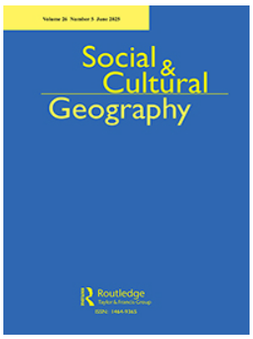

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Performing geographies of disappearance: migration and the case of the Saharan knowledge claim

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the *performativity* of data practices and knowledge claims regarding migratory death and disappearance. Engaging with Science and Technology Studies inspired migration research, it assesses the political contestedness and the performative effects of knowledge practices on migration. Data practices do not simply measure, reflect or represent a self-evident reality 'out there' but are deeply entangled in the *making of migration realities* that are acted upon, including by states and international organizations. In the article, based on document analysis and semi-structured interviews, a specific knowledge claim is analysed. Namely, the claim that more 'people on the move' die when seeking to transit the Saharan desert than when trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea. By tracing the emergence and circulation of this claim in the epistemic community of international organizations and in the context of heightened post-2015 migration anxiety in Europe, the article shows how the claim helped perform the Sahara as a *geography of disappearance* where a messy, dangerous and deadly migration reality required governmental intervention and taming. Echoing colonial imaginaries of the desert as a space of emptiness, unknowingness and danger, the claim underwrote justifications for humanitarian deterrence where, in the name of saving lives, cross-desert movements needed to be prevented by further securitizing and bordering the Sahara.

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Geografías de la Desaparición en la Representación: La Migración y el Caso de la Reivindicación del Conocimiento Sahariano

RESUMEN

Este artículo explora la performatividad de las prácticas de datos y las reivindicaciones de conocimiento en torno a la muerte y la desaparición migratoria. A partir de la investigación sobre migración inspirada en los Estudios de Ciencia y Tecnología, evalúa la controversia política y los efectos performativos de las prácticas de conocimiento en la migración. Las prácticas de datos

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no se limitan a medir, reflejar o representar una realidad evidente, sino que están profundamente entrelazadas en la creación de realidades migratorias sobre las que se realiza, incluso por parte de Estados y organizaciones internacionales. En el artículo, basado en análisis documental y entrevistas semiestructuradas, se analiza una reivindicación de conocimiento específica: la afirmación de que mueren más personas en movimiento al intentar cruzar el desierto sahariano que al intentar cruzar el mar Mediterráneo. Al rastrear el surgimiento y la circulación de esta afirmación en la comunidad epistémica de organizaciones internacionales y en el contexto de la creciente ansiedad migratoria posterior a 2015 en Europa, el artículo muestra cómo esta afirmación contribuyó a presentar el Sáhara como una geografía de la desaparición, donde una realidad migratoria caótica, peligrosa y mortal requería la intervención y el control gubernamental. Haciendo eco de los imaginarios coloniales del desierto como un espacio de vacío, desconocimiento y peligro, esta afirmación justificó la disuasión humanitaria donde, en nombre de salvar vidas, era necesario prevenir los movimientos a través del desierto mediante una mayor seguridad y la delimitación de las fronteras del Sáhara.

Introduction

Many people *on the move* in dangerous border regions die and disappear. Though certainly not exclusively, migratory deaths and disappearances occur in spaces such as the Mediterranean Sea or the Saharan and Sonoran deserts, vast spaces shaped by biophysical forces that challenge human survival and often erase human traces. In these extended border zones, it is rare that bodily remains are found and even rarer that identities of the deceased can be established. That many go 'missing' there is the result of a clash between migratory mobilities and attempts to govern them. Or, put differently, it results from the desire to *become imperceptible* and the risk of *being disappeared*.

Becoming imperceptible is considered pivotal for the success of contemporary projects of unauthorized migration. Eluding border enforcers and dominant regimes of visibility, thus engaging in what Papadopoulos et al. (2008, p. 13) call an 'imperceptible politics of escape' is key in transgressing restrictive borders. Yet, becoming imperceptible is a risky endeavour, given the possibility of disappearing along the way. The relationship between border controls and the production of lengthier and ever-more dangerous migration routes has long been demonstrated. In particular, the externalization of European borders has been shown to produce necropolitical spaces 'elsewhere', where bodies of the deceased remain unfound, covered by the sand of the desert, or vanishing into the sea (Stierl, 2019). Migrant imperceptibility and migrant disappearance are thus intertwined. As Heller and Pezzani (2017, p. 105, emphases in original) observe: 'The very term *clandestine*, from the Latin *clandestinus*, meaning "secret" or "hidden", points to [the] aim to circulate undetected – literally, under the radar [. . .]. However, this desire to go undetected is always weighed against the risk of dying unnoticed'.

As states do not systematically count or trace the dead and disappeared of migration, non-governmental actors set out to expose the scale of such 'unnoticed dying'. Over the

last 30 years, activists, journalists, researchers, as well as nongovernmental and international organizations have sought to shed light on the phenomenon by tracing and counting deaths in the context of Europe's borders (Weber & Pickering, 2011). Though aiming to make the scale of dying and disappearing noticeable, these knowledge practices have produced widely discrepant findings, not least due to different methods of data collection and divergent conceptions of 'border deaths' and 'disappeared migrants'. Setting out to account for the true scale of suffering, these conflicting archives create their own un/certainties.

Currently, discrepancies in death counts are particularly glaring in the context of boat migration from West Africa to the Canary Islands (Stierl & Sánchez Dionis, 2025). For the year 2024, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) has documented 1,142 deaths along the maritime routes to the Spanish archipelago (IOM Missing Migrants Project, 2024), while the Spanish non-governmental organization Caminando Fronteras speaks of 9,757 deaths for the same region, same year, therewith documenting 'the deadliest period since we have had records, with devastating figures averaging 30 deaths per day' (Caminando Fronteras, 2024). Whereas IOM data suggests that not the migratory routes to the Canaries but the routes across the central Mediterranean Sea are the deadliest, Caminando Fronteras notes that, based on their own findings, it is the Atlantic region that 'remains the deadliest in the world' (ibid.).

This article's aim is not to sketch out 'best practices' of counting the dead and disappeared of migration and establish which data practice may allow for the most accurate estimate of the extent of human loss at borders. Instead, it seeks to enquire into the *performativity* of data practices and knowledge claims regarding migrant death and disappearance. In order to do so, the article draws from Science and Technology Studies (STS) inspired migration research. This burgeoning field has examined the performative effects of knowledge practices on migration, noting how these 'practices perform the realities they allegedly only study and describe' (Scheel & Ustek-Spilda, 2019, p. 665; Stielike, 2022; Bartels, 2024; Stielike et al., 2024).

As the article shows, data practices on migrant death and disappearance do not simply measure, reflect, or represent a reality of suffering *out there* but are, instead, deeply entangled in the *making of deadly migration realities*. Using the lens of performativity suggests that we need to look beyond the clash between unauthorized migration and border control and consider data practices that have come to enact a specific person's death *as* a 'border death' and a specific disappearance *as* a 'disappeared migrant'. More than that, these practices enact certain spaces *as* spaces where deadly migration realities unfold. Through them, the Atlantic, the Mediterranean or indeed the Sahara can effectively *become the deadliest border spaces in the world*. In this way, different data practices on migrant death engender varying spatial imaginaries.

Data practices on migrant death and disappearance are performative, politically potent and often deeply contestable. As the above example regarding migration towards the Canary Islands shows, they frequently produce competing knowledge claims. Importantly, which of the existing data practices and knowledge claims are considered credible, thus able to find (public) acknowledgement and acceptance, does not necessarily depend on methodological rigour or the conscientiousness of data practitioners. Rather, whether data is considered to depict a migration situation in a 'truthful', 'factual' and thus 'real' way

depends on power relations and contestations, and, crucially, on the ability of a data practitioner to gain *epistemic authority*.

This article explores the performativity of data practices and knowledge claims regarding migrant death and disappearance through an exemplary case. It traces the case of the knowledge claim that, aided by a data practice, suggests that *more people on the move die and disappear when seeking to transit the Saharan Desert than when trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea*.[1] Based on document analysis and interviews conducted with members of international organizations between 2022 and 2024, the article traces the emergence and circulation of this claim, showing that it was not by chance that it gained traction in the context of heightened post-2015 migration anxiety in Europe. By enacting a deadly migration reality in the Sahara that urgently required acting upon, the claim helped justify increased interventions in the desert region by the very organizations that had made the claim – interventions that were underwritten by the desire to *deter humanitarianly*. The article argues that it is due to these organizations' *collective epistemic authority* that echoes of the claim continue to reverberate through the community of international migration organizations without receiving critical scrutiny. At the same time, it is also due to long-held colonial imaginaries of the desert as a space of emptiness, unknowingness and danger that the Sahara can be produced and re-produced as a *geography of migrant disappearance*, in urgent need of order and taming.

The Saharan knowledge claim

In June 2017, dozens of people died of dehydration when a truck that was meant to bring them to Libya broke down in the Sahara, prompting the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) to note: 'These shocking deaths are part of the bigger picture of exploitation as smugglers broaden the death trap from the Mediterranean to the Sahara Desert' (UN, 2017a). For Guiseppe Loprete, head of IOM operations in Niger, this 'tragedy was a grim reminder that probably more migrants die in the Saharan desert than in the Mediterranean, but due to the inhospitable nature of the region, it [is] virtually impossible to know the exact number' (ibid.). Despite the acknowledged impossibility to know, the claim that *more people on the move die in the Sahara than in the Mediterranean*, even twice or three times as many, gained traction in the mid-2010s, being voiced in particular by members of IOM and UNHCR.

For example, Alberto Preato, IOM programme manager in Niger between 2015 and 2018, noted in 2017: 'Migrants say: "The desert is a larger cemetery than the Mediterranean"' (Guilbert, 2017). The same year, Richard Danziger, IOM director for West and Central Africa, stated that deaths in the Sahara had 'to be at least double those who die in the Mediterranean', though adding, 'we really have no evidence of that, it's just an assumption. We just don't know' (Miles & Nebehay, 2017). In 2019, Vincent Cochetel, UNHCR's special envoy for the Western and Central Mediterranean, said: 'We assume that at least two times as many people probably die on their way to the Mediterranean Sea as in the sea itself' (Deutsche Welle, 2018). While no exact number could be provided, Cochetel noted that the real figure could also 'be much higher' (ibid.). With more certainty, Alessandra Morelli of UNHCR Niger suggested in 2019: 'We, the international community, the UNHCR, say that for every death in the Mediterranean there are at least two in the Sahara, unknown and anonymous' (BBC, 2019a). In 2022, also

UNHCR spokesperson Shabia Mantoo pointed to the possibility of '[e]ven greater numbers' in the desert than the sea (UNHCR, 2022).

In the international media, the claim found considerable resonance, though leading to widely different estimates of the death toll. While a 2015 *Reuters* article considered the Sahara at least 'as deadly as sea' (Flynn, 2015), *Der Spiegel* estimated in 2017 that the death toll in the desert could be three times the toll in the Mediterranean, amounting to 15,000 disappearances within 1 year (Titz, 2017). In 2018, *Associated Press* reported on 'potentially upwards of 30,000' deaths in the Sahara since 2014 (Hinnant, 2018). A year later, a *BBC* video feature wondered, 'Sahara desert: The most dangerous migrant journey of all?' (BBC, 2019b).

In order to trace the knowledge claim regarding the comparative deadliness of the Sahara vis-à-vis the Mediterranean, the following three sub-sections focus on the organizations that were key in the claim's emergence and circulation: IOM, UNHCR and Mixed Migration Centre (MMC). Interviews with members of these organizations were carried out between 2022 and 2024. Interviewees were Julia Black, coordinator of IOM's Missing Migrants Project (MMP); Marta Sánchez Dionis, former MMP project officer; Bram Frouws, MMC director; Alberto Preato, former IOM programme manager in Niger; and Vincent Cochetel, UNHCR special envoy.[2]

Forgotten fatalities?

'Data has power', Julia Black of IOM's Missing Migrants Project noted in our interview in November 2022, 'power to either capture media attention or policymakers', who are always asking for data'. At the same time, Black pointed to the risk of 'giving a misleading picture' through data, not least 'because we know that the data that we have [. . .] is nowhere near the true number'. When asked about the claim regarding deaths in the Sahara, Black made clear that it was not based on MMP data: 'I also am really curious about this as I see it thrown around a lot'. Her former colleague Marta Sánchez Dionis, who had worked at MMP from 2017 to 2022, pointed out that they had once sought to trace the claim themselves:

> We tried to track it down and we found a statement from some IOM director saying that it [the desert route] could be three times deadlier, something like that. And then it got multiplied and used. There is no data, you know. [. . .] There was no data in Missing Migrants Project that could back that up. So, we didn't, we couldn't, use that. It's definitely something that was taken out of context and then it's repeated, but I don't know how this originated exactly and why it is still being circulated. (Interview November 2022)

Both Black and Sánchez Dionis believed that the Mixed Migration Centre may have been the source of the claim, not least as MMC was IOM's main provider of information regarding deaths in the Sahara.

MMC, previously named Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat (RMMS), is part of the Danish Refugee Council and constitutes a global network engaged in data collection on migration. Considering migration as 'one of the defining issues of the 21st century', MMC seeks 'to offer a much-needed voice of reason, based on solid data and sound, balanced analysis' (MMC, 2020). Already in 2014, MMC (RMMS, 2014, p. 46) speculated that trans-Saharan migration may be 'even more dangerous' than trans-Mediterranean migration.

Still, it appears that a MMC report from 2016, entitled 'Forgotten Fatalities in North Africa: The number of migrant deaths before reaching the Mediterranean', proved important for the wide circulation of the claim (MMC, 2016). Indeed, at the time, *Reuters* reported on MMC's findings, considering it 'probably the first attempt to gauge the size of a largely unrecorded death toll among migrants in the Sahara' (Miles, 2016).

Less than two pages long, the MMC report shared data collected via 4Mi, the organization's 'flagship primary data collection system, an innovative approach that helps fill knowledge gaps' (MMC n.d.). Noting that the discrepancy between death counts for sea migration and migration via land routes 'is not solely explained through a disparity in actual risk but also through a disparity in reporting', MMC (2016, emphasis added) states:

> After interviewing over 1,300 migrants between 2014 and 2016, 4Mi reports that 1,245 people perished on the move in Libya, Sudan and Egypt combined. Libya, in particular, was reported to be the site of the majority of 4Mi reported deaths at 870 deaths reported. While there is the possibility of double counting (with interviewed migrants reporting the same incident twice) and inaccurate reporting (there is no system in place to verify reported deaths), the relatively small number of migrants interviewed by 4Mi monitors suggests the 1,245 figure is a conservative estimate of those who actually perished. When compared to the official figure of 103 migrants and refugees dead while on the move in Northern Africa from IOM, 4Mi data suggests a much higher real death toll. Based on 4Mi data, *it would be safe to assume the number of migrants and refugees dying before reaching the shores of Egypt and Libya is even higher than the number of deaths at sea*.

In my interview with Bram Frouws, MMC director and author of the 2016 report, he noted the following regarding the emergence of the claim:

> I tend to be quite modest, but I do feel that it might actually be traced back a little bit to that [2016] article. Cause I hadn't seen that claim before. And I've seen it being picked up quite a lot since then. And then, as you say, IOM and UNHCR started saying it as well. [. . .] I'm not entirely sure where else this claim is coming from. So, it might actually go back to us. (Interview November 2022)

Frouws explained that when noticing a 'void of information' on migrant death in the Sahara, MMC launched a programme to collect data from people transiting the region. At around '20 enumerative stations in key migration hubs', MMC enumerators would ask people on the move whether they had witnessed deaths. 'If so: Where did it happen? How many people did they witness dying?' According to Frouws, this collected data would be regularly shared with IOM and fed into the Missing Migrants Project's database.

Acknowledging that 'our data is not representative for the total populations, [. . .] it's purposive sampling, it's snowball-sampling', Frouws noted that doubts regarding MMC's data collection grew over time. According to him, one key problem was the limited access to transitory populations. Enumerators would be stationed at 'certain locations, which means they are not in other locations, so we might miss certain routes'. In addition, the potential of double counting and the risk of including hearsay in the statistical count became a worry, though Frouws emphasized that 'even if that's the case probably what we are reporting is very much underreporting the true number'. Asked to clarify the estimated locations of reported deaths, which were only roughly indicated in the 2016 report, Frouws noted in a follow-up email in February 2024 that MMC surveys included people who had spent 'a maximum of one or two years in the country of interview, to ensure we target people who are somehow still in transit'. It could thus be that the count

included deaths that 'could have happened in contexts less related to ongoing migration journeys'.

Besides methodological doubts, Frouws became increasingly concerned about the ethics of data collection, '[taking] that information in an interview, not with a whole lot of aftercare, we felt a bit bad about it'. According to him, these doubts lead to the end of MMC's data practice and consequently also to the sharing of such data with IOM. In the interview, I asked Frouws what he made of the wide circulation of a claim that lacked, as he admitted himself, an 'extremely solid evidence base'. He noted:

> From a methodological point of view or an academic point of view, it's quite wrong, I think. The reason why I don't really regret that article is because we did make a bit of a claim there and we may have, you know, influenced this discussion. It's more from an advocacy point of view that I think it has served its purpose even though maybe the evidence is not as solid as it should be. And I mean you've seen the article. This was a one-page article. Not pretending to be very scientific in nature. But I think it served its purpose in the sense of directing attention of media and policymakers to deaths along land routes and not just deaths at sea in the Mediterranean. (Interview November 2022)

Epistemic echoes

When tracing the Saharan knowledge claim in publications by IOM, UNHCR and MMC, a 'circular referentiality' becomes apparent. For example, the methodology section of IOM's Missing Migrants Project reads: 'some experts believe that more migrants die while crossing the Sahara Desert than in the Mediterranean Sea' (IOM MMP, n.d.). As a source, Mixed Migration Centre's (2016) report is provided. In 2022, a MMC (Linekar & Achilli, 2022, p. 14) report pointing to over 23,000 deaths in the central Mediterranean and noting that 'it is estimated that even more die on their journey through the Sahara Desert' refers not to its own 2016 publication as a source but instead to IOM's MMP, despite the absence of MMP data in support of the claim. In an article by MMP's Julia Black (2020), and though stating that 'while over 19,000 deaths have been recorded in the Mediterranean since 2014 [. . .], far fewer fatalities have been documented in the Sahara', she refers to both MMC and UNHCR as having made the claim 'that more people die while crossing the Sahara Desert than in the Mediterranean Sea'. In 2021, a report co-authored by IOM and researchers at Harvard University (Digidiki et al., 2021) notes: 'According to data, for every migrant death in the Mediterranean, two migrants die trying to cross the Sahara Desert'. As a source, the *Reuters* news article is referenced, which had reported on MMC's 2016 findings (Miles, 2016). The claim also appears in a 2024 joint publication by UNHCR, IOM and MMC, providing *Reuters* and MMC as sources (UNHCR et al., 2024).

This circular referentiality, or what can also be described as *epistemic echoes*, might not come as a surprise as both IOM and UNHCR were among the founding members of MMC and given that MMC shared its data with IOM, data that would also feature frequently in UNHCR publications (UNHCR & MMC, 2020). Indeed, data collected by MMC's 4Mi enumerators was passed on to the IOM's Missing Migrants Project's team, which would assess the data and subsequently transfer it into its database, thereby making it available to the public. Importantly, the provision of MMC data to IOM considerably increased the latter's death count. For example, in 2015, the first year that IOM included MMC data, the death toll rose to 638, a considerable increase from the 61 deaths documented by IOM alone for

the year prior. In 2018, following data received by MMC towards the end of the year, IOM added '1,014 previously unknown fatalities' to its statistics on migratory deaths in Africa, including hundreds of fatalities in the Sahara (Reliefweb 2018). This meant that 2018's desert death toll increased from 54, as documented by IOM alone, to more than 800.

After MMC's decision to end its data collection on deaths in the desert, with January 2020 being the last month it shared data with IOM, the latter's death count decreased dramatically, from 913 fatalities in 2019 to 149 in 2020 (IOM MMP, 2025). When asked about IOM's reaction to the ending of MMC's data collection, Frouws of MMC noted in an email in April 2024 that 'probably they were a bit concerned'. He wrote that MMC had 'been in talks a couple of times to explore how we could continue [. . .], it didn't lead to anything'. Frouws further explained: 'I never got a very clear answer on my question of how they would go about the fact that the bulk of data came from us, and thus, as you say, it would lead to a big drop in numbers, not reflective of an actual drop in number of deaths (which would be a good thing), but just related to data availability'. Though IOM's statistical count never reached the heights of the years that MMC had provided data, the number of documented deaths rose again from 2021 on. This was due to IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM), which began to include questions concerning migrant death in its surveys. Strikingly, however, with or without MMC or DTM data, IOM's annual death tolls for the Sahara have remained consistently below the same organization's estimates for the Mediterranean.

Absent (hard) data

In order to understand the reasons why members of IOM and UNHCR have made the claim, even though it conflicts with the organizations' own data and despite the acknowledged limitations in MMC data practices, interviews were carried out with two members of organizations who had repeatedly voiced the claim in media interviews. Following a conversation with Alberto Preato, previous IOM programme manager in Niger, he noted in an email in March 2024 that migrant testimonies would point to a high death toll in the Sahara: 'Many told us that they left someone behind. We were three, now we are two; we were five, now we are three, and so on'. Acknowledging the 'absence of better data' on fatalities, Preato emphasized that data collection should not be a goal in itself. Rather than 'compile an exact statistical account of deaths', the purpose of collecting data was to help inform 'IOM's operational response to a dynamic operational environment'. For example, Preato noted that during his time in Niger, IOM began to conduct rescue operations in the desert, 'bringing thousands of migrants stranded in extremely challenging conditions to safety'.

In several email exchanges with Vincent Cochetel in 2024, the now former UNHCR envoy acknowledged 'challenges with MMC methodology' but referred to its data as 'better than nothing', even if it could not be considered 'hard data'. Asked to clarify why MMC data would not amount to hard data, not least given its use in many UNHCR and IOM publications and statistics, Cochetel wrote that MMC's '4MI tool is not deployed everywhere in any case [. . .] and the good data MMC produces is based on samples'. In contrast to the Mediterranean where 'we get systemically the information and we can give reasonable estimates that we can call hard data', for desert migration, 'the many gaps in geographical coverage and in methodologies used [. . .] do not enable us to refer to any

hard data [in] this sense'. Also for the UNHCR envoy, migrant testimonies were a key source that would 'point to the fact that many deaths on the road are not reported'. He wrote: 'For us, [the Sahara] is deadlier mainly based on testimonies collected over time mainly from expellees or people arriving in Italy. Most people we regularly interview have been witnessed to death [*sic*] in the desert or have seen dead bodies on their way'. Similar to IOM's Preato, Cochetel maintained that the main purpose of data collection should be to 'inform policy and operational response', including 'the development of search and rescue capacities'.

(Non-)knowledge that performs

Over recent years, STS-inspired migration research has explored what Scheel (2021, p. 39) calls 'the politics of (non)knowledge in the (un)making of migration'. Seeking to depart from 'a realist or a representationalist ontology, both of which assume an external migration-reality that preexists the methods, devices, and practices used to know it' (ibid.: 46), this body of scholarship has scrutinized the role of different knowledge practices and producers in bringing migration into existence 'as an intelligible object of government' (ibid.: 47). Often drawing from the work of Annemarie Mol (2002) on *enactment* and of John Law (2004) on *performativity*, scholars have made the case that migration is not simply objectively out there, readily awaiting to be scientifically scrutinized (Scheel & Ustek-Spilda, 2019). Instead, migration is *made*, not least through (divergent) data practices, categorizations and methods, which effectively produce migration realities that are acted upon. As Laura Stielike (2022, pp. 117–118, emphases in the original) notes:

> if method is interactively performative, and helps to make realities, then the differences between research findings produced by different methods or in different research traditions have an alternative significance. No longer different *perspectives* on a single reality, they become instead the enactment of different *realities*.

While multiple migration realities are thus possible, which reality 'wins out' depends to a large degree on the ability of competing data practitioners to gain *epistemic authority* on a subject matter. In the quest for epistemic authority, actors such as IOM and UNHCR have developed novel epistemic communities and infrastructures, thereby expanding the role of non-academic knowledge practitioners on migration (Amelung et al., 2024). These international organizations, Antoine Pécoud (2015, p. 3, emphases in the original) shows, have created a 'growing corpus of international reports and publications on migration', thereby producing 'a relatively coherent body of knowledge and ideas, regarding both *what migration is* (trends, numbers, dynamics, etc.) and *what it should be* (through the elaboration of so-called policy recommendations)'. Underpinned by claims to facticity, objectivity and neutrality, building such 'international migration narratives' (ibid.) serves the very organizations that foster them. As succinctly put by Pécoud (2020, p. 17) when considering IOM's epistemic practices, knowledge production has become 'a de facto commercial issue enabling the growth of the IOM's business'. The ability to gain and showcase expertise and authority on migration through knowledge production has thus become a central avenue for international migration organizations to generate 'resources or jurisdiction over particular policy areas' (Boswell, 2009, p. 7).

Concerning data production on the dead and disappeared of migration, IOM has undoubtedly become 'the leading authority' (Al Tamimi et al., 2020, p. 201) over the past decade. With the establishment of the Missing Migrants Project in 2014, Al Tamimi et al. note (ibid.: 208), the organization 'has successfully consolidated all non-governmental sources of border death data worldwide, thereby increasing its market share and decreasing its competition'. Still, and despite its considerable resources and global reach, this does not suggest that IOM's authority and data are being left uncontested. In the aforementioned example of statistics production on migrant death along the maritime routes to the Canaries, the NGO Caminando Fronteras provides rival statistics, suggesting a much higher death toll, which finds frequent and wide reception in the international media (Stierl & Sánchez Dionis, 2025). Ultimately, which data practitioner gains the upper hand, and consequently which version of migration reality, 'depends on power contestations, controversies and the credibility assembled (. . .) by those who perform different – and often conflicting – versions of that reality' (Glouftsios & Scheel, 2021, p. 132).

At the same time, and although scholarship has discussed competition and rivalry between IOM and UNHCR in the pursuit of (epistemic and other) authority (Georgi, 2010), in the case of the Saharan knowledge claim it was the very sharing of data and the echoing of the claim in the community of international organizations that proved significant for its wide circulation. Collective knowledge practices by international migration organizations were key to enact a deadly migration reality in the desert. By making the claim in (joint) reports, by inserting data resting on questionable surveys into statistical counts and by repeating the claim in media interviews, it appears that the *collective epistemic authority* of this community prevented closer scrutiny of the claim's merit and the claimants' credibility.

Moreover that the claim was echoed despite (or, indeed, due to) its ambiguous nature is significant because some STS-inspired migration scholarship has argued that in order to demonstrate expertise and establish epistemic authority, knowledge practitioners such as IOM and UNHCR would actively sideline 'messy' migration knowledge. For example, Scheel and Ustek-Spilda (2019, p. 676) stress that these organizations would strategically ignore any data 'that may destabilize the enactment of migration as a measurable, orderable reality' as 'to tolerate any knowledge that enacts migration as a multiple, messy reality would cast doubts on the possibility to manage it'. They pithily add: 'For what is difficult to measure is certainly difficult to manage' (ibid.). Though a pertinent observation in many instances (see Bartels, 2024), the case of the Saharan knowledge claim shows that the impossibility to provide a precise ac/count did not prevent the claim's wide circulation.

Indeed, the claim *is a mess* and raises more questions than it answers: In light of the considerable fluctuations in (un/documented) deaths for the Mediterranean over time, against which annual toll would the Saharan deadliness be compared? Given the diverse actors collecting data on Mediterranean deaths, which of their widely different statistical findings is considered the most accurate and credible to then compare the desert toll against? Moreover, given their vast and complex geographies, where are *the* Mediterranean and *the* Sahara even imagined to begin and end for purposes of comparison? And in what circumstances do people dying in these vast regions *become* 'border deaths' or 'missing migrants'?

The lack of answers to these questions and the impossibility to offer precise ac/counts of the death toll in the Sahara did not prevent the wide circulation of the knowledge claim. Though stressing that the claim was believed to be true, members of IOM, UNHCR and MMC would commonly add qualifications in media interviews, acknowledging the absence of certainty and stressing the impossibility to know. In my interviews, respondents noted that whilst it was better to have some (MMC) data than none, what really mattered was not exact data but the conviction of a deadly migration reality that required programmatic and humanitarian response. The ambiguity and uncertainty enfolding the claim did not foreclose its many echoes or diminish the epistemic authority of those who voiced it. Instead of merely probing the validity of the data practices or 'correcting' the claim itself, it is thus more insightful to consider why the claim has travelled so far and whether its very ambiguity was part and parcel of this long journey. As the following two parts go on to show, by enacting a deadly migration reality in the desert, and thus the Sahara as a geography of disappearance, the (non-)knowledge claim was able to *do something*, not despite but due to its ambiguous nature. What is impossible to measure does not appear to be impossible to manage.

Humanitarian deterrence in the Sahara

The claim comparing the relative deadliness of the Sahara and the Mediterranean emerged in the mid-2010s, thus during a moment of heightened migration anxiety in Europe. In the context of uprisings and revolutions reconfiguring the political geographies of North Africa and the Middle East, and with the ensuing regional instability causing cracks in the external/ised borders of Europe, unauthorized arrivals in the EU increased (Stierl & Tazzioli, 2025). When over 1 million people reached European shores in 2015, in what the European Commission considered 'the largest refugee crisis since the end of World War II' (European Commission, 2015), measures to securitize EU borders as well as the union's 'external dimension' and wider 'neighbourhood' became desperately sought after. Riven by conflict, Libya in particular became a key departure point for migrant boats, prompting not only increased European efforts to strengthen Libyan border enforcement capacities but also to securitize the southern parts of the central Mediterranean migration routes in the Sahel region (Ould Moctar, 2024).

With the so-called refugee crisis opening 'a policy window that allowed the approval of policy measures that could have otherwise been proven too controversial for adoption' (Niemann & Zaun, 2023 p. 2967), a range of measures targeting cross-Saharan migration were implemented at an unprecedented pace. To name but a few: The Valletta Summit of 2015, establishing the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, brought EU and African heads of state and governments together to more effectively govern migration, address its 'root causes' and fight smuggling, including in the Sahel region (European Union, 2024). Also in 2015, the 'Sahel Regional Action Plan 2015–2020' was adopted by the Council of the EU which, unlike the EU's prior 'Sahel strategy' of 2011 that had focussed on the fight against terrorism, 'introduced a new and stronger focus on countering undocumented migration and mobility' (Boserup & Martinez, 2018, p. 48). A year later, in 2016, the EU introduced its 'Migration Partnership Framework' to strengthen cooperation with five 'priority countries' on issues of migration, including Niger and Mali. The securitization of the desert, a space

regarded as a threat to European security in terms of both migration and terrorism, has remained EU policy priority since, as the case of Niger exemplifies.

Though interest in Niger had previously been 'extremely low' (Lambert, 2019), this changed in light of the European crisis over migration in the mid-2010s. Given the country's central location for cross-Saharan migration, Niger became one of the EU's focal points in terms of migration cooperation, experiencing 'an unprecedented diplomatic ballet of European chancelleries' (Border Forensics, 2023, p. 15). Besides the above-mentioned policy measures that impacted the region more widely, the EU extended the scope of its 'Capacity Building Mission Sahel Niger' in 2015, adding the new objective of fighting 'irregular migration' and opening a field office in Agadez in 2016, a key node for cross-desert transit. Importantly, through the EU's 'political pressure, technical support and financial incentives', as Lambert (2019) points out, Niger adopted a new law on the 'illegal trafficking of migrants' in 2015, effectively criminalizing the northbound transport of people, which had been a regular and legal occupation before. Although the European Parliament president Antonio Tajani suggested in 2018 that the EU had 'helped Niger to reduce migratory flows to Libya and the EU by over 95%' (EU Reporter Correspondent, 2018), for many observers, this 'help' came at a high human cost. With the transport of people pushed 'underground', cross-desert routes became more expensive, longer and deadlier (Dan Yaye & Stierl, 2023). In consequence, Border Forensics (2023, p. 23) notes, the desert was turned into 'an open-air tomb for hundreds of migrants'.

It is in this political moment and context that the knowledge claim regarding the deadliness of Saharan migration found widespread resonance and circulated rapidly. When voiced by members of MMC, IOM and UNHCR, the claim was commonly tied to calls for increased humanitarian engagement in the Sahel region in order to prevent further migrant death. In the interviews conducted with members of the three organizations, the principal reason stated for making the claim revolved around the hope that gaining the attention of policymakers, the media and the general public would help tackle the ongoing dying in the Sahara.[3] At the same time, with funding windows opening widely in the context of the European crisis over migration, the claim served the organizations' own ambitions to increase their presence and engagement in the Sahel region.

Indeed, MMC's 2016 report that had been so critical in the emergence of the knowledge claim was the only source cited to evidence the deadliness of the Sahara in the UK Department for International Development's (DFID) 2017 funding guidelines for its programme 'Safety, Support and Solutions Phase II'. Focussing on cross-desert migration, this 78-million-pounds-strong programme sought 'to make migration safer and more orderly and provide critical humanitarian support, resulting in fewer deaths and less suffering along migration routes'.[4] MMC joined an NGO-consortium that received 'some 13 million' pounds from the programme, which, according to MMC director Frouws, constituted 'the bulk of our funding for our work in West and North Africa during those years'. The rest, he noted, 'went to IOM, UNICEF, British Red Cross'. Interestingly, this DFID programme also funded the 2021 report co-authored by IOM and researchers at Harvard University, which had repeated the claim (Digidiki et al., 2021). While acknowledging that this funding programme involved 'an element of reducing migration', Frouws emphasized that 'there was also a strong humanitarian focus'.

Yet, rather than separate or even incompatible, aspirations to reduce migration and to provide humanitarian relief have long been deeply entangled (Walters, 2011). As

argued by Martina Tazzioli and myself, what can be conceived as *deterrence humanitarianism* characterizes interventions by states, regional actors, as well as international organizations that, while aiming to hamper migrant mobilities, are underpinned by humanitarian rationales, primarily the saving of migrant lives at risk (Tazzioli & Stierl, 2021). This holds true especially for IOM, which saw their presence in the Sahara 'drastically increase' post-2015, experiencing 'an exponential growth of operational activity' (Jegen, 2019, pp. 21, 50). Rescue operations constituted only one aspect in a whole array of IOM activities. For example, with its Immigration and Border Management programme, IOM sought to reinforce border controls in the Sahara, not only by training local security forces but also by constructing 'new border posts' (Lambert, 2019). Although the importance of rescue operations should not be dismissed, also these humanitarian activities incorporated elements of deterrence. Indeed, 98% of those rescued by IOM were subsequently returned to countries of origin through its assisted voluntary return and reintegration programme (IOM, 2021). Moreover, assistance in the six IOM transit centres in Niger, Lambert (2019) notes, '[depended] on the consent of the persons concerned to assisted voluntary return to the country of origin'.

In my interviews with those who had voiced the claim, the entanglement of logics of humanitarianism and border enforcement emerged repeatedly. For the respondents, especially the fight against migrant smuggling, without which cross-desert movements would not be possible, and dissuading people from crossing the desert in the first place were considered key strategies to prevent migrant death. When asked what he considered the primary reason why people died in the desert, UNHCR's Cochetel referred to 'smugglers/traffickers' who abandoned people 'without food or water'. Following the conversation with former IOM programme manager Preato, he forwarded articles concerning IOM rescue operations, in one of which he is quoted as stating: 'We need to better understand how trafficking and smuggling networks intersect, and to further increase our presence in these remote areas in order to provide information, assistance and alternatives to migrants in need' (UN, 2017b). The article also quotes a person who had gone on the journey despite having been advised against it by UN staff: 'I should have listened to them; I should have never embarked on this route'.

The (non-)knowledge claim that compares the deadliness of the Sahara to the deadliness of the Mediterranean does political work by producing a deadly migration reality *out there*, requiring acting upon. Commonly dissociated from state activities that have increasingly borderised and thereby transformed the Sahel region over the past 10 years, the claim serves to justify increased involvement and presence of, and funding for, the claimants, consistently in the name of saving lives. In this way, the claim can be understood as an ideal discursive vehicle for practices of deterrence humanitarianism. Given its utility, it does not surprise that the claim has never been withdrawn by MMC, IOM or UNHCR. It seemed to matter little that the claim was never supported by the organizations' own statistical findings or that, after the end of MMC's data practice, the recorded death toll by IOM dropped significantly in 2020. No explanation was provided for this decrease apart from brief acknowledgements by IOM that MMC had 'changed their methodology' and thus stopped sharing data on desert deaths (IOM MMP, 2021). Unlike in previous instances, where the adding of (MMC) mortality data to (IOM) statistics would

lead to a considerable increase in the recorded death toll, prompting a flurry of press releases and media coverage, none of the international organizations appears to have felt the need to issue a statement, along the lines of: *According to our data, the death toll in the desert has decreased dramatically in 2020*.

The Saharan knowledge claim lives on. In 2024, a joint report by UNHCR, IOM and MMC notes, 'According to IOM and MMC, the number of those who die in the desert may well be at least double the number of those who die in the Mediterranean Sea' (UNHCR et al., 2024). The case of the claim shows that the impossibility to measure the Saharan death toll does not prevent key international migration organizations from using (non-)knowledge and speculation to emphasize the need for increased resources and engagement. Whereas some critics of IOM suggest that the organization would publish 'minimal' statistics on border deaths to downplay the 'true' extent of deaths at Europe's (externalized) borders (Heller & Pécoud 2020), the opposite is the case here: those who voice the claim allude to the possibility of an enormous, even if ultimately unknowable, death toll. Compared to the Mediterranean, a space that has dominated necropolitical migration realities for decades, the Sahara's designation as 'even deadlier' conjures up a spectacular deathscape that urgently requires remedy – remedy through measures of migration 'management' and border enforcement.

The case of the claim highlights that 'governance practices do not just tame unknowns, but also enact and utilize them' (Stel, 2021, p. 7). It also emphasizes the need articulated by Science and Technology Studies scholars 'to attend to different forms of ignorance or non-knowledge', precisely as they are 'not just objects of governing, but [. . .] techniques of governing' (Aradau & Perret, 2022, pp. 410, 406). Importantly, this does not intimate that 'intentional deceit' (Scheel, 2024, p. 6) underwrites the emergence and circulation of the Saharan knowledge claim. Cautioning against a 'conspiratorial logic' in some Ignorance Studies scholarship, Scheel (ibid.: 5) has rightly criticized 'accounts in which (networks of) all-powerful, seemingly omniscient actors furnish secret plans behind the scenes to produce various types of nonknowledge that help to accomplish pre-defined objectives and agendas'.

In the conducted interviews, there was no indication of conspiratorial intent. Indeed, some members of international migration organizations – including those who had voiced the claim – seemed unsure about how the Saharan knowledge claim had first emerged or were puzzled by its repeated use. Members of the Missing Migrants Project outrightly rejected the claim, noting that it had no merit as it conflicted with IOM's own statistical counts.[5] At one stage in our repeated email exchanges, the UN Refugee Agency's special envoy issued a correction, noting that he had been unaware of the Mixed Migration Centre's surveys on deaths along Saharan land routes, despite the close collaboration between UNHCR and MMC, and the latter's key role in producing the claim in the first place. In turn, the author of the important MMC report of 2016 was quick to acknowledge methodological shortcomings, emphasizing that its use for advocacy would override questions of 'scientific' validity. Moreover, and importantly, despite directly benefitting from its data practice, MMC ended its data collection on desert deaths, citing methodological and ethical concerns. Yet, while not a story of conspiracy, the case of the claim does nevertheless highlight the importance of (collective) epistemic authority and the performative power of (non-)knowledge in the governance of migration.

In the final part, the article considers the Sahara itself, and colonial imaginaries of the desert, as an additional explanatory factor why the claim continues to stubbornly echo through the community of international organizations and the international media. Rather than an 'innocent' setting for a migration drama to unfold, the desert imagined as 'terra nullius' (Hawad, 2023, p. 29) serves the enactment of a *geography of migrant disappearance*. Where but in the space that itself signifies absence would this (non) knowledge claim find such political resonance and receive such little scrutiny?

Colonial imaginaries and the taming of terra nullius

As natural barriers and hostile environments, comparing the Sahara and the Mediterranean has a history much longer than the very recent comparisons in terms of migrant deaths. For Horden (2012, p. 25), the attraction to compare desert and sea derives 'not only from the applicability of nautical similes (camels as ships of the desert, oases as islands) but from the proximity of the two regions'. Already in 1949, Braudel (1966), p. 56 described the Sahara as 'the second face of the Mediterranean', the sea's *hinterland*, and therewith as part of the 'Greater Mediterranean'. Drawing from Braudel's work, Ould Moctar (2025, p. 58) speaks of the 'macro-regional co-constitution' of the Mediterranean and the Sahara, where the regions are imagined to 'engulf and enfold one another, in a manner not unlike the ritual advance and retreat of waves and dunes that are so fundamental to the basic ecological rhythm of each zone' (see also Ould Moctar, 2024). Though Schmitt (2006, p. 43, emphases in the original) had once evoked an elemental opposition between sea and land, where the sea, in contrast to land, had no '*character*, in the original sense of the word, which comes from the Greek *charassein*, meaning to engrave, to scratch, to imprint', this opposition fails to stand with regard to the desert. Both spaces are frequently imagined as 'characterless' and considered as empty – 'mare nullius' and 'terra nullius' (Mainwaring & DeBono, 2021; Stierl, 2016).

Historically, the construction of the Sahara as empty served colonizing powers' quest for control and domination. As Tellit Hawad (2023, p. 29) notes, the French colonial '"invention" of the Sahara as a periphery to be conquered, exploited and disciplined' articulated a 'natural, racial, and political geography' through which 'the colonial administration reduced the nomadic lands to "wild" and vacant territories, "dead lands" in need of "development"'. In today's postcolonial times, and despite 'satellite phones and affordable GPS', the Sahara continues to be imagined as 'both mysterious and empty' (McDougall & Scheele, 2012, p. 3). While, clearly, 'the Sahara is not devoid of life', this idea persists, according to Henni (2022, p. 12), 'to legitimize its transformation, manipulation, toxification, and destruction'.

Regarding the deadliness of cross-desert migration, these long-held colonial 'Saharan Imaginaries' (Ould Moctar & Porges, 2022) seem key to carry and sustain the ambiguous (non-)knowledge claim. The Sahara, 'whose "emptiness" is all too readily filled with the nightmares of contemporary Western imaginations' (McDougall & Scheele, 2012, p. 4), lends itself to the enactment of a geography of migrant disappearance. As in the case of 'mare nullius', where capsizing migrant boats are frequently portrayed as unfortunate and fateful tragedies, their passengers' fate disconnected from state action and accountability, also the Sahara is being 'emptied out' when it concerns migrant death.

To enact the Sahara as a geography of disappearance requires the erasure of *other realities* that conflict with accounts of the desert as a lifeless void. Indeed, IOM and other migration 'managers' have faced criticism for actively disregarding the diversity of human mobility in the desert space. According to Border Forensics (2023, pp. 13–14), both the EU and IOM would 'reduce the trans-Saharan routes in Niger to mere corridors for transit migrants', as if the desert was not a space of 'a wide range of complex and overlapping types of mobilities', which would make drawing distinctions between 'who is a "migrant"', and who is not, an impossible endeavour. In its report on the deadly effects of migration policies and border enforcement in the desert, the NGO notes that 'framing of people moving through the Sahara as "migrants" heading towards Europe serves to justify the deployment of control activities' (ibid.: 14).

In ostensibly responding to the need to prevent further loss of life, these control activities have been critical in driving the once legal transport of people 'underground', thereby increasing the risks during trans-desert journeys. In doing so, Europe's increased efforts to borderise the desert since 2015 have also severely damaged already impoverished local economies, where human mobility and the transportation of people had been key economic activities. In a space such as the desert, not immobility but 'movement and exchange are essential for survival', McDougall and Scheele (2012, p. 14) stress, so that 'the denial of the freedom to move is an important means of control and an expression of power'. Challenging this freedom, border measures have disrupted patterns of regional mobility within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). As Boserup and Martinez (2018, p. 51) note, 'the freedom of movement enshrined in the ECOWAS protocols now stops in Agadez'. Perfidiously, in the name of saving lives, borderizing the desert and thereby taming 'terra nullius' have produced deadly migration routes while, at the same time, hampering mobilities that are so pivotal to sustain human life in the Sahara.

Conclusion

Scholarship in Ignorance Studies and Agnotology has highlighted the exploitation of *unknowns* for particular political gains and projects (Aradau, 2017; Cortiel et al., 2020; McGoey, 2019). Unknowns are not only there to be eradicated through knowledge production, so that knowledge can be 'actionable' and of use for 'better governance'. Rather, unknowns, or what Aradau (2017, p. 331) calls 'different modes of non-knowledge', including 'uncertainty, ignorance, secrecy, ambiguity, and error', can be actively produced and utilized. As the case of the claim regarding the deadliness of cross-Saharan migration shows, also unknowns and non-knowledge can be actionable. Acknowledging the 'inability-to-know' (ibid.: 330) about the 'real' scale of desert deaths did not prevent key international migration organizations from making and echoing an ambiguous, speculative and 'messy' knowledge claim. We can thus consider the case of the knowledge claim as one of *good enough unknowns*, allowing for 'good enough governance' (Rocha de Siqueira, 2017, p. 180).

Findings on Saharan deaths that were deemed 'unscientific' by the data practitioner themselves and that included deaths not even necessarily related to migratory journeys were deemed sufficient to evidence a horrible migration reality in the desert that required specific responses, including humanitarian *and* deterrence measures both by states and international organizations. Effectively, efforts enacted in the name of

preventing migrant deaths were deeply interwoven with efforts to prevent migration itself: *For where few move, even fewer die*. In performing this specific migration reality, other realities became erased. In particular realities, where human mobility and the freedom to move are critical for human survival and livelihood in a space as challenging as the Sahara. Or those realities where the increased efforts to borderise the Sahara since 2015, implicating Europe, African states, as well as international organizations, have not only been at the core of producing ever-more dangerous migration trajectories but have played a key role in producing the impossibility to know itself. That the 'true scale of migrant deaths across the desert is unknown', Border Forensics (2023, pp. 3–4) notes, is also due to border measures that 'have forced cross-Saharan movement within Niger further underground and into more remote areas of the desert, where incidents can easily go unnoticed'.

The case of the Saharan knowledge claim is thus one where the use of unknowns justified efforts that were themselves deeply entangled in the production of unknowns. Colonial imaginaries of the desert as unknowable and empty served this performance of the Sahara as a geography of disappearance, whilst the collective epistemic authority of the claimants seems to have prevented any closer scrutiny of the claim's credibility. Certainly, the article does not suggest that the claim 'single-handedly' prompted the increased interventions by international organizations since 2015. Still, in a context of peaking migration anxiety in Europe, it helped justify efforts to deter humanitarianly. That the impossibility to know or the inability to accurately measure did not mean an impossibility to manage, raises a more general question about the performative role of (non-) knowledge in enacting *messy migration realities* that are then acted upon – a question that calls for deeper exploration across regional contexts.

Of course, all of this is not to question a devastatingly deadly migration reality in the desert. Indeed, testimonies of migrant survivors and instances where human remains are found provide glimpses into the horrors that occur in this space. However, we will never know how many lives have been lost in the attempt to migrate across the Sahara. What we do know is that the deaths and disappearances of those *on the move* in the desert have prompted suffering around the world, especially in the 'Global Souths', where families of the 'disappeared' continue to be tormented by the impossibility to know.

Notes

1. As will become clear later on, expressions of this knowledge claim are diverse and often imprecise so that 'the claim' encompasses a variety of versions, all of which, however, share the estimate that the death toll in the Sahara is larger than the one in the Mediterranean.
2. Given the prominent role of the interviewees in their organizations and also given that several of them have voiced the knowledge claim regarding the Saharan death toll in publications and/or media interviews, the decision was taken to refer to my respondents by name. All agreed to be named and quoted in this article. It should also be mentioned that Marta Sánchez Dionis joined my research project 'The Production of Spaces of Migrant Disappearance' at the University of Osnabrück between June and December 2024.
3. This hope may surprise, given that the availability of supposedly 'better data' for the Mediterranean region has not led to increased state-led rescue efforts.
4. The DFID document was shared by Brem Frouws.
5. That said, as shown before, also MMP has actively circulated the claim.

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