

Challenging ungrievability for people missing at sea

Search infrastructures, spaces of public mourning and claims for justice

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ABSTRACT

Since the so-called refugee crisis, the central Mediterranean Sea has been identified as the deadliest border in the world. As the critical border studies debate has shown, these deaths reflect the structural violence of border regimes and demand due forms of political accountability and responsibility. At the same time, dominant power structures differentially shape the visibility and grievability of those who are missing and dead at the border, as well as the public narratives on life and death in migration. Keeping this complexity as a background, and drawing on examples from Lampedusa and Tunisia, we investigate the politics of challenging Butler's 'ungrievability' – the lack of access to preconditions, spaces, and times of private and public mourning and commemoration. We critically discuss the interplay between three components of this political arena: the search infrastructures of the missing and dead at sea, made of several institutional, non-governmental and civil society actors; the creation of "spaces of commemoration" through place-making (e.g. in cemeteries, squares, online platforms), time-marking (i.e. recurrent events) and collective actions (e.g. civic committees); the claims for justice and political accountability for those deaths, including through formal legal channels (i.e. trials and criminal reports). Overall, we illustrate how deaths at sea are unequally perceived, addressed and commemorated, in terms of claims for identification, accountability and justice, among different and often conflicting stakeholders – civil society actors, family members and public authorities.

Keywords: Forced migration – Ungrievability – Death at sea – Search infrastructures – Commemoration – Claims for justice