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Risking Rescue: The Politics of Precarity in Mediterranean Crossing

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Going Against the Grain

University of Dayton Human Rights Center
Social Practice of Human Rights Conference, Oct. 1-4, 2019

Risking Rescue: The Politics of Precarity in Mediterranean Crossing

Presented by:

Eleanor Paynter, *Ohio State University*

Session: Paradigm Shifts: Migrant and Refugee Rights

Abstract:

Over the course of Europe's recent refugee crisis, the role of Search and Rescue (SAR) has changed dramatically, first forming a critical part of (inter)national responses to the crisis, and now occupying an antagonistic position, as countries have closed their ports to NGO-operated vessels and the European Commission (EC) has ceased naval Search and Rescue operations. As a result, migrants crossing the Central Mediterranean face different and increased risks, including dying at sea, being held by European authorities, or being apprehended closer to Libya and sent to a Libyan detention camp.

In response to these shifts, groups that continue SAR operations without guaranteed government support have become more overtly activist in nature. This change is exemplified in the work of the group *Mediterranea*, in which activists, humanitarian workers, and scholars maintain the rescue ship *Mare Jonio*, working at sea to bring migrants to safety, and via social media to garner support for their cause.

In this talk, through the example of *Mediterranea*, I ask: How does a reading of risk, understood from the perspectives of different institutional and individual subjects, inform understandings of how notions of rescue and human rights are changing in contexts of precarious migration? I consider how structural changes in border management affect the dynamics of risk engaged by different actors in borderzones, including migrants, humanitarian workers, and border authorities. My focus on social and political transformations through the lens of risk also draws on my ethnographic and narrative-based research with migrants and aid workers in Italy.

Presenter information:

Eleanor Paynter is a PhD Candidate in Comparative Studies at Ohio State University. Her scholarly work focuses on migration, asylum, borders, and their representation in life narrative, with particular attention to contemporary Mediterranean migration to Italy. Eleanor is a co-founder of OSU's Migration Studies Working Group, and her articles have appeared in the *European Journal of Life Writing*, *a/b: auto/biography*, and *Contexts*. Her dissertation project investigates discourses and experiences of emergency in the context of precarious migration to Italy, analyzing oral history interviews and written and filmic narratives.