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Blue Skies, Black Death: Skydivers and the Ambiguity of Belief

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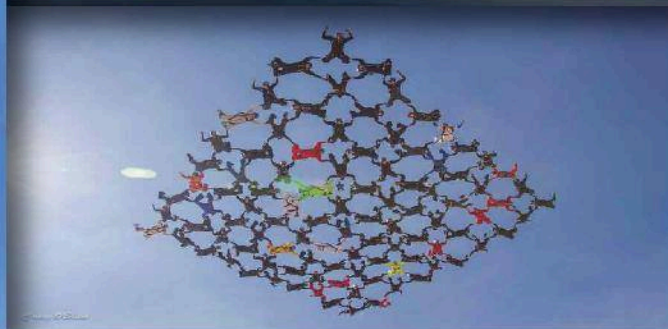
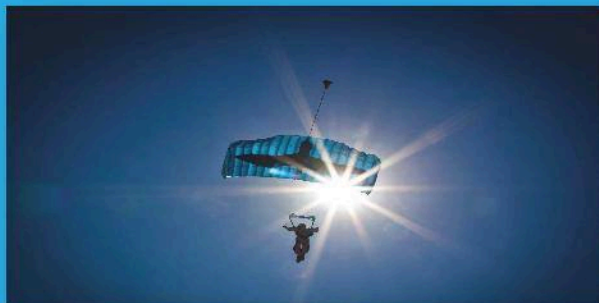
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BLUE SKIES, BLACK DEATH: SKYDIVERS AND THE AMBIGUITY OF BELIEF

“Every time you jump out of that plane, you’re dead until you do something about it.” This is a traditional saying among seasoned skydivers; do they feel it, think it, believe it as they practice their everyday routines between sky and earth? Dr. Miller will discuss her ethnographic research in the professional/competitive skydiving community, including observations and in-depth interviews with hundreds of participants of diverse ages, nationalities, and roles within the sport—all with thousands of jumps and years of experience. Dr. Miller’s work illuminates the complexity and variety of attitudes among insiders of this culture, leading us to a deeper understanding of the ambiguity of belief. For example, jumpers have spoken of the different categories in which they place the tragedies that touch their community—native categories that organize grief and belief into a range of emotional impacts, responses, and rationalizations as they cope, reevaluate, and continue to jump even immediately after fatalities on the drop zone. In the performance and practice of belief, learned through time and experience in a sport where death visits regularly, skydivers’ expressions and behaviors are layered with multiple meanings. Dr. Miller has studied their narratives and rituals in context; her presentation explores how these mysterious and shifting contextual frames incorporate questions and convictions about the threshold we all stand upon.

Dr. Montana Miller is an Associate Professor in the Department of Popular Culture at Bowling Green State University. She holds undergraduate, Masters and PhD degrees in folklore from Harvard University and the University of California at Los Angeles. She specializes in qualitative research methods and ethics. Her ethnographic research has focused on beliefs and perceptions of risk and death, especially in subcultures where insiders’ experiences and lifestyles are misunderstood by the public. She is completing work on her current book project, “Blue Skies, Black Death: Skydivers and the Ambiguity of Belief.”