

Liquid Traces: Investigating the Deaths of Migrants at the EU's Maritime Frontier

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Because any trace on water seems to be immediately dissolved by currents, the seas have long been associated with a permanent present, that resists any writing of history. The infinite liquid expanse has equally represented a challenge for governance: the impossibility of drawing stable boundaries in ever changing waters has led to consider the seas as a space of absolute freedom and flow – the “free seas”. In this presentation, I will show that on the contrary, the seas are increasingly documented and divided, and inextricably so. A complex sensing apparatus is fundamental to a form of governance that combines the division of maritime spaces and the control of movement, and that instrumentalises the partial, overlapping, and “elastic” nature of maritime jurisdictions and international law. It is in these conditions that the EU imposed migration regime operates, selectively expanding sovereign rights through patrols in the high seas but also retracting from responsibility, as in the many instances of non-assistance to migrants at sea. Through the policies and the conditions of maritime governance, the EU the sea is turned into a deadly liquid – the direct cause of over 13.000 documented deaths over the last 15 years. However, by using the Mediterranean's remote sensing apparatus against the grain and spatialising violations of migrants' rights at sea, I will demonstrate that it is possible to re-inscribe responsibility into a sea of impunity.

Charles Heller and Lorenzo Pezzani are Research Fellows at the Centre for Research Architecture, Goldsmiths, University of London. Together they launched the Forensic Oceanography research project in summer 2011 to support a coalition of NGOs demanding accountability for the deaths of migrants in what is known as the “left-to-die boat” case. Since then, their research has attempted to account for the transformations of the EU's maritime frontier. Together with a wide network of NGOs, they have founded the WatchTheMed online mapping platform