses of the migrant body as a means of establishing political and economic power;
- Implementing deterrence through the manipulation of the migrant's (dead) body / creating resistance.

We invite contributors to **send their proposals** (a 250-word abstract, title, author's name, a 150-word bio, and contact information) to the conference email address: [thanaticethics@gmail.com](mailto:thanaticethics@gmail.com)

Being focused on such an emotionally challenging topic as "Thanatic Ethics", it would also be possible for the speakers to 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, group panels with participants coming from different disciplines who plan to prepare their panel collectively, artistic or staged presentations, creative workshops, performed talks, interactive and / or multilingual conversations, etc. Through these alternative modalities we hope to reflect the multi-directional entanglement of the themes broached in the organisation of the conference itself. In this case, a time requirement for consideration should be included in the proposal. Conventional 20-minute papers, followed by discussion time, are, of course, very welcome too, as are combinations of both.

