

The onto-politics of body counts

Political Studies

1–21

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DOI: 10.1177/00323217251360049

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with a conundrum: the contention that the dead are dehumanized both through body counts and their absence. To understand this paradox we need to excavate who normatively speaking has a life that counts. I advance the idea of countability as a novel explanatory concept to name the general conditions of possibility, including the ordering of grievability, that underpins acts of counting. Among other things, orders of grievability regulate who enjoys ontological status as fully human. To be eligible for counting an embodied being must first be countable. Furthermore, body counts are performative. They have onto-political effects, organizing and facilitating, reflecting and reiterating, the differential valuation of human lives as well as the distribution of ontological possibilities. The failure or refusal to count has parallel onto-political effects. (De)humanization, however, is not just an issue of whether deaths are counted but, as shown here, how they are counted.

Keywords

body counts, countability, (de)humanization, grievability, orders of grievability

Accepted: 30 June 2025

Counting is central to how mortality in the world around us is understood. From its origins in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Bills of Mortality documenting deaths from the plague, through the emergence in the 1660s of ‘political arithmetic’ (Hacking, 1990: 16; Porter, 2020), to its nineteenth-century successor, ‘statistics’, coined as a ‘new term for quantitative evidence’ (Best, 2012: 11), tallying deaths has become, over time, an increasingly integral part of statecraft in countries across the globe. Since the nineteenth century, other types of death data have emerged. The daily ‘body counts’ of enemy dead during the Vietnam war, which were so central to US strategy (Kaplan, 2011). The efforts of the United Nations Statistical Commission to find ways during the mid-2000s to measure violence against women (Merry, 2016). The national and global pandemic fatality metrics, which since 2020, have provided a (partial) record of the widespread devastating effects of COVID-19. Numbers chronicle what is happening in society. Such are the

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apparent ‘seductions of quantification’ (Merry, 2016) that, as Peter Andreas and Kelly Greenhill (2010: 6) put it, phenomena such as armed conflict, human trafficking, refugee flows, or violence against women ‘are not perceived to be “real” until they are quantified and given a number’.

Several approaches have been adopted in the literature to the question of how death is quantified and with what effects. Attention has focused on how particular death data are generated, whether they are ‘good’ or ‘bad’, accurate or inaccurate, trustworthy or untrustworthy (Best, 2012; Huff, 1991 [1954]; Yates, 2019). Another strand of research has concentrated on the methodological factors and diverse techniques at play in generating different types of fatality metrics (Daponte, 2008; De Montclos et al., 2016; Fischhoff et al., 2007; Jewell et al., 2018; Seybolt et al., 2013b), weighing why in certain circumstances it might be difficult or impossible to garner accurate figures (Daponte, 2007; Davis, 2020; Greenhill, 2010; Seybolt et al., 2013b). To unpick the ‘politics’ of statistics, scholars have examined their weaponization in concrete political struggles to see how they are deployed in contentious and antagonistic ways by rival parties mustering competing ‘facts’ to bolster their own political claims and agendas (Greenhill, 2010; Jewell et al., 2018; Seybolt et al., 2013a: 3; Wilke and Naseemi, 2022), as well as exploring how they inform transitional justice processes (Jewell et al., 2018), or contribute to governance projects (Merry, 2016). Within this, and most germane to the concerns of this paper, scholars have explored ‘body counts’ in relation to topics such as global crime and conflict (Andreas and Greenhill, 2010; Greenhill, 2010; Gregory, 2014), civilian casualties (Aronson, 2013; Daponte, 2007; Seybolt et al., 2013b), violence (De Montclos et al., 2016), migrant deaths (Tazzioli, 2015), specific wars or conflicts (Chernus, 2003; Gregory, 2022; Hamourtziadou, 2021; Hil and Wilson, 2007; Hyndman, 2007; Wilke and Naseemi, 2022; Williams, 2005), the biopolitics of death (Masters, 2007), trends in armed violence (Rodehau-Noack, 2023), and capital punishment (Smith, 2020).

This paper is also concerned with body counts, including in contexts of conflict. Attention here has typically focused on issues such as military accountability, the lawfulness of military action, or whether the military values the lives of those that are killed (Gregory, 2022: 482), as well as on the political and methodological challenges of counting those who die in conflict (Andreas and Greenhill, 2010; Seybolt et al., 2013b). I want to extend the discussion in a different theoretical direction by investigating an issue that is often referred to in the literature but never really scrutinized in depth; namely, that both counting the dead *and* not counting them are alleged to be dehumanizing. One aim of this paper, therefore, is to interrogate why the same phenomena, dehumanization, is taken to be a by-product of both counting (the more common position) and its polar opposite, not counting.

To make sense of this conundrum we need, in my view, to excavate what it reveals about who, normatively speaking, has a body or a life that counts *and who does not*. Here I develop the idea of countability as a novel explanatory concept to name the general conditions that underpin acts of counting. By countability, I mean the normative conditions that determine whether a particular subject qualifies as countable or not and, if so, how they are countable. It is my contention that such conditions are themselves underpinned and shaped by what I call, drawing on previous work (Lloyd, 2017, 2018), orders of grievability: the inegalitarian and hierarchical ordering of bodies that, among other things, establishes whose lives matter and who enjoys status as fully human. Orders of grievability work, in part, through the production of ontology. The second aim of this paper, therefore, is to show that the body counts imbricated in such orders also have

onto-political effects, generating and/or consolidating ontological possibilities for those who live and die. Not counting particular deaths in conflict, I aver, has a similar effect.

There are five stages to my argument. First, I outline the claims charging that dehumanization is both an effect of body counts and their absence. Second, to establish the performativity of counting and the place of classification within it I consider the relation between counting and accounting or counting *as*. Third, to introduce the idea of countability, I turn to an example of where counting the dead did not take place. Fourth, I set out the onto-political relation between counting, countability and grievability, because it is this relation, I argue, that conditions which lives count, are counted, and how. Central to this is a discussion of how grievability is organized. Finally, I return to the paradox at the core of this paper to tease out further some of the complexities of these competing claims.

(Not) Counting Is Dehumanizing

Dehumanization may seem an unusual term to employ in the context of statistical recording. The term is normally reserved to describe the systematic stripping away of human qualities from a population, whether by designating them as sub-human in some way, using animal vocabulary to describe them, or objectifying them. The closest example of a link between dehumanization and enumeration in such discussions is found in the de-individualizing practice of referring to members of said populations by numbers rather than names, as happened notoriously to prisoners in Nazi concentration camps (Frankl, 2008). More recently, the same practice has been used with asylum seekers arriving by boat both to Australia (Nyers, 2006: 156n.73) and to the UK (Wheeler, 2022), each of whom is designated by a letter–number sequence (with the letters denoting the boat they arrived on and the numbers identifying their disembarkation number).

Critics argue in respect of body counts that mathematical abstraction works in a *similar* way. ‘Statistics dehumanize’, it is said, first, because ‘dead bodies are sanitized into numbers that neutralize death’ (Van Courtland Moon, 2004: 6). Representing the dead ‘as so many anonymous numerals’, for Joseph Pugliese (2006: §12), means that ‘flesh and blood bodies are decorporealised into so many algorithmic digits’. Body counts thus obviate the bloody horrors of war or the trauma of death (Gregory, 2014, 2016; Hil and Wilson, 2007: 36; Hyndman, 2007: 36) and so cannot adequately represent the actual bodies of the dead and injured. In treating death as an objective measurable fact, they perform, what Monica Casper and Lisa Jean Moore (2009: 66; see also 88–89) in a discussion of infant mortality, describe as ‘a type of numerical magic’ that transmogrifies real corpses and actual grief into an impersonal statistical aggregate. But as Ximena Ortiz observes: ‘there is nothing abstract about a corpse’ (cited in Hamourtzidou, 2021: 65). Each statistic refers to ‘a life violently ended’ (Hamourtzidou, 2021: 104).¹

Treating the dead as anonymous numerals – x numbers killed – dehumanizes them because it evacuates the human from the data, generating what one historian has described as ‘history without a human face’ (Coleman, 1995: 641; see also Nelson, 2015). Casualty metrics may aggregate those killed and injured according to certain categories (male, female, combatant, civilian, child, adult and so on), though not all do, and such categorization is often fraught, however, the coldly arithmetic, abstract, and anonymous nature of body counts, it is argued, indicate nothing about the singular ‘person-as-such’ (Edkins, 2011: viii) who has died, about their ‘life [or]. . . decisions’ (Masters, 2007: 49) or their ‘dashed hopes, and shattered dreams’ (Ashwari, 2002: xi). The lack of details about *who* rather than *what* the dead are (Arendt, 1958: 179), captured in the anonymization that

characterizes fatality metrics, means that they cannot be properly lamented since ‘numbers alone cannot represent human lives’ (Hamourtziadou, 2021: 179). Body counts cannot fully humanize the dead.

Contrast this with the apparently paradoxical counterclaim that it is the very *absence* of death data that are dehumanizing because they render uncounted populations invisible and derealize their experiences of violence, pain, and suffering, most notably in war and conflict. Discussing the lack of an accurate death toll for those killed in the civil war in South Sudan in 2014, Peter Martell observes that failing to count dehumanizes. It represents a scandalous ‘dishonour to the dead’ (Martell, 2014). Counting, by contrast, ‘is a minimum form of respect’ owed to those killed (Copeland, cited in Martell, 2014; see Aronson, 2013: 34), a way to ‘redeem their humanity’ (Auchter, 2016: 42) by acknowledging that they once lived. For Daoud Kuttab (2007: 887), ‘Nowhere was . . . dehumanization more evident than in the absence of an actual counting of Iraqi casualties’. Although body counts turn victims into ‘nameless, faceless abstractions’, as also noted earlier, they demonstrate ‘for ever and ever that they [those killed] lived and died. . . . When a human being’s death is erased from history, so is their life’ (Chernus, 2003). ‘Not counting ‘enemy’ casualties would seem to be the ultimate form of dehumanization’, writes Roberto Rodriguez (2011): ‘No need to count their bodies, because they’re not worthy of being identified or even acknowledged’.

On this reading, body counts are essential to remembrance, a way to recognize those killed in conflict and the sacrifices they have made (Gregory, 2014). No surprise, therefore, that Iraq Body Count (n.d.), a web-based project set up to log the names and demographic information of civilian deaths stemming from the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, contends that ‘our common humanity demands the recording of war deaths’. Or that, as a result of the United Nations not collecting data on the numbers killed in the South Sudanese civil war, a group of activists set up Remembering the Ones We Lost ‘to humanise the cost of war by counting and naming all those dead and missing’ (Centre for Law & Transformative Change, n.d.). A project that one of its organizers, Anyieth D’Awol, describes as a ‘vital step to recognising. . . collective loss’ in a context where there is a ‘lack of justice, accountability and acknowledgement of losses’ (cited in Martell, 2014).

Where the first position sees counting, in diverse ways, as a mechanism for dehumanizing the dead, the second regards its absence as the mechanism whereby both the humanity and value of the dead are repudiated. How, though, can dehumanization be effectuated both by counting and by not counting? Why is it the case, as in Iraq or South Sudan, that not all deaths seem to count enough to be counted? Why do the deaths of some populations only appear publicly in statistical terms and no other forms? What does it indicate about the lives that preceded them when deaths are either only recorded in numerical terms or not tallied at all? To address these questions, we need to step back from specific counts and generalized statements about the effects of counting or not counting to consider the onto-political relationship between counting, countability, and grievability, because, I will suggest, it is this relationship that conditions which lives count, are counted, and how. As a first stage, therefore, I turn to the question of accounting – or counting *as*.

Counting as

It is often presumed that fatality metrics provide brute, albeit possibly incomplete, apolitical data about the numbers of the dead in a specific context: the war in Iraq or the civil

war in South Sudan, for instance. The idea prevalent within society that ‘numerical data offer a particularly reliable form of truth’ (Merry, 2016: 26) or ‘objective data’ about the world (Andreas and Greenhill, 2010: 264) leads to a tendency to treat numbers as if they are scientifically derived ‘hard’ facts. Such numbers in turn then often come to be viewed as indisputable, innocent, transparent, impartial, precise, a- or non-political, and, when they gathered officially, authoritative. Since they are purportedly less open to manipulation than other information sources, numbers are presumed to furnish a particularly ‘powerful form of evidence’ (Best, 2012: 131; see also Yates, 2019).

Following this logic, counting supposedly neutrally logs what already exists in the world, while what is counted is taken to be independent of and separate from the process of computation itself. But matters are not that simple. Counting is a socio-political practice. As various commentators (Auchter, 2016; Best, 2012; Martin and Lynch, 2009; Seybolt et al., 2013b) note, before any kind of body count can take place, decisions must be made not just about what is to be counted but also, *inter alia*, about who is going to undertake the count, when, how, and why. The answers are manifold. The who might be a government body, a non-governmental organization, the military, a charity, a research body or one of the parties to a conflict. The why might be to track the human cost of war (Gregory, 2022), the scale of military success, how a conflict is progressing (Auchter, 2016), to inform policy (Rodehau-Noack, 2023), or to challenge or confirm figures already circulating in the public realm. Simplifying methodologically, the how might involve either recording or estimating the dead (Seybolt et al., 2013a: 8).² That is, grounding the count in records of actual, verified deaths (recording) or in inference based on a survey of a sample of the affected population (estimating).³ The when might be after a major event, as it is ongoing, or some combination of the two (Daponte, 2007). The why might be to quantify the scale of violence either in future wars (Rodehau-Noack, 2023) or in a specific conflict (Gregory, 2022). And so on. These decisions condition the eventual shape, scope, and accuracy of the ensuing fatality metric. Estimating, for instance, can generate both higher and lower figures than recording (Aronson, 2013). Counting during a conflict may be more dangerous and thus lead to less accurate results than counting deaths after that conflict has concluded (Daponte, 2007). Different understandings of what, who, why, how, and when to count will lead, therefore, to different numbers being counted.

More importantly for the argument developed in this paper, counting needs to be understood as a *performative* socio-political practice or technology. Those who attempt to measure the world, as Sally Engle Merry (2016: 21) observes, ‘create the world they are measuring’. Statistics, in other words, ‘do not just describe reality – they create it’ (Walter and Andersen, 2013: 8–9). They generate what Maggie Walter and Chris Andersen (2013: 121) call ‘statistical imaginaries’, or ways of making sense of the world that rest on and perpetuate certain ‘truth claims’ (to borrow Foucault’s term) about it. Numbers organize and facilitate forms of perception, understanding, and action, and foreclose others. As highly selective bio- and necro-political processes that *constitute* objects of quantification rather than merely logging them, body counts, I hold, are onto-politically framed and framing.⁴ By onto-political I mean that claims about what exists in the world are not simply descriptions of reality, of what is given there, but are, rather, enactive of it. Ontologies are political, therefore, in the sense that they are generated by historically delimited and culturally bounded norms, political and social institutions, the operations of power, and material practices, including, I am suggesting, quantification and the concrete political decisions about who to count and how. This becomes particularly clear when we consider the question of who is counted and as what in specific contexts.

One feature of the war in Gaza, which began in October 2023, has been the highly public contestation over mortality statistics for the conflict.⁵ Although international legal standards exist that broadly define the legitimate targets of war,⁶ one area of disagreement centres on who, among Gaza's dead, counts as a civilian and who a combatant. Based on Gaza Ministry of Health data, which itself does not differentiate between combatant and civilian, analysis by Action on Armed Violence, for instance, specifies that at least 30,122 (or 74%) of the 40,717 deaths reported by 7 October 2024 were civilians, mainly women and children, though it notes this figure is 'likely to be an underestimate'. In total, 10,595 deaths (26% of the total) 'at most' were combatant deaths (Cockerill, 2024). Figures cited by the Israeli Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, however, claim that 17,000 of those killed were combatants (or 'terrorists') (Ortal, 2024), while an 'official IDF estimate' put 'militant' deaths at 17,000–20,000 (cited in Fox, 2024: 29). This would suggest that, for the same period, approximately 41% to 48% of those killed were combatants.⁷

The contested nature of the combatant/civilian binary can also be seen in the reporting of some journalists' deaths in Gaza. As of 7 April 2025 investigations by the US-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) have confirmed that 165 Palestinian journalists have been killed in Gaza (CPJ, 2025a).⁸ Under international law, journalists are civilians not combatants.⁹ This applies even if, as the CPJ (2025b) notes, they are 'affiliated with an armed non-state actor – even one classified as a terrorist group', such as media outlets run by or affiliated with Hamas, multiple employees of which have been killed by Israel (Davies et al., 2024). Israeli officials, however, have characterized many of the latter as militants or terrorists, and thus 'lawful targets', simply 'masquerading' as journalists (Zhuang and Ahmad, 2024; see also Davies and et al, 2024; Fabian, 2025; Kelly, 2025; Reuters, 2024).

Contingent on who provided them and why, these various metrics 'account' (Martin and Lynch, 2009) for the dead in different ways, thus constituting alternative realities of the conflict in Gaza. In the first, a reality where, depending on the source, either the dead are disproportionately civilians who should be protected, or significant numbers are combatants who are legitimately killable. In the second, a reality where, again depending on the source, journalists are civilians deserving of protection or they are terrorists in disguise and not so-deserving. Counting, as Martin and Lynch point out, is not just a 'calculative operation' or act of tallying. To 'count is to classify as well as to enumerate', which necessitates 'determinations about *what counts* as a possible object in the field counted' (Martin and Lynch, 2009: 246, original emphasis). It entails *accountability*, 'counting as' a member of the class of objects being counted (Martin and Lynch, 2009), which is based on normative judgements about what belongs where. This applies, as their work shows, both to the counting of things (their examples being chromosomes and DNA matches) and of people (they refer to estimates of crowd size and counting votes). Although they do not explicitly consider body counts, it seems to me that their work has potential purchase here also.

Paying attention to the categorization of individual deaths could provide insight into some of the onto-political mechanisms through which competing body counts performatively structure reality; that is, into what *specific* numbers *do*. How, for instance, through judgements about what group a particular body belongs to (civilian, combatant, journalist, terrorist) they govern the way the world is organized and condition our understanding of it. If, as Martin and Lynch (2009: 263, original emphasis) note, 'counting *as* simultaneously establishes *what* is in the world as well as how much there is of it', then this would

imply that body counts, as a species of enumeration, would have similar onto-political – and indeed epistemological – effects, as the examples from Gaza illustrate.

Martin and Lynch's work focuses attention on what happens in a count and how it is structured; how decisions are made about what categories to use and about whether some entity (human or nonhuman) belongs to that category and can be counted within it. In terms of body counts, however, we have seen the issue is not always to do with what a particular body is counted *as* but whether some bodies are counted at all. Less an issue of accountability, in Martin and Lynch's sense, than one of what I refer to as *countability*.¹⁰ Before I flesh out what I mean by this term, I want to turn by way of illustration to another example. This returns us to the case of the Iraq War that began in 2003 but focuses this time on the British Government's approach to counting the dead of that conflict. My argument in what follows is that not counting is also onto-political; it too shapes ways of perceiving and understanding the world and can generate its own governance and policy outcomes.¹¹

To Count or Not to Count

During the war, the UK Ministry of Defence (MoD) gathered and published statistics on the number of British soldiers killed or injured in Iraq. It knew precisely where and when each had died (Williams, 2004). An MoD-hosted website continues to list the names of the dead, with links to individual entries for each of those killed (Ministry of Defence, n.d.). The entries typically include testimonials from senior officers and/or family, some personal information about the decedent, plus details about the cause and site of their death (for a fuller analysis, see Zehfuss, 2009). In 2004, however, the MoD could not, as Michael Williams (2004: 17) observes, 'estimate the number of dead Iraqi civilians to the nearest ten thousand'. 'The dead of Iraq', in the words of Robert Fisk (2005), 'were simply written out of the script. Officially', as he noted at the time, 'they do not exist' (see also Iraq Body Count, n.d.).¹²

Some, such as Baroness Crawley in a House of Lords debate (HL Deb 25 February 2004), and Baroness Symons of Vernham Dean, The Minister of State (Middle East), Foreign and Commonwealth Office, in a statement to the Lords (HL Deb 17 November 2004), claimed that this 'official silence' (Hil and Wilson, 2007) was because it was impossible to get accurate figures. Similarly, a later Government statement in the House of Lords contended that while 'every civilian death is a tragedy' the Iraqi Government was 'best placed to monitor deaths among their own civilians' (Triesman, 2006: col. 870). As one commentator notes, 'difficulties with compiling figures' were 'repeatedly taken as grounds against counting death at all' (Rappert, 2021). Others took a different view. One military source informed Williams (2004: 17, my emphasis) that 'We don't keep a tally *because no one really wants to know*'.¹³ Despite the invasion of Iraq being partly justified on the grounds of freeing the Iraqi people (Bluth, 2004; Rappert, 2021), the British Government appears, according to this latter view, to have decided not to count the number of Iraqi civilians killed in this conflict because it did not want to be cognizant of the civilian death toll. Deliberately perpetuating 'the unknowability' (Aronson, 2013: 36) of these deaths meant not just that they were uncounted; the British Government seems also to have decided that they were (publicly) *uncountable*.¹⁴

If counting is the practice of enumeration or reckoning, then my contention is that countability refers to those general conditions of possibility that both qualify a subject for a count – that craft it into a *countable* body – and structure and shape the act of counting.

These conditions, I tender, in relation to body counts are inextricably connected with how grievability is ordered. As I will propose shortly, they establish which lives count as losses, which deaths can be ‘quietly calculated without ever being named as such’ (Butler, 2022: 86), and which matter insufficiently to be counted at all. Understanding the relation between counting, countability and grievability, I am thus proposing, helps make sense of who is counted and how, why some bodies appear to be countable only numerically while others are ‘counted’ in ways that, ostensibly at least, better register their humanity, and why certain bodies are countable as losses while others are not countable in this way and, as such, are left uncounted. It thus aids in clarifying the previously observed paradox of dehumanization in relation to (not) counting by calling attention to the (shifting) hierarchies of value that determine *prior to any count* what constitutes a countable death. In this way, both counting and not counting, can reflect and sustain differentially distributed ontological possibilities.

Ordering Grievability

The term grievability originates with critical theorist Judith Butler (2004, 2009, 2020, 2022). Reflecting Butler’s (2004; see also 2009) initial concerns with which of the dead qualify for public mourning, to date scholars have primarily drawn on grievability to explore who, in particular conflicts, is eligible, variously, for obituaries (Millar, 2015; Zehfuss, 2009), public commemoration, or memorialization (Millar, 2015, 2017; Purnell, 2018; Rashid, 2022), as well as how particular deaths are framed by the media and other bodies (Gregory, 2012; Mhanna and Rodan, 2019; Morse, 2016). Such work tends to emphasize the *posthumous* dimensions of grievability (but see Gregory, 2012), particularly un-grievable deaths. For Butler, however, grievability is not exclusively concerned with death or the dead,¹⁵ since it ‘already operates in life as a characteristic attributed to living creatures’ (Butler, 2020: 59, 2022: 101). As a ‘presupposition for the life that matters’ (Butler, 2009: 14), grievability is ‘a condition of life’s emergence and sustenance’ (Butler, 2009: 15). Determinations of who is (un)grievable, in other words, are already active before death. (We will see the significance of this for counting below.) As such, grievability is tied conceptually to considerations of life, living, and (in)equality (Butler, 2020), or what Butler terms livability. Understood thus, grievability bears close connections to what Didier Fassin (2018: 92) calls ‘the politics of life’: the ‘differentiation in the treatment of lives and its meaning in terms of unequal worth’. It is this wider understanding of grievability, as registering in both life and death, that I call on in this paper.

Taking my lead from both Butler and Fassin, a grievable life is thus conceptualizable as a life that is recognized and sustained in material and non-material ways as socially valued and valuable *prior to* death. It is a protected life, a cared-for life, a supported life. A life that has ‘a living value’ (Butler, 2020: 28) and that ‘*would be* mourned’ if it ‘*were* lost’ (Butler, 2020: 75, original italics). By comparison, un-grievable lives are those ‘*prior to any explicit destruction or abandonment*’ (Butler, 2015: 197, my emphasis) that are not valued, supported, protected, cared-for, or sustained in life. Those for whom the ‘ordinary texture of existence’ (Fassin, 2018: 109) is often one of situational or structural vulnerability or precariousness. Or, as Butler (2020: 121) puts it, lives that ‘from the start’, are regarded ‘as beyond losing, already lost, never living, never having been entitled to life’. Grievability, in other words, is differentially and unevenly allocated, such that some lives matter more than others.

Observing that there *is* a differential division of grievability signals little about *how* particular lives and deaths come to be valued (or otherwise) in the way they are. To understand better the differential valuation of lives and deaths in any context we need to pay attention to what I refer to as orders of grievability (Lloyd, 2017, 2018), a term that draws from the work of both Butler and Jacques Rancière.¹⁶ I use it to refer to the social arrangements (including but not limited to the media conventions, social, political, and military policies, racial, sexual, and other norms, and institutional practices) that both determine and reflect who, within any particular order, has a life that matters and who does not (Lloyd, 2017, 2018), who is grievable and who is not. These might include normative understandings of gender that structure the ‘war system’ (Millar, 2015: 10; see also Millar, 2017) and frame the lives and deaths of men and women in the military in different ways, the ‘racial, gendered, and civilizational norms’ that render the deaths of some civilians, in this case Afghan, ‘impossible to grieve’ (Gregory, 2012: 338), immigration policies that decide which lives can be killed or left to die and which need protecting or saving (Gebhardt, 2020; Wilson et al., 2023) and neoliberal, heteronormative, colonial and racist norms that shape how particular populations live – precariously, vulnerably, in the shadow of violence, at risk of preemptive assault, arbitrary arrest, or abandonment (see, for example, Butler, 2015, 2020, 2022; Perhamus and Joldersma, 2016; Sandset, 2021). Orders of grievability, as I understand them, are constituted through the plural operations of multiple policies, practices, and norms that intersect and combine, but may also clash and diverge.

Orders, which are always multiple and may conflict,¹⁷ further encompass, as I have argued elsewhere (Lloyd, 2017), the norms governing who enjoys ontological status as fully human, the historical and epistemological factors establishing who is eligible for a livable life, and the frames determining what counts as real. They produce what, in Rancière’s (1999) terms, might be understood as a ‘sensate distribution’ of what, in specific contexts, and these vary, is sayable, visible, and audible in terms of *both* lives and deaths. This sensate distribution underpins and structures public responses, shaping, for instance, what is apprehensible as suffering and what fails to register in that way, whether certain deaths are regarded as eventful (deaths that shock or stun) or non-eventful (so common as to be expected), whether they are talked about or not, and, if so, how they are characterized.

While body counts and counting are not normally explored from the perspective of grievability,¹⁸ it is in this context that they need to be situated, because they are *one* of the ways in which the value (or otherwise) of specific lives is established, reiterated, and sustained. Counting as a political technology, I submit, reflects how grievability in a certain setting is ordered. For a death within any order to be perceived as undesirable or unacceptable, a passing that deserves acknowledgement, lamentation, and perhaps, in some contexts, indignation, outrage, or even compensation (on the latter, see Fassin, 2018: 92ff.), it must first be ‘conceptualizable *as a loss*’ (Butler, 2020: 58, original emphasis). One way to record loss, though not the only one, is to count it. To be eligible for *counting*, however, an embodied being must first be intelligible as worth counting. They must be *countable*. For the ungrievable or those who are, to draw on different vocabularies, socially dead (Cacho, 2012; Fassin, 2018; Patterson, 1982), disposable (Cacho, 2012; Mbembe, 2003), or superfluous (Arendt, 1976 [1951]) this is often not the case. Their existences ‘*never* achieve, in the eyes of others, the status of “living”’, are ‘seldom recognized’ or valued, and are ‘often unnamed’ (Holland, 2000:15, original emphasis).¹⁹ The loss of these lives, therefore, may not appear – may not be conceptualizable, publicly perceptible, or *countable* – as a loss.²⁰

Accordingly, orders of grievability entail hierarchies of value. As Lisa Marie Cacho observes, '[v]alue is made intelligible relationally'. It requires 'negativity' (Cacho, 2012: 13). One group's social value consequently depends upon and is 'made legible through the devaluation of an/other' (Cacho, 2012: 15). This indicates why, within any order of grievability some lives are regarded as more deserving of protection and support, while others can be lost, disposed of, or abandoned with impunity.²¹ Evidence of this is discernible in the 'hierarchies of risk and death' (Levy, 2019) developed by states in contexts of protracted conflict to gauge the relative value of military lives vis-à-vis the lives of civilians and enemy non-combatants, a calculation that often evolves over the course of the conflict. Positions in these hierarchies of grievability are 'mutually exclusive' in that risk levels vary for different groups but 'variations in the risk level of one group affect the others' (Levy, 2019: 3). Risk is always relative.²² A lowering of risk for one group implies its raising for another, with a concomitant shift in the worth of the lives of each respective group. What this reveals is that human value and human disposability are always interdependent (Cacho, 2012).

Such comparative valuations are historically, politically, and culturally contingent and thus, potentially, revisable. Nevertheless, within any specific order of grievability some lives will normally *appear* to be naturally and self-evidently more precious and more worth shielding than others. While the relative worth of discrete populations is generally implied rather than made explicit, occasionally details of the specific calculus of grievability in play are disclosed.²³ In August 1994, during the genocide, the Force Commander of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda, Roméo Dallaire received a 'macabre' call from a US official 'engaged in some sort of planning exercise' to determine whether to support UN peacekeeping efforts in Rwanda. The staffer requested to know 'how many Rwandans had died [in the genocide], how many were refugees, and how many were internally displaced'. In response, the official advised Dallaire that 'his estimates indicated that it would take the deaths of 85,000 Rwandans to justify the *risking* of the life of *one* American soldier' (Dallaire and Beardsley, 2004: 499, my emphasis). Rwandan lives were, in short, insufficiently valuable – insufficiently grievable – to persuade the US to send troops to protect them, prompting Dallaire and Beardsley (2004: 522) to ask, 'Are we all human, or are some more human than others?'

Having set out the broad relation between counting, countability and grievability in this section, I now want to return to the paradox at the centre of this paper: why both counting and not counting are taken to dehumanize the dead.

Is Counting Sufficient to Re-Humanize the Dead?

The reasons for not counting those who die in certain settings differ and it is important to be aware of this. As in the earlier discussion of Iraqi civilian deaths, it might be a consequence of generating and maintaining '*official ignorance*' (Aronson, 2013: 44, original emphasis) of these deaths to conceal them from a national or international public. Or, to take a different example from a different context, it might be due to the absence of adequate civil registration infrastructure, such that particular populations die 'without leaving a trace in any legal record or official statistic' (Setel et al., 2007: 1569). The public effect, however, is broadly the same: the lives and deaths of affected populations are publicly occluded resulting in what, in one case, has been dubbed a 'scandal of invisibility' (Setel et al., 2007). Because they are uncounted, indeed are uncountable, quite

literally in the second case, their deaths are not visible and, as such, not perceptible as important or meaningful.²⁴

This happens most often to populations that have *already* been effaced or abnegated in life. Their deaths are uncountable because their lives *before death* are already of little or no value. It is often the most marginalized that are the most ‘unseen, uncountable, and hence, uncounted’ (Setel et al., 2007: 1569). If, as has been asserted, far from simply furnishing neutral or objective death data, counting constitutes reality, then, by implication, deaths that are not counted are not real. Not counting them, in other words, derealizes them. This too has onto-political effects. It implies, as Judith Butler (2004) claims, that any violence against such persons will not register as violence. Absent a public record of their deaths, such as an official count, these deaths and the lives preceding them are negated. There are no countable losses here. Dehumanization takes place, in other words, through what is *not* counted; through what is refused enumeration. It takes place through omission and erasure. It is not that the loss of ungrievable lives do not matter to, or are not mourned by, close friends or family. Of course, they do and are. Indeed, on occasion, such mourning might generate forms of protest that contest this very ungrievability. The point is rather that the public recording (or otherwise) of fatalities, whether by governments, militaries, or other bodies, differs depending on who the subject is. Counting both reflects and bolsters underlying assumptions about whose lives are grievable and have value and whose are not. This is why some deaths are well publicized, others barely so, while still others are either unreported or, in some cases, intentionally ignored. Whether a death is countable or not stems from how grievability in life is ordered.

If the absence of death data is dehumanizing, as has been contended, and if not counting deaths derealizes the dead, then logically we might assume that to counter that dehumanization what is required, *as a bare minimum*, is to count the dead. Counting would signal that their lives have not been disregarded, overlooked, denied, or erased. It would enable the losses suffered and violence experienced to be registered in some way. Such a position construes counting as a mode of recognition that confers (at least) a modicum of visibility on those who are counted (Hyndman, 2007: 39). Body counts *constitute* their deaths as visible.

At first glance, this seems plausible enough. If a failure to count renders a group invisible then, logically, counting, as noted earlier, might be a way to make them seen, to bring them to public view, and to confer significance on them. Assuming that enumeration is performative, as previously proposed, then onto-politically, counting those who have been hitherto uncounted might, *potentially* at least, signal both a re-configuration of social and political reality and an opening up of (new) ontological possibilities. A renovation not just in who is perceptible as countable but also an axiological shift in terms of revaluing lives that were previously de- or un-valued to indicate that they do, in fact, matter. For this to happen, however, the conditions of possibility governing who or what within a particular order of grievability is countable would also need to shift.

Whether counting alone would be *sufficient* to fully counter the dehumanization of a population is moot. One of the most significant objections to body counts is that the human is missing from the data. Fatality metrics are too abstract and impersonal to adequately capture actual human life and death. Humans in their fullness cannot, it is claimed, be reduced to quantification (Nelson, 2015: 18). This view is reinforced by Hamit Dardagan and John Sloboda, the founders of Iraq Body Count, who describe counting as a last resort. It is ‘what we must do when we lack the means to properly record individual lives lost’, when, for instance, the means are not available to document ‘*who* died’

(Dardagan and Slobada, 2021: ix, original emphasis). Enumerating deaths in such contexts may be better than nothing, better than denying that such deaths are happening or seeking to hide them. They might thus serve to acknowledge the human cost of war or ensure that a minimal form of remembrance is afforded to those who are counted. But they do not necessarily, in and of themselves, either contest the production of certain bodies as disposable, or indeed, killable (Wilcox, 2015: 163) or confer (greater) equality of value or grievability on the lives of those who have been killed. This is because the differential valuation of human lives is *also* reflected in *how* the dead are counted, and here things get a little more complicated.

Although the ungrievability of some populations manifests itself precisely by their being uncountable, this is not always the case. For some, their relative value and (un)grievability stems from the way in which they *are* counted. (There are, in other words, gradations of (un)grievability.) In a discussion of Rwanda, Rancière (2007: 77) refers to what he calls a ‘number system peculiar to victims’, an idea that has resonance here. There are two related features of this number system worth remarking. First, it typically counts those that are less or un-grievable in vague terms, such as ‘in hundreds of thousands’ (Rancière, 2007: 77). Fassin makes a similar claim when he compares the ‘counting accuracy to the unit’ for members of the US military who died (in Iraq) and rounding to ‘the nearest hundred thousand’ for Iraqi civilian deaths. These two styles of enumeration taken together, he observes, ‘crudely confirm the difference in the worth granted to their respective lives’ (Fassin, 2018: 101).

In terms of dehumanization, the principal issue here is not just who is counted and who is not. It is *how* different groups are counted. Precisely and accurately, in one case, loosely and approximately in the other. (Arguably it is the latter mode of counting that is usually adjudged to dehumanize the dead.) Within any specific order of grievability, therefore, a distinctive distribution of value, counting, and visibility might be expected that determines the status of individual groups and ‘the kind of attention they merit’ (Rancière, 2009: 99). Both ways of counting – precisely and approximately – attach to a different way of perceiving and valuing those who have died: the former as esteemed individuals, the latter as indistinguishable and fungible members of an indeterminate mass or, what Rancière (2009: 98) terms, ‘multiple’. In other work, Fassin (2012: 241) counterposes ‘the sacred life of the Western forces of intervention, in which each death is counted and honored’ to what he describes as the ‘sacrificeable life’ of enemy troops and their civilian populations ‘whose losses are hardly tallied’. This might imply that to redress such an axiological imbalance, *all* deaths should be counted accurately ‘to the unit’, as a signal that each one matters as much as every other. But, given earlier arguments, this begs the question whether more accurate death tolls would be sufficient to counter the dehumanization of particular dead? The answer appears to be no.

The second feature of this purported number system, which I can only touch on briefly here, concerns the relation between counting and naming it gives rise to. It was noted earlier that one of the concerns with abstract body counts is that they deindividualize, and thus dehumanize, the dead by *anonymizing* them, by treating them as a nameless aggregate. Names, it is countered, are important because they convey individuality or *whoness*: ‘Our names are at the core of who we are and of who we are perceived to be by others’ (Hamourtziadou, 2021: 177). In being denied a name, it is intimated, the latter are denied their individuality and thus their humanity.

Another way in which orders of grievability function, therefore, in terms of the comparative valuation of human lives, is by differentiating between those who are publicly

nameable in death and those who remain nameless. This implies that *counting alone* will never be able to counter dehumanization, to re-humanize the dead, or establish greater equality of grievability; that is, to confirm that each life matters. What is also required, *at the very least*, is their public naming, because a ‘named victim is a recognized victim, a remembered life’ (Hamourtziadou, 2021: 41). By contrast, namelessness, allegedly, signals a life not just forgotten but one that does not warrant remembering; a life that is forgettable. According to this logic, erasing names and identities erases a person’s humanity and uniqueness, while to be named is – ostensibly – a form of acknowledgement, perhaps even, a form of bearing witness (Doss, 2010: 152).²⁵

Conclusion

This paper had two main aims. The first was to explore a conundrum that has often been referred to in the literature on body counts but not investigated in depth where both counting and not counting casualties are taken to be dehumanizing. It explained why both approaches can serve to devalue the lives of certain populations. Counting, by reducing the dead to brute statistics that not only decorporealize and anonymize the dead but that mask the violence that killed them. Not counting, by failing to recognize those who have lost their lives in particular conflicts. What the discussion reveals is the ambivalent nature of counting, as both ‘essential *and* insufficient, dehumanizing *and* reparative’ (Nelson, 2015: 24, original emphasis). But, as demonstrated, counting is a political technology that is both generated by and generates ontological possibilities. Building on this, the second aim of this paper was to explore the ways in which both counting and not counting are performative and have onto-political effects.

To advance this argument, I introduced a distinction between counting as, or accounting, which shows what specific numbers – or their absence – do, and countability, which I developed as a way to refer to the conditions that underpin counting as a political technology and determine whether, in the first place, a particular subject qualifies for counting or not. Conditions that are themselves configured by and configure what I have termed orders of grievability. Those social, political, cultural, and economic arrangements, policies, institutions, and norms (gendered, raced, colonial, patriarchal) that, collectively, govern who, in both life and death, matters. This locution is important, for (un)grievability does not simply determine how the dead are treated. It also governs the existences of the living. In this way, my argument extends existing discussions of grievability by exploring grievability’s connection to counting and countability, while the idea of countability furnishes a new conceptual approach for understanding who, in a given context, might qualify for a count and who might not. Showing, for instance, that in some contexts what is counted is what *already* appears to have value; that is, what is *already* deemed countable, while in others counting merely reinforces the expendability and ungrievability of those lives. It also helps to explain why *not counting* the deaths of particular populations derealizes not just deaths but also the lives that preceded them. In this sense, not counting (re)produces those lives as not-mattering.

It might be objected that one of the limitations of the analysis offered here is that it does not sufficiently problematize a specific racial and imperial, a Western, dynamic that conceives of grievability-as-countability and humanization as statuses that might be bestowed by the already grievable and human on those who have yet to be identified as such.²⁶ One where to be recognized as having lives that matter, the dead of Gaza, Iraq, or Rwanda, the examples used in this paper, need to be counted by western bodies, be they governments,

the media, or other non-governmental organizations. Given the way that patriarchal, sexual, racial, and colonial norms shape who is countable and grievable, who is human, and who is not, there is certainly reason to exercise caution here. First, because of the risk that by focusing on how and who ‘we’ count, Western orders of grievability, and logics of recognition are centred at the expense of other non-Western forms. Second, because of the possibility that in construing certain lives as knowable principally through their ungrievable deaths, other forms of their ‘livingness’ (McKittrick, 2021) might be occluded. Finally, because, ontologically and epistemologically, counting may matter more to those doing the counting than to those being counted. For, as Martina Tazzioli (2015: 5) notes in a discussion of migrant deaths, the danger of focusing solely on the ‘logic of counting’ and attempting to produce a more accurate or exact count is that it may occlude factors that are ‘undetectable’ from the perspective of those counting.²⁷ While these concerns are reason to be vigilant, they are not necessarily a reason to abandon entirely the analysis of body counts, since it is useful to understand both what they do and how they are used.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their excellent and insightful comments on an earlier iteration of this paper.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by a Leverhulme Trust Major Research Fellowship (MRF-2022-048).

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Notes

1. Furthermore, as Jennifer Hyndman (2007: 38) contends, counting ‘transforms unnamed dead people into abstract figures that obfuscate the political meanings of the violence [they experience] and its social and political consequences’, masking not just where and why someone died and the grief of those left behind, but also the wider geopolitical situation within which the killing took place.
2. Recording is sometimes referred to as ‘tallying’. See Daponte (2007).
3. These, in turn, raise further questions: what constitutes a verified death – one that requires a death certificate or another kind of evidence and, if so, what kind? What constitutes an appropriate sample and how is the sample population defined? For further discussion of different methods see Daponte, 2007 and the essays, particularly, in Parts III and IV of the edited volume by Seybolt et al. (2013b). For an account of how to respectfully record death see Fischhoff et al., 2007.
4. I understand ontologies to be normatively produced rather than naturally present in the order of things, contingent rather than unchanging, and contestable rather than universally valid (Lloyd, 2017, 2019). On political ontology see Mol, 1999; see also Butler, 2009.
5. Debate has centred mainly on the accuracy of the figures furnished by the Gaza Ministry of Health (MoH). Some suggest that for methodological or political reasons the figures for those killed are variously erroneous, distorted or ‘manipulated’ (Epstein, 2024a, 2024b; Fox, 2024. See also Epstein and Spagat, 2024), while others argue that the figures provided by MoH are not merely accurate (Huynh et al., 2024: 23) but, building on further independent statistical analysis, may, in fact, be an undercount of Palestinians killed in Gaza (Jamaluddine et al., 2025: 474; Nolen, 2025; Smith et al., 2025: 440). This includes only those who are the direct casualties of violence, not those who die from war-related factors such as diseases due to contaminated water sources or deaths from malnutrition (see Nolen, 2025).

6. Rule 3 of Customary International Humanitarian Law, sometimes called the ‘law of war’, states that ‘All members of the armed forces of a party to the conflict are combatants, except medical and religious personnel’, while Rule 5 notes that ‘Civilians are persons who are not members of the armed forces’ (Henckaerts and Alvermann, 2005: 11, 17; Wilke, 2014; but see Wilke and Naseemi, 2022).
7. Ministry of Health data does not itself differentiate between civilians and combatants. It is unclear how the IDF’s figure is arrived at.
8. A Costs of War report from 1 April 2025 puts the total figure at anywhere between 147 and 232. This compares to 69 killed in both World Wars combined (Turse, 2025: 3; see also Mirkinson, 2024; Robie, 2024). It is worth remarking that foreign media are not allowed to report from Gaza.
9. The only exception is if journalists ‘are directly participating in the hostilities’ (CPJ, 2025a), evidence of which would remove them from the CPJ death toll.
10. Countability also affects what is included in specific counts, as Martin and Lynch’s (2009) work illustrates. My focus here, however, relates to the claim that a failure to count dehumanizes the dead; that is, it relates to situations of not counting and their implications for the uneven valuation of human life.
11. See, for instance, Smith (2020) for a discussion of the effects of suppressing data in developing policy in China in relation to capital punishment.
12. As Fisk notes: ‘No Western official, no Iraqi government minister, no civil servant, no press release from the authorities, no newspaper, mentioned this terrible statistic’. The ‘terrible statistic’ refers to the 62 dead Baghdad civilians killed in a 36-hour period, which a mortuary official reported to Fisk. For more on the ‘erasing’ of Iraq by Western governments and the mainstream media see Hil and Wilson, 2007 and Otterman and Hil, 2010.
13. As the same official revealed, the prospect of enumerating these deaths ‘worried’ Downing Street, because ‘a big number could cast doubt on the legitimacy of the war’, on its ‘proportionality’ (Williams, 2004: 17).
14. The UK has not been alone in eschewing the counting of all conflict-related killings. The US has done the same. See, for example, Aronson, 2013; Englehardt, 2007; Williams, 2005.
15. Grievability is thus neither synonymous nor coterminous with grief or the politics of grief, though the terms are sometimes treated interchangeably in the literature. See Fierke and McKay, 2023 for an account that differentiates between them.
16. The idea of grievability, I derive from Butler. I borrow the idea of an order from Rancière’s idea of the ‘police order’ (1999), where it refers to the system organizing and defining specific ways of being, making, doing and communicating. As such, police orders traverse politics, economics, policy, and culture, among other things (see Chambers, 2010: 61). An order of grievability refers to how grievability and ungrievability are determined politically, economically, culturally, and socially.
17. As I understand them, there may be multiple, overlapping, and at times clashing orders of grievability in existence at any one time rather than a single all-encompassing and uniform order. While the British Government did not want to know how many Iraqi civilians died, Iraq Body Count was founded precisely for that purpose: to counter the meagre attention, if any, given to civilian deaths and to ensure that every individual death should not only be counted but properly commemorated (Dardagan and Slobada, 2021: ix; Hamourtziadou, 2021, *passim*; Zehfuss, 2007: 68).
18. As noted above, body counts have been examined from a number of perspectives (governance, transitional justice, civilian casualties, as well as methodological) though not, particularly, from that of grievability, at least not in any sustained way.
19. It is not only dead bodies that are officially discounted. Section 127 of the 1901 Australian Constitution, for instance, states that: ‘In reckoning the numbers of the people in the Commonwealth, or of a State or other part of the Commonwealth, aboriginal natives shall not be counted’. This section, repealed in 1967, formally and explicitly excluded ‘aboriginal natives’ from the census, and consequently from electoral representation in the Commonwealth (see Lloyd, 2019).
20. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore it, since the discussion here is limited to body counts and the paradox of dehumanization that attends them, there may, however, be occasions in some contexts where the value of a life is determined or revised retrospectively after death.
21. The relation between disposability and value is sometimes more complex as, for instance, with soldiers who are simultaneously valued and venerated, for example, via funerals with military honours, combat medals, war memorials etc., and yet also viewed as disposable, their deaths often expected, even anticipated (see Zehfuss, 2009).
22. Although he does not use the language of grievability, Levy (2019) provides extensive insight into how hierarchies of risk and death evolve, including how they change within particular conflicts, depending on factors such as the decline in tolerance for military deaths, the immunity of non-combatants and security considerations, as well as (international) legal considerations, public opinion, the socio-economic make-up of the military and so forth. See also Levy, 2012.

23. In some cases, evaluation takes monetary form. For instance, in his discussion of the financial reparations for battlefield casualties, Fassin notes that compensation for an Iraqi civilian killed by the US is around \$4000. 'For a US soldier killed in action or in an accident', the figure paid to family is around two hundred times that; in excess of \$800,000. Where 'all the families' of the 4500 US soldiers killed were entitled to compensation, 'very few of the families of the more than 500,000 Iraqis' killed were eligible for reparations (Fassin, 2018: 100).
24. Or at least not in conventional 'Western' terms. For an account that explores how Western mathematics served/serves as a tool of both colonialism and neo-colonialism and how it has led to the devaluation of indigenous numeral systems, see Nelson (2015). For a discussion of indigenous statistics, see both Walter and Andersen (2013) and Andersen et al. (2025). See also Walter (2025: 48) for an exploration of how 'contemporary statistics' is connected 'methodologically . . . to eugenics, colonization and hierarchies of humanity'.
25. Questions of naming, however, are more politically complex than this insinuates (see, for instance, Doss, 2010; Edkins, 2016; Laqueur, 2015; Lloyd, 2017, 2018; Tazzioli, 2015).
26. A persistent criticism of Butler's initial work on grievability was that its framing 'foregrounds, however unintentionally' Western experiences of grief and loss (Thobani, 2007: 176), centres on 'our abilities to mourn *their* lives' (Gregory, 2012: 335, original emphases) rather than exploring the grief of non-hegemonic persons or populations, and falsely assumes or reproduces a universally shared human experience (Thobani, 2007). See also Lloyd, 2017: 273; Zehfuss, 2009.
27. In Tazzioli's analysis, what border deaths mean for friends and families of missing migrants. What is needed, she surmises, is to bring into 'visibility the reality of what the visa regime and the European mechanisms of border control generate: the "disappearance" of women and men who die without being detected but who are counted as "missing" [rather than dead] in the countries of origin or of transit by those who know them' (Tazzioli, 2015: 5).

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