dignity
commemoration
forensics
gestures of care
(in)visibility
warm data
shared language(s)
common world
seeds
solidarities
fertility
belonging
proclamation
inheritance
collectivity
haunting presence
against white noise
speaking with

Beyond the List
Ecologies of Mourning and Resistance to Fortress Europe's Border Violence

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SCAFFOLDING   SPECTRES

This text takes the form of a reflection as a hyphen between institutions, disciplines, and experts, referencing ideas, actions, and gestures considered by numerous companions involved in mourning, honoring the dignity of those who have died or disappeared during their migrations. — These include:

1) the ongoing performance project *Necropolis*, initiated in 2018 by choreographer Arkadi Zaides, which investigates the politics of death, migration, and border violence by constructing a performative archive of those who have lost their lives while attempting to cross the European borders. The project traces the impact of migration policies, making visible the often-erased histories of the deceased.

2) numerous works of art and discursive strategies developed as part of La Voix des Sans Papiers (Voice of the Undocumented) in Brussels, a self-organized collective with the intention to rebuild a political movement around the issue of undocumented immigrants, to inform, raise awareness, mobilize, and fight for a dignified life. As well as some members of Le Comité des Femmes Sans-Papiers, formed by undocumented women from different backgrounds, both with and without papers, looking to share their struggles, experiences, and knowledge. La Voix des Sans Papiers (VSP) is represented by Aïsta Bah, Halidou Wuandaougo, Thierno Dia, Mamadou Taslim Diallo, Modou Ndiaye and Alberto Isifin Tchama. Le Comité des Femmes Sans-Papiers is represented by Leticia Assemien, Henriette Essami-Khaullot, Bintou Toure.

3) the *Necropolis United*[1] research project, with Christel Stalpaert as Principal Investigator, and *Atelier Cartographique* (represented by Pacôme Béru, Pierre Marchand), Milady Renoir as a close neighbor, and UNITED *for Intercultural Action* (Geert Ates) as third parties. Martín Zícari, appointed post-doctoral researcher and research coordinator on the project, and Fran Kourouma, a member of the project's scientific committee.

Together, we offer our intertwined reflections on the expansion of choreographic gestures of care within ecologies of mourning. It is important to emphasize that, in alignment with VSP's work, we do not view death and disappearance as the sole fatal consequences of European border policies. Rather, we also consider the liminal state of migrants who, due to various administrative and bureaucratic classifications (refugee, asylum seeker, undocumented), find their lives in their destination countries completely stalled, forced to endure extreme precarity. In response, VSP proposes the concepts of *petite-mort* (small death) and *mort-vivant* (living death) to describe this condition.

I

All (human) life is life.
It is true that one life comes into existence before another life,
But a life is not 'older,' more respectable than another life,
Just as one life is not superior to another life.
...
All life being life,
Any harm done to a life requires reparation.
Therefore,
Let no one attack his neighbor gratuitously,
Let no one harm his neighbor,
Let no one martyr his fellow man.
...
Let each one watch over his neighbor,
Let everyone revere their parents,
Let everyone educate their children as they should,
Let everyone 'maintain,' provide for the needs
    of the members of their family.
...
Because any country, any land which would see
    men disappear from its surface
Would immediately become nostalgic.
People of old tell us:
'Man as an individual
Made of bone and flesh,
Of marrow and nerves,

Skin covered with hair,
Feeds on food and drinks;
But his 'soul,' his spirit lives on three things:
Seeing who he wants to see
Saying what he wants to say
And doing what he wants to do;
If even one of these things were to be lacking
in the human soul,
It would suffer
And would surely wither.'

Consequently (...):
Everyone now has their own person,
Everyone is free to act,
Everyone now has the fruits of their labor.

This is the oath of the Manden[2] |
To the ears of the whole world.

2 |

Mandé: an ancestral king-
dom of West Africa, a
stronghold of resistance
against slavery and
colonization, and a space
for the imagination of
transformative prophecies.
According to the griot
Babou Condé, the name
Mandén would mean 'child
of the manatee.' In the
French language, *Mandé*
refers to someone who is
summoned, notified, or
ordered to come. *Mander*
is synonymous with
calling or summoning.

The Charter of Mandé[3] | resonates in the Semira Adamu room
at the building in Brussels occupied by La Voix des Sans Papiers
(VSP) at the start of 2025. There, news of new shipwrecks and

other pushbacks reaches the participants of *Necropolis United* who share an easter cake and coffee while connecting the words of the Sages who advocate dignity and response. —

3 |

The Manden Charter dates back to the early thirteenth century and is considered one of the oldest known declarations of human rights in the world. It was conceived (without foreign influence) during the completion of the Mali Empire under Sundiata Keita. This charter is addressed to the 'twelve parts of the world,' and thus, according to its authors, it carries a universal purpose. It consists of seven statements, each serving as the heading of an article in the charter, which is also known by other names, such as *Donsolu Kalikan* (The Hunters' Oath), *Dunya Makilikan* (Admonition to the World), or more commonly *Manden Kalikan* (The Mandé Oath).

II

The *Necropolis United* project[4] | seeks to explore how virtual space can become a site for commemoration, mourning, and action. — It aims to develop software—an information system—that is democratic. With the rise of techno-fascism within countries across Europe, challenging concepts and values such as democracy, we can also name this information system as non-extractive.

4 |

The *Necropolis* United project brings together members of various migrant-led initiatives and civil, as well as human rights organizations in meetings called Multi-Lingual Encounter (ME), to refer to the multiplicity of working methodologies, languages, and discourses involved. Organizations include Comité des Femmes Sans-Papiers, La Voix des Sans Papiers de Bruxelles, Getting the Voice Out, Agir pour la Paix, Abolish Frontex, Collectif les Morts de la Rue, IWW Belgium, Santé en lutte, Réseau Salariat, as well as artists, researchers and members of the Brussels-based cooperative of cartographic practices Atelier Cartographique. ME are organized in different Brussels cultural organizations such as Globe Aroma, Pianofabriek, Maison de la Paix, La Loge and the occupation of La Voix de Sans Papiers Fritz Toussaint.

Pacôme resists defining our work in negative terms—by what is not (in this case, extractive)—and instead proposes

the concept of an information system that is self-organized. Taslim suggests that we focus on redefining what we mean by **democratic**, bringing new significance to the term. Faïza frames it under the concept of **co-responsibility**. Through all these perspectives, we aim to create an information system that is described and conceptualized by those who will use it—both contributors and end users—in a direct and non-hierarchical relationship with those responsible for its technical development.

We believe that such an effort is a necessary foundation for designing a technological infrastructure that deals with deaths and disappearances through migration. Why? Because violence at the borders is a continuation of colonial violence, driven by an imperialist and supremacist agenda. Technocratic violence, facilitated by multinational corporations, is part of a long-standing fascist cybernetic project—one in which companies such as Google, Amazon, and Microsoft are deeply implicated. To prevent marginalized bodies from being subjected to cybernetic, colonial, and border violence, we shift our approach: rather than speaking **about**, we prioritize speaking **with**.

The methodology for designing and producing the system involves bringing together a group or community united by a common cause, prior to any software writing. Workshops are organized to allow stakeholders to collectively define the issues, objectives, uses, target audience, and aesthetic of the forthcoming information system.

Each participant's contributions are recognized as equally valuable, with respect given to expertise rooted in lived experiences, as well as professional, political, cultural, or social knowledge. The term 'work' is intentionally used to describe those contributions, emphasizing the importance of active engagement and fair remuneration for all participants.

This collective work establishes a distinct economic approach and timeline, fundamentally opposed to the production

methods typically used in the software creation industry. The focus shifts from optimizing technical production flows to prioritizing relational quality and collective co-creation. ▬

This shift repositions technically proficient individuals, who must put their skills at the service of the common cause, as well as future users, who must actively participate in defining their technical needs.

The attempt to create democratic software writing places questions of social and collective organization at the center of the software design process, reinforcing the long-term effort to develop a shared language and formulate a collective request. ▬

III

In her book *Our Grateful Dead*, Vinciane Despret suggests that, to be treated properly and with respect, the dead must be situated. They need to be given a place where they can guide, inspire, haunt, or demand care. Without a proper place or recognition, they remain in a kind of limbo, unable to 'complete' their purpose, whether that purpose is to be remembered, mourned, honored, or integrated into the ongoing lives of the living.[5] ❙ This means establishing an ecology of mourning: a space made for them, where they can manifest their ways of being and where their effects can be felt by those who remain.

5 ❙
Despret, 9.

Despret frames this care for the dead as an ecological issue. She examines and creates the conditions in which the dead can exist, asking, 'What makes a dead person able to carry on? What is a dead person holding on to? What are the right conditions to make the dead enabled? What kinds of trials strengthen them, and what kinds put them in danger? What are they in need of? What do they ask for? What do they make other beings capable of? What makes for a good milieu for them and for those who have taken on the responsibility for their accomplishment?' For Despret, these questions 'stand apart from [those] that mainstream science typically focuses on,' instead addressing 'the needs that have to be respected in the continual creation of an association.'

IV

Taslim, spokesperson for La Voix de Sans Papiers, adds:
  Don't wait until I'm dead...
Faïza replies:
  to greet me...
Fran completes:
  to bring me back to life
Thierno, also a spokesperson for VSP, bounces back:
  to offer me heaven and earth beyond my lifetime
And then Aïsta and Halidou, Modou, Milady, ask themselves
who can restore, define or confiscate the DIGNITY of others,
and who holds it, and who loses it?

The group listens and VSP recounts their Odyssey:[6]
  Once upon a time, there was an Elsewhere, not so far,
  founded before, stretching from yesterday to today.
  A land of births, of horizons,
  a breath of dreams and ambitions.
  Journey. Crossing. Danger. Epic.
  By plane, through tunnels, by train, by boat,
  conquered lands never subjugated,
  in bags and in cargo holds,
  seeds of ideals and illusion.
  Collision. Landing. Shipwreck. Arrival.
  A polluted breeding ground, a disappointing environment,
      which ferments with precarity and hypocrisy.
  A swamp of state violence
  Quicksands of suspicion,
  winds of criminalization,
  The breath of discrimination,
  storms disrupting the breath, forming a giant hurricane:
  Western mythification

[6]
See ep.cfsasbl.be/vsp-l-
odyssee-des-sans-papiers.

V

The shipwreck that occurred on October 3, 2013 off the coast of Lampedusa could mark the beginning of the so-called refugee crisis—or rather the 'crisis for refugees,' as Gurminder K. Bhambra more precisely calls it,[7] to dispel any doubt about who is truly suffering.[8] Following the shipwreck, Italian Prime Minister Enrico Letta granted Italian citizenship to the 372 individuals who lost their lives in the disaster. At the same time, the 155 people rescued from the same ship were placed in a detention center without any rights.

[7] Bhambra.

[8] The term 'migration crisis' has been used in political and media agendas since the early 2000s. More than a migration crisis, it is, in Europe, a crisis of reception. Furthermore, the term 'crisis' is problematic, because it gives the impression of an unexpected, unmanageable phenomenon. This framing helps justify the reinforcement of external border controls. It benefits numerous actors involved in 'crisis management,' both public and private. We suggest avoiding the use of the word 'crisis.' Moreover, a whole semantic framework has developed in media and political discourses to create a distorted image of migratory movements as being overwhelming: flows, waves, tsunamis, etc. We propose refraining from using such terms that liken migration to liquids, as they are dehumanizing. Instead, we prefer terms like movements or displacement.

We wish to expose the imperialist nature of what is called citizenship: Ariella Aïsha Azoulay refers to it as 'the institution of citizenship as a set of rights against and at the expense of others.'[9] What is omitted in these imperialist narratives of citizenship 'proclaiming the progress of citizens' rights,' she argues, 'is the violence involved in defining citizenship as a constitutive element of belonging to the state rather than a shared trait among co-citizens concerned with a common world.'[9] One can only belong to the state if one has the proper documents to present. This divides people into those who have the correct documents and those who do not, all in the name of progress. Imperial citizenship, Azoulay asserts, 'condemns different people who share a world to not ontologically or politically coincide within it.'[9]

[9] Azoulay, 16, 39, 16.

With Azoulay, we propose unlearning this type of imperial citizenship and instead proclaiming co-citizenship. Co-citizenship is an ongoing, ever-evolving composition of a common world; it is a set of assumptions and practices shared by different people as companions who oppose imperialism, colonialism, and racial capitalism.

VI

UNITED List of Refugee Deaths is a database documenting the deaths of people who have perished on migration routes towards Europe. This database was created and is maintained by UNITED for Intercultural Action, a European network fighting against nationalism, racism, and fascism, supported by more than 550 organizations across 48 European countries. 'Fatal Policies of Fortress Europe' is a related, ongoing campaign of the UNITED network that examines the consequences of the European Union's restrictive border policies. It is assembled row by row, each record a death or a group of related deaths. The information is broken down into six columns: the date of the reported death(s), the number of bodies found in that case (ranging from one to as many as 1,100 in the deadliest incident reported), the deceased's name, gender, and age, their region of origin (if known), the cause of death (such as drowning, suicide, police violence, or lack of access to medical care), and the source(s) that reported the case. Between 1993 and 2024, 60,620 deaths have been recorded in the UNITED list. 99 percent of the victims are mentioned as N.N., which stands for *Nomen Nescio*, Latin for 'I do not know the name.' Thousands more have never been reported.

Necropolis, the stage performance by choreographer Arkadi Zaides, takes the UNITED List of Refugee Deaths as its starting point. It seeks to transcend the two-dimensional, flattened nature of the list itself, turning it into a warm body of data.[10] In the context of this artistic project, the team has developed a

ritual that involves searching for and geolocating the graves of the deceased, thereby giving them a physical and geographic presence beyond the abstraction of the list. Through this process, *Necropolis* transforms the list of the dead and disappeared into a narrative of remembrance and recognition, challenging the audience to engage with the victims of border violence who are structurally rendered invisible. ▁ Another aim of the project is raising awareness about the lack of proper forensic investigation needed in order to determine the identities of the victims.

10 |

Mariam Ghani's concept of 'warm data' refers to the complex interplay of personal, historical, and cultural contexts that surround and give depth to information. Unlike 'cold' data, which is often stripped of context and presented as raw, objective, and neutral, warm data acknowledges the human elements that shape and influence it—stories, emotions, and power structures. Ghani explores how this layered, textured understanding of data can bring a more holistic perspective to archives, histories, and narratives. By focusing on warm data, she challenges the detachment often associated with traditional archival practices, emphasizing the need to account for the subjective and relational dynamics that imbue data with meaning and life. This concept encourages the use of archives and records not just as repositories of facts, but as spaces where memory, identity, and connection can be actively engaged and interrogated. Ghani and Ganesh.

In the first part of the performance, the audience is guided by two performers and a disembodied voice through a virtual map on Google Earth, where all the localized graves are marked. Beginning with the theater space, Google Earth zooms out to reveal the graves of people who died on migration routes, showing those buried nearby as well as farther away. In the second part of the performance, a sculpture resembling human body parts is examined by the two performers on stage. This act ritualizes a forensic procedure—one that many victims at Europe's borders are tragically deprived of—bringing attention to the denial of proper investigation and acknowledgment of their deaths. ▁

VII

From these ill winds, a few mists infiltrate the promises:
    the NGO-ization of cultural and educational places,
        academic extractivism,
    the monopolization of stories and images
    by artists and well-intentioned people paving hell
        with gold-plated tiles.
    When the varnish cracks,
    the 'weeds' regain their power.

    So the women and the men and the children
    and the spirits went in search for Water,
    the one which forms the vital strength,
    the one which bypasses the mountains and the fires,
    the one which engages the resistance.
    All the waters flow in immensity,
    connecting through a thousand streams, blood,
        saliva and sap.
    In the gills, the chests and the hearts,
    the air of dignity,
    the oxygen of the ancestral struggles blows,
    breathes the hope of inheritance. ▬
    Materials. Ferns. Anger.
    In the holes that Europe has dug,
    some stumble
    others slip,
    some gravitate,
    others sink.

surfacing toward life
p.102

VIII

Stemming from colonial discourse, the term 'origin' is used
by European bureaucracies to indicate the country, region, or
place of birth of a person, their parents, or their grandparents.
('origin' can also refer to a dual cultural background.) This use
of the term, among others like 'roots,' 'ancestry,' or 'descent,'

is problematic because it can imply that people—most of whom experience racism—are not considered to be European even if they were born there. Therefore, we suggest that when referring to a country where someone is from, it should be indicated as their country of birth, not their origin. We also propose that, in general, one should avoid mentioning the nationality of a person, as well as the country their family or ancestors lived in before settling in the host society. These measures are proposed to circumvent the weaponization of the concept of 'origin' as part of any racist agenda.

XIX

The following text is spoken by the disembodied voice at the opening of the *Necropolis* performance:

'In order to gain the right to live in Necropolis, one has to die in an attempt to enter it. Citizenship is granted posthumously to dismembered and decomposing corpses. Everyone else—those others who are still alive but without documents—are kept outside, left to die beyond the entry points. They need to arrive at the gates—dead—in order to be processed.'[11]

[11]
Written and recorded by the dramaturg of the *Necropolis* project, Igor Dobričić.

X

European legislation establishes a clear distinction between criminal, natural, and accidental deaths, which determines how bodies are treated thereafter. The bodies of deceased migrants challenge this taxonomy. When the thousands of deaths occurring at Europe's borders are classified as accidental, forensic procedures for collecting medical and biological data on the bodies are not mandatory. In most cases where forensic investigations do occur, they are not conducted properly. The resulting loss of irreplaceable information prevents any future identification of the victims.

How can we mourn these migrant deaths when crucial information is unavailable? How can we investigate and create the conditions in which these deaths can exist? What needs must be respected in the continuous creation of a co-citizenship, as referred by Azoulay? These are the questions we ask ourselves.

XI

In her book *Strangers I Know*, Claudia Durastanti writes:

> 'When we die, maybe on our tombstone they'll write a loved one's name, what profession we had, a line from our favorite book. What won't be written on our tombstones is our distance from home.'[12]

12 |
Durastanti, 173.

XII

Globalization has multiplied borders and reinforced them with walls, increasingly detailed regional and national regulations. These borders create legal categories of people whose rights are increasingly unequal. Many individuals are stranded at Europe's external borders, commonly referred to as Fortress Europe. The border is continuously reenacted. For some people, the experience of the border is everywhere—it is a central protagonist in their lives.

XIII

One could say that *Necropolis United* seeks to build a spectral infrastructure that encapsulates 'textures, rhythms, atmospheres, invocations, gestures, vernacular languages, and affects,'[13] introducing a disruption into what otherwise appears to be an efficient organism. — A 'spectral infrastructure' (as conceived by freethought collective)[14] is a haunting presence within a structural organism. We propose this spectral

allowing apparitions
to arise and take shape
p.245

infrastructure as a method for reflecting on the countless deaths of migrants in Europe—those who died on their way to gaining access to Fortress Europe.

13 | Rogoff et al. (freethought collective).

14 | Ibid.

XIV
Around 2014—and ever since—VSP
aka La Voix des Sans Papiers
SOWS, SOWS, SOWS, SOWS
kernels, seeds,
eggs, powers:
seeds of union and solidarity
between undocumented and documented
sprouts of resistance and ethics
between deaf ears and heard voices
seeds of self-organization
towards the grapes of great anger
Then the *Gouye*, the *Cabesera*, the *Mbuyu*
are born,
the *Zirasun*, the bokki, بابوب, the *Cabda*,
the *Kondebili* ... the Baobab!

Over a decade as long as a millennium,
despite predations and corruption,
the Baobab takes root from all those uprooted
Deep in the ground, defying the barren loam
to anchor itself in fertile land.

Each foot is named:
A root of the family,
A compass in storms,
A root of the village,
fighting against hunger and war,
A root of resistance,
weighing the YES and AGAINST,
saying NO, ▬ we've had enough!!!

refusal
p.97

These roots pierce the City!
Even if the tree catches fire,
like a snake that sheds its skin
the bark of the baobab regenerates.

The Baobab of VSP,
with a proud and strong trunk stands
against white noise,
against underground parasites,
its trunk engraved with all the names
members of VSP
alive, dead and in between.

Each leaning against a solid trellis
of ethical relationships and self-teaching,
in autonomy and alliances, —
the Baobab protects the popular university
against the cold of fear
and the fire of racism

continually made
and changed in
a network of relations
p.420

The crown, the branches, the twigs
everything is on fire but nothing burns
'Ragal dou diam gouye'[15]

15
Wolof Proverbe:
'The fearful do not cut
the baobab.'

The branches extend the tree
with powerful reach,
welcoming good omens:

Pure dignity, VSP[16] on the menu
tables of *attayas*, *thiakry*, *attiéké*.

16
La Voix des Sans Papiers
2014–2024: an odyssey
of self-organization and
resistance by Milady
Renoir and Modou Ndiaye.
See legrainasbl.org/
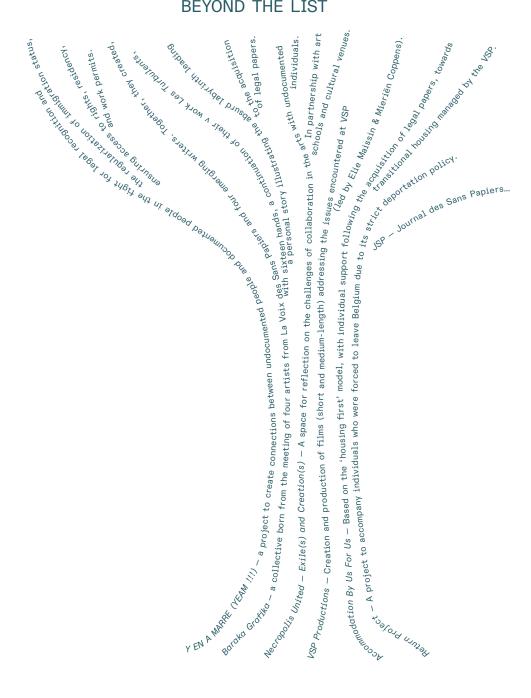revueakene/la-voix-des-
sans-papiers-2014-2024/.

RHYTHM   RECALIBRATION   TREMBLING

Y EN A MARRE (YEAM !!!) – a project to create connections between undocumented and documented people in the fight for legal recognition and the regularization of immigration and ensuring access to rights, residency, and work permits.

Baraka Grafika – a collective born from the meeting of four artists from La Voix des Sans Papiers and four Sans Papiers with sixteen hands, a continuation of their v work Les Turbulents, Together, they created, with emerging writers. Together, they created, a personal story illustrating the absurd labyrinth leading to the acquisition of legal papers.

Necropolis United – Exile(s) and Creation(s) – A space for reflection on the challenges of collaboration in the arts with undocumented individuals. In partnership with art schools and cultural venues.

VSP Productions – Creation and production of films (short and medium-length) addressing the issues encountered at VSP (led by Elie Maissin & Mieriën Coppens).

Accommodation By Us For Us – Based on the 'housing first' model, with individual support following the acquisition of legal papers, towards transitional housing managed by the VSP.

Return Project – A project to accompany individuals who were forced to leave Belgium due to its strict deportation policy.

VSP – Journal des Sans Papiers…

Foods such as these are the fruits of the tree of life and nourish VSP's struggle towards rock solid cases for regularization, a book of recommendations and another of demands,[17] alliances with collectives, networks, organizations from the most grassroots to the most institutional, resumption of studies and access to state-recognized trainings, the creation of 100PAP solidarity beer,[18] and a forest house which proudly stands higher and higher in the canopy of resistances.

17 | 2019 version: sanspapiers. be/wp-content/uploads/ 2019/04/Elections-mai-2019-Recommandations-des-sans-papiers.pdf.

18 | An initiative that fights for the housing rights of undocumented individuals. The profits from the sales are used to pay rents, utilities, and renovations. 100PAP in French reads like 'sans-pap' short for 'sans-papiers,' which refers to undocumented migrants.

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