

Geothanatology

Toward a Forensic Poetics of Territory

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Abstract

This article proposes the concept of geothanatology as an interdisciplinary analytical framework for examining the relationship between death, disappearance, and geographic space in contexts of forced migration. Drawing on critical geography, necropolitics, forensic studies, and documentary artistic practices, it investigates how territory actively participates in the production, concealment, and signification of migrant death. The work engages with projects such as Forensic Oceanography and Forensic Architecture while addressing a critical lacuna: the question of impossible mourning and suspended memory when body and place disappear simultaneously. The article develops a threefold methodology combining forensic cartography, political analysis, and poetic restitution, proposing geothanatology not as a descriptive category but as a critical tool for restoring humanity to the territories of death.

Keywords: geothanatology, forced migration, necropolitics, memory, mourning, Mediterranean, border, disappearance.

1. Introduction

What place does a body occupy when it disappears without a trace?

Between 2014 and 2024, more than 28,000 people vanished in the Mediterranean without their bodies being recovered or identified.¹ The sea has become Europe's deadliest border, and also a space where death occurs outside any visible legal, symbolic, or geographic framework. There is no corpse, there are no precise coordinates, no name remains. The disappearance is double: of the body and of the place.

These figures are not merely statistics: each number is an absence that existing forensic, legal, and geographic language cannot adequately name. Reports by international organizations record "unrecovered bodies," yet they do not interrogate the space in which this non-recovery occurs. States enumerate "shipwrecks" without assuming responsibility for the zones where they systematically fail to rescue. Families search for coordinates but find no symbolic framework within which to situate their grief. This triple absence, of body, place, and language, demands a conceptual framework. Geothanatology seeks to provide one.

Geothanatology emerges in response to this lack. I propose this term to name the critical analysis of how geographic space participates in the production, concealment, and signification of death in

contexts of forced migration.² The aim is not merely to study where migrants die, but to understand territory itself as agent, witness, and archive of contemporary necropolitics. This is neither a descriptive nor a purely aesthetic category, but a critical tool that interrogates the unequal distribution of the right to life, memory, and mourning.³

This reflection is grounded in my own experience as a migrant and witness to these losses. Geothanatology does not emerge from analytical distance but from an embodied awareness of what it means to disappear in transit, to be seen without being recognized. From that position I propose a framework integrating critical inquiry, collective memory, and territorial ethics, situating itself in dialogue with projects such as *Forensic Oceanography* by Charles Heller and Lorenzo Pezzani,⁴ the forensic aesthetics of Eyal Weizman,⁵ and the artistic work of Teresa Margolles⁶ and Bouchra Khalili.⁷

The goal is not to found a new academic discipline but to articulate a transdisciplinary methodological lens traversing forensic anthropology, critical geography, visual studies, and documentary artistic practices. Although this essay focuses on the Mediterranean, geothanatology aspires to function as an analytical framework applicable to other geographies of migratory death: the Mexico-United States border and the Sonoran Desert, the Darén Gap between Colombia and Panama, the English Channel, sub-Saharan routes, or the Bay of Bengal.⁸

The Sonoran Desert, for example, shares with the Mediterranean the necropolitical function of a weaponized natural border: whereas the sea erases bodies through currents and salinity, the desert mummifies and disperses them through extreme heat and scavenging fauna. Both spaces operate as disappearance devices in which nature is instrumentalized to execute lethal deterrence policies. Yet where the Mediterranean produces an immediate, liquid disappearance, the Sonoran generates a slow, arid one, in which bodies may reappear years later as bone fragments without recoverable identity. Jason De León documents how the desert functions as a "hybrid killing machine" in which natural and political factors fuse until they become indistinguishable.⁹ This comparison reveals that geothanatology must attend to the material specificities of each deadly geography without losing sight of the shared necropolitical patterns that subtend them.

To name is to resist forgetting. This essay seeks to open a territory where thought, memory, and action coincide.

2. Territories of Power and Death: Biopolitics, Necropolitics, and Space

2.1 From Biopower to Spatialized Necropolitics

Michel Foucault defined biopolitics as the power to "make live and let die," wherein the State administers the life of populations through techniques of regulation and control.¹⁰ Achille Mbembe extended this notion with necropolitics: the exercise of sovereign power to determine who may live and who must die, converting certain territories into "death zones" where human life loses its legal and political value.¹¹

Yet both Foucault and Mbembe address space only implicitly. What is absent is an explicit theorization of territory as a necropolitical actor. Henri Lefebvre demonstrated that space is not a neutral container but a social production traversed by power relations.¹² Doreen Massey added that space is relational, always in the making, and a product of social interactions.¹³ Edward Soja proposed the category of "spatial justice" to signal how inequalities are inscribed geographically.¹⁴

Geothanatology integrates these perspectives: the Mediterranean is not simply the stage on which deaths occur, but a space produced necropolitically through non-rescue protocols, border externalization, and jurisdictional gray zones. As Nicholas De Genova argues, the European border regime does not seek to prevent migration but to manage it through the calculated production of "illegality" and extreme vulnerability.¹⁵

2.2 The Liquid Border as Legal and Moral Gray Zone

Thomas Nail proposes the figure of the "migrant" as a constitutive political subject of modernity: expelled, in perpetual movement, dispossessed of rights.¹⁶ The sea functions as a liquid border where this expulsion is radicalized. International waters operate as spaces of legal suspension: no one is fully responsible for the bodies that disappear within them.

The distinction between SAR (Search and Rescue) zones, territorial waters, and international waters generates structural vacuums of responsibility. The principle of non-refoulement, the prohibition of forcible return, is diluted in practice through agreements with third countries, Libya and Tunisia among them, that intercept vessels before they can reach European waters.¹⁷ The Montego Bay Convention on the Law of the Sea obligates rescue but specifies neither who must perform it nor

what follows when all actors look the other way.¹⁸ This normative ambiguity is not accidental; it is the very architecture of impunity.

Jurisdictional fragmentation allows States to evade legal responsibility while maintaining political control over routes. As Forensic Oceanography documents, the Mediterranean has become a laboratory of planned indifference in which the architecture of international law facilitates death rather than preventing it.¹⁹ Geothanatology must point to these legal fissures not merely as technical failures but as deliberate mechanisms of abandonment.

2.3 Grievability, Mourning, and Suspended Temporalities

Judith Butler argues that certain lives are recognized as "grievable" while others are excluded from the framework of recognizable humanity.²⁰ The question is not only who can die, but who has the right to be mourned. The disappeared at sea inhabit a suspended temporality: they are neither alive nor certifiably dead. Their families live within an impossible mourning, in a time held still where waiting and bereavement coexist without resolution.

Pauline Boss conceptualized "ambiguous loss" as that condition in which a person is physically absent yet psychologically present.²¹ Unlike conventional grief, which proceeds through recognized rituals and phases, ambiguous loss generates a state of emotional arrest: the person cannot move forward because it is unclear whether to wait or to mourn. In the migratory context, this ambiguity multiplies: missing is not only the body, but the precise place of disappearance, reliable witnesses, and any institutional acknowledgment of the event.

Geothanatology must interrogate not only space but also these fractured temporalities: the bureaucratic time that never arrives, the time of the sea that erases evidence within hours, the time of grief that cannot close without a body or certainty. Jenny Edkins, in her work on missing persons, notes that the modern State depends on its capacity to certify births and deaths; when that certification fails, people remain in a legal and existential limbo that places sovereignty itself in question.²²

2.4 On "Forced Migration": A Contested Term

The use of the term "forced migration" in this essay requires conceptual precision. In international legal and political debate, the categories of "refugee," "economic migrant," "internally displaced person," and "forced migrant" are not equivalent and carry materially differentiated consequences.²³ The 1951 Geneva Convention reserves refugee status for those fleeing specific persecution on grounds of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.

This legal distinction, however, proves insufficient in the face of contemporary realities. Alexander Betts proposes the concept of "survival migration" to name displacements that fall outside the restrictive definition of refugee yet are anything but voluntary.²⁴ People fleeing climate collapse, gang violence, structural famine, or persecution on grounds of gender or sexual orientation are frequently excluded from international protection.

I use "forced migration" here as a critical category that questions the legal distinction itself: it recognizes that contemporary displacement operates along a continuum of coercions in which separating direct violence from structural violence is increasingly artificial. My aim is not to resolve the legal debate but to underscore that disappearance at sea makes no distinction of status: those who perish there flee wars, hunger, authoritarian regimes, and climate catastrophe alike. Geothanatology interrogates precisely that zone where legal categories collapse and only nameless death remains.

3. Definition and Specific Difference

Geothanatology can be defined as the interdisciplinary study of the relationship between death, disappearance, and geographic space in contexts of structural violence, and especially of forced migration. It is a critical, ethical, and poetic practice that recognizes territory as body, archive, and agent.

In contrast to traditional forensic thanatology, which focuses on the individual body and the technical cause of death, geothanatology considers three inseparable dimensions:

1. The forensic dimension of territory: Space as material evidence, encompassing marine currents, temperatures, GPS coordinates, floating remains, and geolocated testimonies.
2. The political dimension of abandonment: Analysis of how power produces spaces of death through protocols, omissions, and border designs.
3. The poetic dimension of restitution: The construction of symbolic frameworks, memorials, and narratives that restore humanity and enable mourning where the State has suspended it.

3.1 What Geothanatology Is Not

- It is not a geography of death: Medical geography studies the statistical distribution of mortality; geothanatology interrogates the political production of deadly space.
- It does not replace forensic science: It neither identifies remains nor establishes technical causes of death, but examines why certain bodies remain beyond the reach of the forensic apparatus.

- It is not merely critical cartography: Although it employs maps, its aim is not to represent but to restore presence to absence.
- It is not a neutral aesthetic or curatorial resource: Geothanatology cannot be appropriated as a merely descriptive category or as a depoliticized aesthetic operation. Its critical dimension is inseparable from its commitment to memory, justice, and the restitution of humanity.²⁵

3.2 The Foundational Question

What does geothanatology do that Forensic Oceanography does not already do?

The answer is this: Forensic Oceanography documents shipwrecks to produce legal evidence and hold States accountable for their omissions. Geothanatology adds a further and irreducible layer, the interrogation of impossible mourning: how to sustain the memory of those who have neither grave nor coordinates; how to build epitaphs for unnamed seas; how to convert geospatial data into acts of recognition; how to inhabit the fractured temporalities of grief without a body.

Where Forensic Oceanography ends, when the report is presented to the court, geothanatology begins: What do we do with that truth? How do we convert it into living memory rather than a dead archive?

Having established the conceptual specificity of geothanatology, the question that follows is: how is it practiced? The next section proposes a methodology that integrates the three dimensions identified above, the forensic, the political, and the poetic, in a concrete research process, guarding against the risk of a theoretical framework that remains abstraction without empirical anchoring.

4. Methodology: Cartography, Discourse, and Testimony

Geothanatological research is situated at the intersection of science, memory, and art. The method is autoethnographic and transdisciplinary: the researcher acknowledges his own position within the web of events, resisting the illusion of neutral objectivity.²⁶

4.1 Three Methodological Movements

First Movement: Forensic Cartography of Territory

This movement integrates:

- Geospatial data, including GPS coordinates, oceanic drift analyses, and satellite imagery.
- Institutional archives: coast guard reports, SAR protocols, and emergency communications.
- Testimonies from survivors, families, and activists.
- Visual and documentary materials.

Objective: To reconstruct trajectories of disappearance and to identify zones of systematic absence, those places where rescue never arrives, where data is lost, where bodies dissolve without record.

Second Movement: Discursive and Visual Analysis

This movement examines how institutions, media, and artists represent migratory death:

- What images circulate, and which remain suppressed?
- What narratives prevail? Passive victims versus political subjects; natural catastrophe versus state crime.
- Who holds the right to speak, and from what position?

Objective: To trace the ethical limits of representation and to resist the spectacular saturation of pain.²⁷

Third Movement: Poetics of Testimony

Writing, visual work, or memorial becomes a form of situated knowledge. The aim is not to illustrate analysis but to allow the form of the work itself to restore presence.

Objective: To convert the map into epitaph, statistics into mourning, coordinates into names.

4.2 Collaborative Research and Epistemic Justice: Against Academic Extractivism

Geothanatology is legitimate only insofar as affected communities participate in the construction of knowledge, not merely as "sources" but as co-researchers.²⁸ This entails:

1. Informed and continuous consent: Families and survivors determine what is documented, how it is represented, and where it circulates.
2. Material and symbolic reciprocity: Research outputs, reports, maps, and archives, must be made available to the communities from which they derive. Where publications or exhibitions generate resources, mechanisms of economic redistribution or support for families' organizations must be established.
3. Shared capacity-building: Workshops in which families acquire tools of cartography, digital archiving, or strategic litigation, thereby appropriating technical resources for themselves.

4. Community veto: Communities must retain the power to withdraw information, cancel collaborations, or modify the forms of representation whenever they judge that revictimization or spectacularization is occurring. This explicitly includes the right not to participate from the outset, or to withdraw at any point without required justification. Silence and absence are legitimate forms of agency that geothanatology must honor as political decisions, not as voids to be filled. No geothanatological investigation may proceed without active and renewable consent.

This collaborative methodology is not optional but constitutive of geothanatology. Without it, the project becomes yet another form of academic or artistic extractivism that reproduces the very logics of dispossession it claims to denounce.

4.3 Ethical Protocols Against Re-aestheticization

Although geothanatology critiques the visual saturation of pain, it runs the risk of reproducing it. To guard against this, I propose five operative ethical principles:

1. Principle of subtraction: Use the minimum necessary quantity of explicit images. Privilege suggestion over the direct exhibition of suffering.
2. Principle of protected anonymity: Do not circulate images of bodies without the explicit consent of families. When such images are used, they must be contextualized and never treated as isolated aesthetic objects.
3. Principle of slow temporality: Refuse the logic of the news cycle, with its rhythm of impact followed by oblivion. Geothanatological interventions must be durable, sustained, and cumulative.
4. Principle of reciprocity: Those who document must be prepared to be documented. The positions of researcher or artist and those of community members must be made explicit and held open to negotiation.
5. Principle of utility: Every geothanatological production must ask: does this serve families, social movements, or litigation? Or does it serve only the academic curriculum, the artistic career, the cultural market?

These principles do not guarantee ethical purity, but they establish minimum thresholds of responsibility.

5. Applied Geothanatology: Cases and Methodologies

5.1 The Lampedusa Shipwreck (October 3, 2013)

A complete geothanatological analysis of the Lampedusa shipwreck illustrates how the proposed framework operates in a concrete case. This event, which caused at least 368 deaths, condenses geothanatology's three dimensions: the spatial evidence of abandonment, the political architecture of impunity, and the impossibility of mourning.

5.1.1 Forensic Reconstruction of Territory

Coordinates and material conditions: In the early hours of October 3, 2013, a fishing vessel overloaded with approximately 500 people, most of them Eritreans fleeing Libya, capsized just meters from the coast of Lampedusa.²⁹ The boat was less than one kilometer from Italian land when an accidental fire caused panic among passengers, producing a weight shift that brought about the sinking. The approximate coordinates of the shipwreck (35°31'N, 12°36'E) place the event in waters that fall technically under Italian jurisdiction, in a zone where surveillance has historically been intermittent. Weather conditions were favorable, with calm seas and good visibility, which makes it all the more evident that it was not natural factors but deficient protocols that caused the tragedy.

Disappearance data: Of the 500 people aboard, 368 died and only 155 were rescued. Most bodies remained trapped in the sunken hull or were dispersed by marine currents. Eight days later, a second shipwreck in the same zone claimed 268 more lives, including 60 minors, aboard a vessel carrying Syrian refugees.³⁰ The repetition of the event in the same geographic space reveals that this was not an isolated fatality but a zone of systematic abandonment.

5.1.2 Abandonment as Design: Protocol Analysis

Geothanatological analysis does not limit itself to documenting what occurred, but asks why institutions allowed it to occur. In the Lampedusa case, documented evidence shows that Italian authorities deliberately delayed intervention in order to prevent survivors from disembarking on Italian soil, which would have obligated them to process asylum applications.³¹

The Bossi-Fini Law and the criminalization of rescue: Italy was then operating under the Bossi-Fini Law, which penalized even those providing humanitarian assistance to migrants in danger. This legislation rendered fishermen and civilian vessels that performed rescues liable to prosecution as accomplices in "illegal migration facilitation," with penalties of up to fifteen years in prison.³² The law openly contradicted international maritime law, specifically the SOLAS Convention and the SAR

Convention, which obligate the rescue of persons in distress without distinction of nationality or migratory status.

This legal architecture produced a space of calculated death: authorities knew vessels were in distress, but the legal framework incentivized non-intervention. Forensic Oceanography documents how, in the aftermath of the 2013 tragedy, rather than reinforcing SAR protocols, Italy terminated the Mare Nostrum operation (which had substantially increased rescues) and replaced it with Triton, a mission focused on border surveillance rather than search and rescue.³³

5.1.3 Testimonies and Oral Memory

Survivors of the shipwreck described how they could see the coast lights for hours without assistance arriving. One of them, identified as Abraham (a pseudonym used to protect his identity), declared to Amnesty International:³⁴

"We could see the lights of Lampedusa. We were shouting. Water was coming in and people were drowning around us. We thought someone would come. But no one came until it was too late."

This testimony reveals the temporality of abandonment: the absence was not accidental but imposed. The documented response time exceeded two hours from the first distress calls, by which point the vessel was only 800 meters from the coast. In geothanatological terms, those two hours are the interval in which the State exercises necropolitics through omission: it lets people die without acting directly.

Eritrean families who lost their relatives have maintained, across ten years, a symbolic search: without bodies to bury, without precise coordinates as sites of mourning, grief remains suspended in a geographic and temporal limbo.

5.1.4 Media Analysis: From Ephemeral Compassion to Persistent Metaphor

The Lampedusa shipwreck generated a global media eruption lasting seventy-two hours. Images of coffins lined up at the island's airport circulated widely, producing what Susan Sontag would call a "moment of spectacular compassion."³⁵ Geothanatological analysis must interrogate the absences that this iconic image contains:

- Bodies that were never recovered were not shown; more than one hundred remain missing.
- The coordinates of the shipwreck and the map of responsibilities were not visualized.
- Failed protocols went undocumented and no responsible officials were named.
- The image froze grief at a single moment, without any subsequent account of the families ten years on.

The philosopher Francisco Torres observed, in an analysis published in *Pensamiento Crítico*, that "Lampedusa" has become a metaphor for the failure of European migration policies.³⁶ Yet metaphors can anesthetize as readily as they move: by converting the event into an abstract symbol, the specificity of the 368 concrete people who died at concrete coordinates, through concrete decisions not to rescue, is effaced.

5.1.5 Temporalities of Mourning: Ten Years of Waiting

A decade after the shipwreck, the crisis not only persists but has intensified. In September 2023, more than 10,000 people arrived in Lampedusa in just three days, overwhelming an infrastructure designed for 400.³⁷ In August 2024, another shipwreck on the same route left twenty dead and fifteen to twenty missing, with UNHCR denouncing the "continued tragedy" and "insufficient political action."³⁸

For the families of the 2013 victims, each such report is a reopening of grief. An Eritrean mother interviewed by Amnesty International in 2023 declared: "Every time I see news from Lampedusa, I return to that day. I have nowhere to mourn my son. The sea took him and no one tells me where he is."³⁹

Geothanatology recognizes this suspended duration of mourning as a specific form of structural violence: it is not only that 368 people died, but that their families live within a continuous present of loss without closure. Institutional time, with its closed archives and dismissed cases, collides with family mourning time, which remains open indefinitely.

5.1.6 A Geothanatological Memorial Proposal

A geothanatological memorial for Lampedusa cannot be a conventional monument. It must fulfill three simultaneous functions:

1. Forensic function: Mark the exact coordinates (35°31'N, 12°36'E) where the shipwreck occurred, converting that point of the sea into a site of public mourning. This might take the form of a memorial buoy bearing the names of the 368 victims and a QR code linking to a digital archive where families can deposit testimonies, photographs, and stories.
2. Political function: Include documentation of the legal architecture that produced death: excerpts from the Bossi-Fini Law, transcriptions of communications between coast guard authorities showing deliberate delay, and data on non-activated SAR protocols. The memorial must also be an archive of impunity.

3. Poetic function: Design co-created with Eritrean families, allowing them to determine the rituals, symbols, and texts to be incorporated. It might include a sound installation of waves and testimonies in Tigrinya, the primary language of Eritrea, restoring linguistic and cultural presence to those who were erased.

This memorial would not be an endpoint but a living process: each October 3, a public ceremony in which the names of new Mediterranean victims are read, continuously updating the archive of death. The territory would thereby cease to be merely a stage for disappearance and become instead a space of recognition.

5.2 Comparative Geographies of Disappearance

Geothanatology reveals transnational necropolitical patterns while attending to the specificities of each deadly geography. The Central Mediterranean, the Sonora-Arizona desert, and the Darén jungle function as parallel laboratories of forced disappearance, each with its own lethal materialities.

In the Sonora-Arizona corridor, the American policy of "Prevention through Deterrence" deliberately channels crossings toward remote desert zones where temperatures exceed 45°C. Between 1998 and 2020, more than 3,300 bodies were recovered, though thousands more are estimated to remain unlocated.⁴⁰ Unlike the Mediterranean, where water dissolves evidence within days, the desert partially mummifies bodies, creating a fragmented archive: bones scattered across kilometers, personal objects bleached by sun, GPS coordinates marking absences.

The Darén jungle between Colombia and Panama presents yet another variant: vegetative disappearance. Extreme humidity accelerates decomposition while the density of the jungle makes systematic searches impossible. Bodies are literally consumed by the ecosystem within weeks, leaving no recoverable traces. The Emberá and Wounaan indigenous communities report constant encounters with unidentified remains, configuring a geography in which migrant death naturalizes as part of the landscape.⁴¹

These geographies share the instrumentalization of natural elements as border technologies, yet differ in their temporalities of disappearance and identification possibilities. Geothanatology must develop specific methodologies for each territory without relinquishing the structural critique of the global system that produces these deaths.

5.3 Applications and Projections

5.3.1 Forensic Identification and Collective Memory

Geothanatology can contribute to:

- Transnational search protocols: Coordinating among States, NGOs, and families to locate and name remains.
- Integrated databases: Cross-referencing genetic information, testimonies, personal objects, and spatial data.
- Public memorials: Converting sites of loss, including coasts, ports, and detention centers, into spaces of recognition.

5.3.2 Strategic Litigation and Legal-Political Advocacy

Geothanatological reports can become litigation tools before international and national courts. This requires:

1. Admissible evidence format: Documentation meeting evidentiary standards, including data custody chains, certified testimonies, and verifiable geospatial analyses.
2. Existing concrete cases: The case of *Hirsi Jamaa and Others v. Italy* (2012) before the European Court of Human Rights, which condemned Italy for returns at sea, illustrates the potential.⁴² A geothanatological report would have substantially strengthened the spatial reconstruction of the pushback.
3. Advocacy in international organizations: Presenting geothanatological reports to the UN Human Rights Council, the European Parliament, or the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in order to press for legislative change.
4. Demands for symbolic reparation: Requiring States to officially acknowledge deaths, to construct public memorials, and to establish reparation funds for families.

Geothanatology does not replace legal work, but it can provide the material and symbolic coordinates where law must intervene. It transforms diffuse data into localized evidence, dispersed testimonies into coherent narrative, and institutional forgetting into documented responsibility.

6. Limits, Resistances, and Ethical Dilemmas

6.1 Epistemological Risks

- Superficial appropriation: The term can be emptied of meaning if used without methodological rigor or as a depoliticized curatorial operation. It is essential to preserve its critical dimension and its commitment to affected communities.
- Academic extractivism: Researching the pain of others without returning knowledge to the communities from which it was drawn.
- Re-victimization: The insistence on documentation can produce secondary trauma in families and survivors.

6.2 Institutional Obstacles

- State resistance: States are disinclined to have their complicity documented.
- Lack of funding: Transdisciplinary projects do not fit easily within traditional academic funding calls.
- Algorithmic censorship: Digital platforms suppress images of bodies or shipwrecks under policies on "sensitive content."

6.3 What Geothanatology Cannot Do

- It does not resurrect the dead.
- It does not replace professional forensic identification work.
- It does not guarantee legal justice, although it can contribute to it.
- It does not eliminate the pain of families; it can only attempt to accompany it.
- It cannot close the mourning of those who live in the suspended temporality of waiting.

An additional dilemma emerges when geothanatology confronts the tension between autonomous memory and state memory. States that produce migrant death occasionally appropriate mourning narratives in order to legitimize themselves, converting partial recognition of victims into political capital. Italy, for example, declared October 3 a "National Day in Memory of Immigration Victims" in the wake of Lampedusa, while simultaneously hardening border policies. This selective state memory, which mourns the dead while producing more of them, constitutes a perverse necropolitics of memorialization.

Geothanatology must navigate this tension while maintaining critical autonomy: collaborating with institutions when doing so serves families, but resisting the cooptation of memory as a device of state legitimization. Affected communities, not States, must maintain sovereignty over their dead. This implies rejecting official memorials that function as symbolic closure without structural change, and insisting that genuine mourning requires the cessation of the policies that produce death.

7. Against Forgetting, Against the Dead Archive

To name is to resist. Geothanatology does not aspire to resolve horror, but to sustain the gaze where others look away. Each coordinate where someone disappeared is an open wound on the map. To look at these wounds, to name them, to think them, is an act of partial and incomplete reparation, but it is necessary.

The territory of death does not belong to forgetting. The Mediterranean is not only water: it is a cemetery without headstones, an archive without an index, mourning suspended in time. Geothanatology proposes converting that space into active testimony, into a place where memory can occur even in the absence of the body, where the arrested time of families finds resonance and public recognition.

Against the necropolitics that produces spaces of death, geothanatology seeks to construct a territorial ethics that recognizes the right to memory even where humanity has been legally suspended. The task is not to understand death in the territory, but to restore humanity to the territory of death. To transform anonymous coordinates into pronounceable names, data into mourning, institutional forgetting into collective memory.

Geothanatology is not a distant intellectual exercise. It is an embodied commitment to communities searching for their disappeared, to survivors carrying the weight of testimony, to activists who interrupt the normalization of death. It is a practice that only makes sense if it serves those who suffer absence most deeply.

The challenge that remains open is threefold:

1. Build a transdisciplinary community that sustains this approach, drawing together researchers, artists, activists, and families, without reproducing the extractive hierarchies of knowledge.
2. Translate principles into concrete actions: co-designed memorials, strategic litigation, community archives, public interventions, and transnational solidarity networks.

3. Protect the concept from banalization: maintaining the critical dimension and ethical commitment as inseparable conditions of any use of the term.

Geothanatology does not offer consolation. It offers presence: the possibility of saying names where the State sees only numbers, of tracing maps where politics has decreed a void, of sustaining mourning where the right to grieve has been denied, of inhabiting the broken temporalities of grief without a body. It is an act of impossible and necessary reparation. A way of accompanying pain without pretending to resolve it. A form of returning the gaze to those expelled not only from life, but from memory itself.

Notes

- 1 Missing Migrants Project, International Organization for Migration (IOM), data updated to October 2024: <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean>
- 2 The term "geothanatology" is proposed as a specific critical category for the analysis of death in contexts of forced migration and structural violence. It should not be confused with occasional uses of the same term in forensic geology or studies of archaeological funerary deposits.
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