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Building a Bridge Across the Sea

Abby Wheatley

Arizona State University, abbycwhheatley@gmail.com

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The Social Practice of Human Rights: Charting the Frontiers of Research and Advocacy

2017 Conference of the University of Dayton Human Rights Center

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Research Panel: Place-Based Rights: Connecting Global to Local

Presenter: Abby C. Wheatley

Title: Building a Bridge Across the Sea

Abstract:

On October 3, 2013, the island of Lampedusa, Italy, was transformed into an international stage for the crisis of migration when a boat carrying hundreds of migrants traveling from Libya sank off its coast. Reports indicate that 368 people drowned, while 89 people were rescued, most of them by locals. Though the mass drowning of Africans seeking refuge in Europe was not a new phenomenon, the event brought international attention to Lampedusa and underscored the fragile line between local and global processes and the intertwined yet opposing forces of mobility and enclosure.

Using Lampedusa as a case study, this paper examines the reality of human displacement and mass migration through three distinct yet interrelated approaches. These include:

- 1) A humanitarian corridor to resettle one thousand vulnerable migrants from Syria, Lebanon, and Morocco co-created by the Italian government and the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy;
- 2) Local responses that range from receiving and welcoming migrants and refugees as they disembark in Lampedusa to documenting the militarization of the island over an extended period of time;
- 3) Autonomous migration examined through the intimate stories of migrants and refugees arriving on the island after months of travel across the Western Sahara and Mediterranean Sea.

Based on ethnographic research conducted over two summers in Lampedusa, Italy, I argue that the human rights challenges posed by the militarization of the EU-Africa corridor are not insurmountable and are continuously challenged through autonomous migration and local efforts to circumvent failed immigration policies.

About the presenter:

Abby C. Wheatley is a sociocultural anthropologist with research and teaching interests in international migration and mobility, transnational social networks, and community regeneration. Spanning two border regions — the US-Mexico and EU-Africa borders — her research considers the mechanisms through which migration becomes a dangerous and deadly endeavor; the strategies developed by people in transit to survive precarious crossings; and local efforts to circumvent failed immigration and refugee policies. Her book manuscript *Con Sangre y Fuego: Mobility, Autonomy, and the Politics of Survival*, examines a range of community-based strategies employed by Mexican and Central American migrants to survive and resist the highly militarized U.S.-Mexico border.