

Organized by **Serena Bindi** (Université Paris Cité) & **Aidan Seale-Feldman** (University of Notre Dame)

Experiencing Loss in Contemporary Worlds: Toward an Anthropology of Grief

International Conference
16-18 December 2024



Monday 16 and Tuesday 17 December 2024
IEA de Paris - 17 Quai d'Anjou, 75004 Paris

Wednesday 18 December
Université Paris Cité - 45 rue des Saints-Pères 75006 Paris -
Room R 229

To see the full programme and register for the conference (compulsory but FREE of charge):
For all other information, please write to: serena.bindi@u-paris.fr



Experiencing Loss in Contemporary Worlds: Toward an Anthropology of Grief

December 16-18, 2024

International Conference associated to the ANR programme PHANTASIES :
Phantoms or fantasies? Experiences of Loss in Changing Therapeutic Contexts

Organised by:
Serena Bindi, Université Paris Cité
& Aidan Seale-Feldman, University of Notre Dame

Presentation

While funeral practices and sociocultural conceptions of death have long been a central research theme for anthropology, much less attention has been paid by anthropologists to the ways in which the living respond to the loss of a loved one. Nevertheless, a reflection on this theme seems all the more important since, at the present time, the Euro-American world, among others, is crossed by lively scientific and social debates on the ways of coping with the experience of death of a loved one. Mental disorders related to bereavement have recently been included in the two international psychiatric diagnostic manuals, a historic culmination, according to some, of a tendency to medicalize the experience of loss and normalize its course. But if this experience of loss is indeed universal, is it possible to define absolutely how it is or should be lived? Does the notion of "grief" have the same meaning in every social context? And if specific somatic and emotional responses are considered to be at odds with the experience of loss, how does the management of these body conditions vary across societies? What happens when divergent, even conflicting, loss management methods intersect within the same society? Whether in the context of situations of contact between cultures or due to the co-existence of various

institutions (therapeutic, religious, political), grief may take different forms within the same human environment, impacting understandings, perceptions, and the lived experience of loss as well as the "symptoms" which accompany it.

The sessions of this conference will address these questions based on anthropological, theoretical, and empirical contributions, covering a broad range of cultural and geographic locations. The aim of this conference is to invite reflections on the epistemological premises on which an anthropology of loss and grief could be built, as well as the types of theoretical contributions that have already been made by the discipline, and those that might be developed in the future. The conference will also serve to support reflections on the specific methodological techniques used in the study of grief and mourning, as well as the ethical challenges of conducting ethnographic research on this sensitive topic. In this way, the conference seeks to create a space conducive to open and collective reflection around the multiple complex dimensions of the experience of loss, as well as the different ways it is lived, communicated, and given form and meaning.

Logistical Details

Venues

16 and 17 December:

IEA de Paris - Hôtel de Lauzun-17 Quai d'Anjou, 75004 Paris - Salle des Gardes

18 December :

Université Paris Cité - 45 rue des Saints-Pères 75006 Paris - Room R 229

Only in-person, no live broadcast.

The conference will be held in English.

Admission free subject to availability, registration required for 16 and 17 December.

Register here: <https://www.paris-iea.fr/fr/evenements/experiencing-loss-in-contemporary-worlds-toward-an-anthropology-of-grief>

Programme

16 DECEMBER

IEA de Paris -17 Quai d'Anjou, 75004 Paris -
Salle des Gardes

10am-10.45am

INTRODUCTION

Serena Bindi, Associate Professor of
Anthropology, Université Paris Cité,
Coordinator Programme ANR PHANTASIES

Aidan Seale-Feldman, Assistant Professor,
Department of Anthropology, University of
Notre Dame

10.45am-11.30am

Immersive Light

Todd Meyers, Professor and Marjorie
Bronfman Chair in Social Studies of Medicine
& Acting Department Chair, McGill University

11.30am -12pm: Coffee Break

12pm-12.45pm

*Time After Time: Digital Memory and the
Multiple Temporalities of Loss*

Alexa Hagerty, Affiliate Researcher of the
University of Cambridge Minderoo Centre for
Technology and Democracy

1pm-2.30pm: Lunch Break

2.30pm-3.15pm

*Lost Objects: Dreams in the Endlessness of
Grief*

Aidan Seale-Feldman, Assistant Professor,
Department of Anthropology, University of
Notre Dame

3.15pm- 4pm

*Funerary Trait. On marking death at a 'club
thérapeutique'*

Anthony Stavrianakis, Senior Researcher in
Social Anthropology, CNRS, LESC

4pm-4.30pm: Coffee Break

4.30pm-5.15 pm

*Thinking with 'Cargo': Biography,
Understanding, and the Work of Transit in
Palliative Care*

Sarah Pinto, Professor and Chair, Department
of Anthropology, Tufts University

17 DECEMBER

IEA de Paris - 17 Quai d'Anjou, 75004 Paris -
Salle des Gardes

10am-10.45am

*Mourning Elsewhere: Specters of Grief in the
Life Death of Abdelkader Bennahar*

Robert Desjarlais, Professor, Sarah Lawrence
College, New York

10.45am-11.30am

*Ghost, Fantasy, Symptom: Shifting Relations
with the Dead and Imagination of the Future(s)
in the Himalayas*

Serena Bindi, Associate Professor of
Anthropology, Université Paris Cité

11.30am-12pm: Coffee Break

12pm-12.45pm

*Grabbing On and Letting Go: Grieving Bodies
in Southeast Rajasthan*

Andy Mcdowell, Assistant Professor,
Department of Anthropology, Tulane
University

1pm-2.30pm: Lunch Break

2.30pm-3.15pm

*Coastal distress: The biomorality of ecological
loss*

Claudia Lang, Anthropologist, Research
Associate Max Planck institute and University
of Leipzig

3.15pm- 4 pm

*Grieving the ordinary. Wounded knowledge in
the face of political violence*

Lotte Segal, Senior Lecturer in Social
Anthropology, University of Edinburgh

4pm-4.30pm: Coffee Break

4.30pm-6.15pm

Screening of and debate on 'Morire a Palermo'
(*'To die in Palermo'*) by Caterina Pasqualino
(A finished 1-hour documentary in Italian with
English subtitles)

Caterina Pasqualino, Senior Researcher in
Social Anthropology, CNRS, LAP

18 DECEMBER

Université Paris Cité - 45 rue des Saints-Pères
75006 Paris - Room R 229

9.15am-10am

*Mourning in the world: Island experiences of
loss, home, and place*

Devin Flaherty, Assistant Professor,
Department of Anthropology, University of
Texas- San Antonio

10am-10.45am

*Thinking about mourning by dealing with the
pain of the dead - examples from Iceland and
Portugal*

Christophe Pons, Senior Researcher in Social
Anthropology, CNRS, IDEAS

10.45am-11.15am: Coffee Break

11.15am-12pm

Bones from 6 million Parisians below Paris
(*three times the population of Paris today*)

Gilles Thomas, Historian, Prevention and
Protection Department of the Paris City Council

12-1pm: Lunch Break

1 pm-2 pm

FINAL DISCUSSION

ABSTRACTS (Authors in Alphabetical Order)

BINDI Serena, Associate Professor of Anthropology, Université Paris Cité

Ghost, Fantasy, Symptom: Shifting Relations with the Dead and Imagination of the Future(s) in the Himalayas

Over the past century, the Garhwal region, located in the northern Indian state of Uttarakhand, has experienced significant social changes, influenced by a variety of factors including economic shifts, education, migration, and environmental challenges. In this rapidly changing context, multiple domains of life - livelihood, patterns of residence and kinship, technologies, ritual and therapeutic practice - are undergoing deep transformations.

My current research interrogates the way such changes also impact the subjective experience of loss. Over the last ten years, the landscape for dealing with death and its consequences has become extremely complex in the Garhwal region. In response to the consequences of recent disasters which hit the region (2013 Himalayan Tsunami and 2020 Covid Pandemic) several psychosocial initiatives and a community mental health programme have been implemented in the hilly areas. These interventions have contributed to the rapid spread of psychiatric and psychological practices for dealing with the experience of losing a loved one, whether it be collective losses caused by these disasters or all kinds of violent and sudden losses that continue to affect individuals, families and village communities.

Today, recently introduced practices such as active listening, counselling, psycho-social training and psychiatric consultations coexist alongside pre-existing systems such as oracular consultations, ritual dialogue with the dead and Brahmin practices.

Although far from homogeneous themselves, these forms of care nevertheless tend to reproduce specific epistemologies about death and its effects on the living, as well as distinctive emotional norms governing how the bereaved (and the dead) should feel, and divergent sensory regimes concerning how to interpret and manage the feelings of those who are left behind.

This talk shows how, taking form at the interface of multiple epistemologies, emotional norms, and sensory regimes, grieving experiences become, in some instances, particularly slippery and uncertain. At the same time, this talk will be the occasion to consider the following hypothesis: is it possible to see ways of grieving and relating with the dead as practices that crystalize local theories of change and imaginations of the future(s)?

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DESJARLAIS Robert, Professor, Sarah Lawrence College, New York

Mourning Elsewhere: Specters of Grief in the Life Death of Abdelkader Bennahar

This presentation draws from a recently completed book of mine, titled *Wounded: The Life Death of Abdelkader Bennahar*. The book inquiries into the life and death of Abdelkader Bennahar, a man from the Oran region of Algeria who died on the outskirts of Paris, France, on 18 October, 1961, apparently due to violent actions of Paris police officers. The night before, Bennahar was gravely beaten on the side of a road in Nanterre, probably by French police officers; traces of the wounding suffered is apparent in a set of photographs taken that night by Jewish-French photographer Élie Kagan. In tracing out elements of Bennahar's life and death, the book explores the ways in which forms of French colonialism and police and violence shaped the tenor of this life and death. With the current presentation, I consider the

ways in which members of Bennahar's family, who reportedly lived in the Oran region of Algeria, might have responded to his continued absence in their lives, from the fall of 1961 on, and how they might have mourned his death once they learned of it. For years, the family had no clear understanding of whether or not Abdelkader Bennahar had died at some point, or if he was still alive - or if the latter, where his body might have been buried. At that time, mourning for and within the family would have been, I speculate, forever uncertain and tentative – as is my writing about such concerns. Mourning for the family was always *elsewhere*, in that any engagements with grief and remembrance would have been far removed from any actual circumstances of Bennahar's death. At the same time, there is a strong spectral dimension to Bennahar's absent presence, as conveyed in the surviving photographic images and historiographic accounts of his death. This includes my own decidedly spectral, hauntological reflections on Bennahar's death and the afterlife survivance of his name and the remaining trace-images of his life and wounding.

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FLAHERTY Devin, Assistant Professor, Department of Anthropology, University of Texas- San Antonio

Mourning in the world: Island experiences of loss, home, and place

This paper traces the experiences of two women who both lost a parent at the end of life on the island of St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands. One an island native who had been long absent, another a “continental” whose home supposedly lay elsewhere, I follow these women in the weeks after their loss to illuminate two alternate, but resonant, experiences of mourning in this small island place. I engage a phenomenological perspective to interrogate how loss, home, movement, isolation, time and place intertwined in the mourning experiences of these two women. Finally, I offer reflections on what these experiences might show us about mourning as world-changing and geographically attuned.

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HAGERTY Alexa, Affiliate Researcher of the University of Cambridge Minderoo Centre for Technology and Democracy

Time After Time: Digital Memory and the Multiple Temporalities of Loss

This talk examines how digital technologies generate new 'temporal frictions' in contemporary experiences of grief and loss. Through an analysis of social media memorials and AI 'griefbots,' I explore how 'lossless' digital preservation and seamless technological capture and retrieval promise a time 'after time'—a realm beyond temporal decay where grief can be tamed through technological mastery. Yet this computational timescape exists in tension with multiple competing temporal registers: the phenomenological disruption of grief itself, where ordinary rhythms become unmoored; cyclical patterns of mourning rituals; and ongoing care of the dead. I argue that these temporal frictions generate epistemological tensions about how loss can be known and measured across different cultural contexts. The analysis reveals how the material foundations of digital remembrance—from server farms to rare earth minerals—create their own temporalities of obsolescence and decay, even as they promise synthetic eternity. Through examining these competing temporalities of loss, I argue that grief in our current moment requires navigating between radically different ways of experiencing and marking time.

LANG Claudia, Anthropologist, Research Associate Max Planck institute and University of Leipzig

Coastal distress: The biomorality of ecological loss

In the last decades, coastal communities in the South Indian state of Kerala have faced increasing floodings. Amid annual flooding events and chronic tidal floodings, people suffer the loss of landscapes, homes, and livelihoods. A warmer Arabian sea, altered oceanic currents, and obstructed backwater canals wreak havoc on the coast and on those dwelling by and living off the sea. These oceanic changes and coastal damages are a source of grief for many. Chellanam in the South of Kochi, a sliver of land between the Arabian sea and the Vembanad lake, has been particularly heavily hit. Coastal losses not only deeply affect residents' mental health and wellbeing, the sea and the landscape itself has become distressed. This paper reflects on ecological grief less as attachment to loss but rather as shared biomoral qualities. What does it mean to think coastal distress – a form of ecological distress – through local environments and physiologies? How can we understand coastal distress as entangled physiological and oceanic states - heat, turmoil, and agitation, as versus coolness and calmness? If landscapes and minds are wounded and healed by flows and blockages, how to repair grief, and how can grief itself become generative of repair?

These questions are raised by my preliminary work on ecological grief as a shared and emplaced feeling amongst coastal communities, and grounded in my long-term engagement in Kerala with depression as a biomoral physiological state. The questions contribute to broader debates on planetary distress amid climate-changed and damaged environments. In Kerala, I argue, ecological grief is not only entangled with local socio-moral-material worlds; grief is also generative of ecological and social repair. I develop this argument in three steps. First, I describe elderly women's experiences of what one woman has called 'the trauma of the sea', and the way these experiences have sparked activism and protest seeking ecological, social and psychological repair. Second, I turn to the ways women and fellow coast dwellers sense and describe recent changes of coastal landscapes and oceanic flows and their damaging effects on, or rather entanglement with, mental and social wellbeing. Third, I delve into a community program that turns ecological grief and loss into a resource for data collection and documentation, and finally for social repair.

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MCDOWELL Andy, Assistant Professor, Department of Anthropology, Tulane University

Grabbing On and Letting Go: Grieving Bodies in Southeast Rajasthan.

Incited by a Dalit aphorism about holding on in life and letting go in death, this paper looks to the grieving body for insight on the ways that grief moves through people and bodies. Focusing on women's actions during two events following the death of a relative, the paper traces how grief moves into and between bodies as they grab out for a loved one. It argues that by analyzing bodies as well as speech in expressions of grief anthropologists can subvert doubts about grief as an internal state and transform analyses of Dalit narratives about death as merely in opposition to Brahminical eschatology. Instead, grief and grabbing on as part of living creates affectively and atmospherically entangled bodies that knit social worlds together across ontological divides.

MEYERS Todd, Professor and Marjorie Bronfman Chair in Social Studies of Medicine & Acting Department Chair, McGill University

Immersive Light

The title of my talk, “Immersive Light,” comes from the American artist James Turrell, whose light projections and installations often envelop viewers in a field of light. I begin with Turrell’s installation *Perfectly Clear (Ganzfeld)* (1991), a large room that bathes viewers in slowly changing colors. The installation—a “ganzfeld” or uniform “whole field”—produces a loss of depth perception and, in my reading, opens a corresponding sense of loss. I take up Turrell’s ganzfeld not as a metaphor for grief but as an ethnographic provocation about a domain of experience in the absence of a horizon. The talk is part of an ongoing project on grief and its corresponding registers between memory and visibility.

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PASQUALINO Caterina, Senior Researcher in Social Anthropology, CNRS, LAP

***‘Morire a palermo’* (*‘To die in palermo’*)**

A finished 1-hour documentary in Italian with English subtitles

‘Morire a Palermo’ is a stunning hour-long documentary that reveals the farce behind the Rotoli cemetery in Palermo, Italy, and its treatment of the dead. Renowned filmmaker and anthropologist Caterina Pasqualino uncovers the tragic story of ‘the waiting dead’, where over 1,500 deceased have been waiting years to be buried, as their grief-stricken relatives are held hostage to bureaucracy, bad politics, and, in some cases, Mafiosi bribes in their fight for a final resting place for their loved ones. This situation prompts Caterina Pasqualino to make enquiries at the cemetery and in the city, where she meets some Palermitans who weave complex relationships with their deceased loved ones. She tiptoes into the stories, into their lives, and among their dead, to explore that thin border that exists between life, death and the poetic desire for rebirth.

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PINTO Sarah, Professor and Chair, Department of Anthropology, Tufts University

Thinking with Cargo: Biography, Understanding, and the Work of Transit in Palliative Care

This paper begins with the idea that the medical work of attending to the dying and recently dead in India is a work of transit, in which forms of bodily care are distributed across personnel, time-frames, and technologies, involving the transitional work of caring to persons in relation to their biographical selves and transitioning them across the threshold of death. Drawing on a recent Hindi-language science fiction film, *Cargo* (dir. Arati Kadav, 2019), which portrays the post-life labors of transitioning the dead as care-work managed by *rakshasas* (monsters) in a post-human cosmos, this paper considers the work of palliative and post-death care in an urban Indian hospital, where critical labors include communicating the moment of death, managing patients’ biographical senses of self, and micro-decisions in the space of “non-escalation”, efforts that doctors and nurses often refract - if in jest - through cosmological roles. At a moment of change in the medico-legal landscape of India, when advance directives (“living wills,” “DNRs”) are increasingly part of hospital processes yet often

overridden in moments of crisis, palliative care nurses and doctors do the constant, iterative work of negotiating non-escalated care as a form of "understanding" rather than an act of agency or choice. In a global bioethical conversation dominated by concepts of "assisted dying" and "chosen death," what happens to our conceptualizations of bioethics when the crux of ethical work at end of life is *not* oriented by the "rights" of the dying to choose their time or mode of death, but by a sense of transit as the work of inevitability?

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PONS Christophe, Senior Researcher in Social Anthropology, CNRS, IDEAS

Thinking about mourning by dealing with the pain of the dead - examples from Iceland and Portugal

How are the work of mourning and the management of suffering when it is reorganised around the suffering of souls? Many bereaved people continue to have a relationship with the deceased. They see them, they talk to them. Usually it stops after a while; sometimes not. Academic psychology gives little thought to these processes, seeing them as a form of denying the death. I would suggest that this is a little more subtle and complex. On the one hand, there is a stage of blurring of subjectivities. The bereaved person becomes the Subject of the Alter that has disappeared. I suggest that this is a normal state. As Ernesto de Martino pointed out, the loss of a loved one creates a loss of presence; it can also be an effect of substitution. The survivor then becomes the speaking, acting and thinking Subject of the person who has disappeared. This process of substitution is certainly the effect of a trauma that calls for a separation/division. The survivor must once again become the Subject of himself and cease to be the Subject of the alter. How to manage to do this? Vernacular systems of thought tend to conceptualise these principles. They often give to the social community an active role in such a process. In certain others contexts (spiritualists), the work of mourning is focusing on the deceased rather than the survivor.

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SEALE-FELDMAN Aidan, Assistant Professor, Department of Anthropology, University of Notre Dame

Lost Objects: Dreams in the Endlessness of Grief

In 2015, a 7.8 magnitude earthquake and 7.3 magnitude aftershock struck Nepal. Over 9,000 people died and half a million were left homeless. The disaster generated a sudden shock of humanitarian concern for the mental health of Nepali people, and over 300,000 people received psychosocial support, many for the first time in their lives. Among the recipients of aid was a mother named Rekha who lost her young daughter in the disaster but continued to see her in a recurring dream. Five years after the day her daughter died in the earthquake, Rekha's grief began to drift away from her heartmind, *man*, but it had not subsided. She described this feeling, the endlessness of grief, as an ongoing sense of dizziness, *ringata lagyo*. In his essay *Mourning and Melancholia*, Freud argued that mourning entails working through grief, such that eventually a person might "sever" their attachment to the lost object, ultimately making new attachments possible. If the severing of attachment is unsuccessful the mourner internalizes the lost object and enters into a state of extended melancholia. Years later, when Freud lost his own daughter to influenza, he revised his argument, writing that "although we know that after such a loss the acute state of mourning will subside, we also know we shall remain inconsolable and will never find a substitute." Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in the aftermath of the Nepal earthquakes, this talk places psychoanalytic and Himalayan theories of attachment and loss in dialogue to explore the space of dreams in grief that remains inconsolable.

SEGAL Lotte, Senior Lecturer in Social Anthropology, University of Edinburgh

Grieving the ordinary. Wounded knowledge in the face of political violence.

With this talk I wish to investigate the conceptual intimacy between grief and witnessing political violence. Whilst withholding the impulse to gesture at witnessing and say ‘this is grief,’ I pursue the argument that witnessing political violence amounts to a form of woundedness, a form of loss with nowhere to go, leaning on Veena Das’ recent exploration of the notion of inordinate knowledge as a concept awaiting conceptual elaboration in anthropology (Das 2021). Ethnographically the paper draws on my research on kinship and political violence in contemporary Palestine as well as 20+ years of engagement with clients and carers within and beyond a Danish rehabilitation clinic for survivors of torture. A central question guiding me is what there is to learn about grief in the register of the impersonal; grief without a singular loss that that can be claimed as yours or mine, but ours, as such marking the human form of life as it descends into the ordinary (Das 2007).

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STAVRIANAKIS Anthony, Senior Researcher in Social Anthropology, CNRS, LESC

Funerary Trait. On marking death at a ‘club thérapeutique’

This presentation takes as its starting point the deaths of several people who had been members of a Parisian social club for users of psychiatric services (*un club thérapeutique*). The question that is taken up is how those who come to the club, as well as the team of clinical psychologists that works at the club, make present the deaths of club users. Any answer to the question is nontrivial to the degree that one can wonder how symbolic and imaginary operations for grasping loss of this kind function in a setting where the majority of club users have histories of serious psychiatric illness. By taking up four examples, two deaths from some time ago, and two recent deaths, it will be possible to ask about the singular ways that different people at the club make and mark a place for the club member who has died, as well as to consider the factor of time in the collective elaboration of such a place.

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THOMAS Gilles, Historian, Prevention and Protection Department of the Paris City Council

Bones from 6 million Parisians below Paris (three times the population of Paris today)

At the end of the 18th century, the Saint-Innocents cemetery was so overcrowded that sanitary risk appeared in its vicinity. Parisian administration decided to stop burying inside it, to close it and tried to find a new place outside the city for human relics. Bones from this cemetery was transported in the near south suburb of the capital... but into an old underground disused quarry. It was the beginning of Paris catacombs, because after this first cemetery, every other Parisians cemeteries were emptied, and their population transferred into this new city of the dead : the « Empire of Death ». At the same time, three new Parisians cemeteries were opened outside Paris walls, but they have been included inside the town when this one grew for the last time in 1860. That year, a famous French photographer, Nadar, had the idea to take the first underground pictures of the world, despite the darkness of the place, photos which showed how the transportation of bones was organised by the same way seventy-five years previously.

LIST OF SPEAKERS

1. Serena BINDI (Associate Professor of Anthropology, Université Paris Cité)
2. Robert DESJARLAIS (Professor, Sarah Lawrence College, New York)
3. Devin FLAHERTY (Assistant Professor, Department of Anthropology, University of Texas- San Antonio)
4. Alexa HAGERTY (Affiliate Researcher of the University of Cambridge Minderoo Centre for Technology and Democracy)
5. Claudia LANG (Research Associate in Anthropology, Max Planck institute and University of Leipzig)
6. Andy MCDOWELL (Assistant Professor, Department of Anthropology, Tulane University)
7. Todd MEYERS (Professor and Marjorie Bronfman Chair in Social Studies of Medicine & Acting Department Chair, McGill University)
8. Caterina PASQUALINO (Senior Researcher, CNRS, LAP)
9. Sarah PINTO (Professor and Chair, Department of Anthropology, Tufts University)
10. Christophe PONS (Senior Researcher in Anthropology, CNRS, IDEAS)
11. Aidan SEALE-FELDMAN (Assistant Professor, Department of Anthropology, University of Notre Dame)
12. Lotte SEGAL (Senior Lecturer in Social Anthropology, University of Edinburgh)
13. Anthony STAVRIANAKIS (Senior Researcher in Anthropology, CNRS, LESC)
14. Gilles THOMAS (Historian, Prevention and Protection Department of the Paris City Council)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Financial and logistical support for this programme and this conference was provided by:

- The French National Research Agency, ANR, grant ANR-19-CE27-0015-01
- The IdEx Université Paris Cité, ANR-18-IDEX-0001
- The Institut d'Études Avancées de Paris

TO REGISTER

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