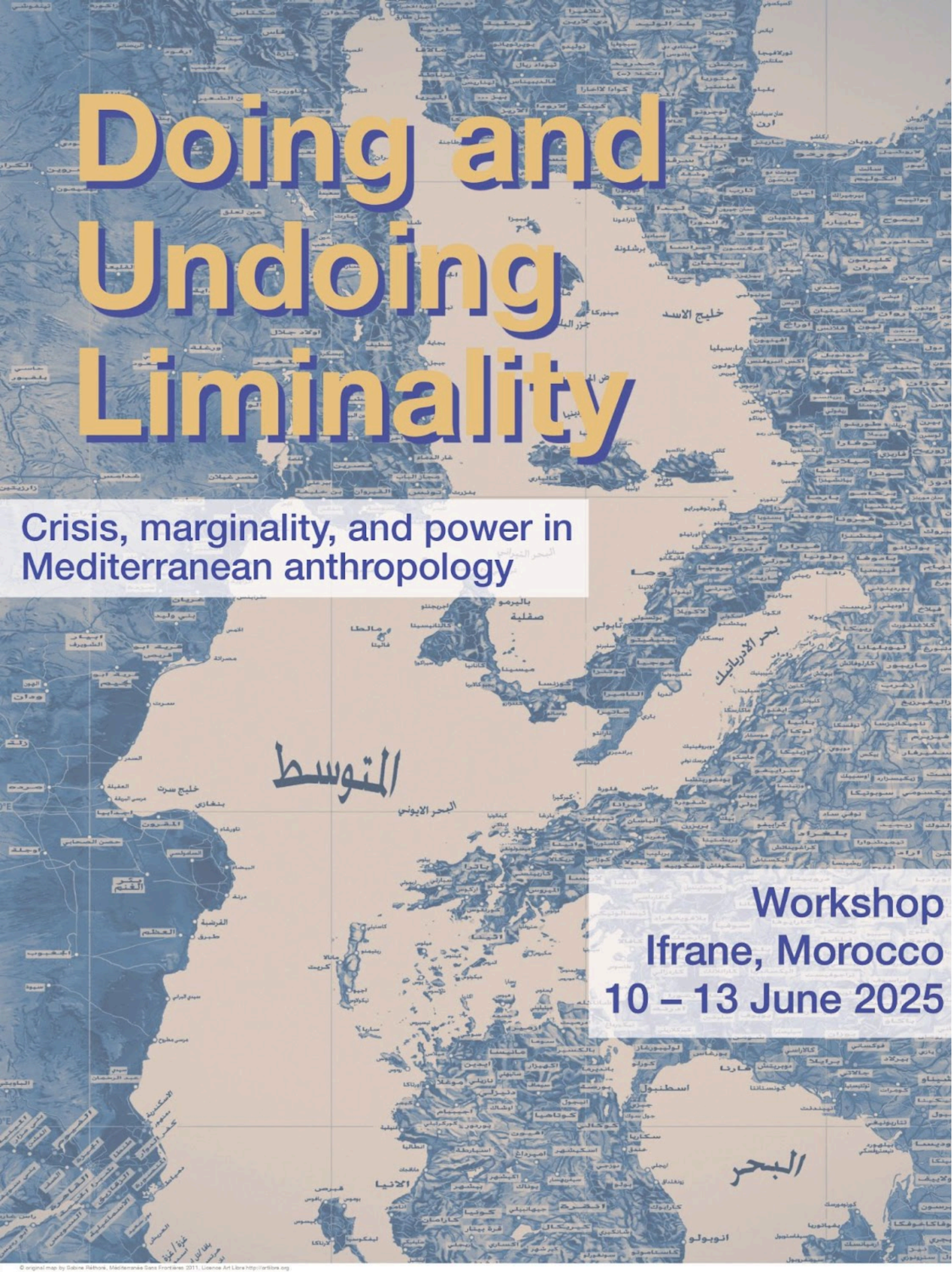
# Doing and Undoing Liminality

## Crisis, marginality, and power in Mediterranean anthropology

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## Abstracts

### Knowledge-making and unmaking in the ruins of the world

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How does one make knowledge in the time of the unspeakable? What processes and politics of knowledge-making and unmaking can be harnessed to come to terms with the horrific? Where does not one begin? Part of an ongoing project, this paper reflects on one dimension of 'bearing witness' as an epistemic response to genocidal catastrophe and explores its conditions of (im)possibility, tensions and promise as a praxis of decolonization.

### Liminality and the Power to Conjoin

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In religious contexts, the liminal frequently allows sacred power to emerge where boundaries are fixed and set. Yet, understood as a sign of divine authenticity which stands in direct opposition to secular or worldly belonging, the liminal can have the paradoxical quality of conjoining. Does there exist a sacred in the Mediterranean with the power to conjoin? I will reflect this comparatively from a perspective on India. A topographical arrangement of space becomes particularly, but not exclusively, pronounced at sacred locations, as something that stands outside of normal society, as something extraordinary and hence functioning by different principles.

### The „Crisis of presence“: A Theory from the Mediterranean for the Mediterranean?

*Ulrich van Loyen, University of Siegen, Ulrich.vanLoyen@uni-siegen.de*

In the aftermath of the second world war, the historian of religion and anthropologist Ernesto de Martino elaborated a theory of ritual re-integration and healing which he tried to prove in the 1960s, especially with regard to trance rituals in Southern Italy. Later on, his theories were applied to millennaristic movements and the struggle of peasant communities to „enter history“. In my paper, I want to give a brief outline of his theory and – with regard to my own fieldwork in Naples and Calabria – ask whether it can be of any use for a better understanding of passages in contemporary and urban mediterranean settings.

### The Moroccan Colonial Soldiers through the Lenses of Liminaliy

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This paper will attempt to look from a historical perspective to look at the place of the Moroccan colonial soldiers from the perspective of liminality is as their stories and realities fall within the “in-between” fragments of history. It was neither part of a “national narrative” of colonialism in Morocco nor part of the historical memory of the two world wars in Europe. The colonial soldiers inadvertently created a historical space of their own that challenged both nationalist history and the history of France. In different ways, Moroccan colonial soldiers crossed all sorts of boundaries and borders, and became subsequently marginalized or ignored in the traditional literature.

**A Stupid Death: On Agency, Blame, and Familial Catastrophe after the Islamic State**

*Alyssa Miller, GIGA Institute for Middle East Studies, Alyssa.Miller@giga-hamburg.de*

The story of a volunteer in transnational jihad can take on startlingly different forms, depending on who does the telling. Parents often portray volunteers as victims of recruitment networks, resorting to agency-denying tropes like brainwashing to explain their child’s involvement in jihad. Siblings, however, are often more candid, drawing difficult and sometimes devastating conclusions about their brother or sister’s responsibility for catastrophic outcomes.

Based on ethnographic fieldwork with families of Tunisian volunteers who traveled to Syria to engage in jihad following the 2011 Arab Uprisings, this paper uses one sibling narrative to examine the economy of agency and blame as it circulates in such families. Despite its negative connotations, blame can play a constitutive role in kinship, providing an idiom for subaltern kin to renegotiate and repair harmful familial relations (Brannigan 2023). Yet blame can also presage the willful severing of kinship ties altogether. Here, I recount the story of Tarek (as told to me by his brother Ramzi), a Tunisian man who joined a jihadi militia in Syria in 2012 but was ultimately assassinated by the Islamic State. Against scholarly usages in medical anthropology, where it refers to fatalities produced by structural violence, Ramzi invokes “stupid death” to assign his brother responsibility for his own demise, as well as the catastrophic situation of his widow and children, who subsist precariously in a Syrian refugee camp. The paper examines the nexus of blame and love—as well as blood, cash transfers, and digital communications—that sustains a tenuous kinship between Tarek’s Syrian widow, his stateless children, and his Tunisian family of origin. In doing so, I reflect on the resilience and limitations of kinship as a lifeline for persons unprotected by citizenship regimes after the Islamic State’s territorial demise.

**Navigating Shadows: The Liminal Journey of the LGBTQ Community in Tunisia**

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In the context of Tunisia, the LGBTQ community emerges as a marginalized group engaged in a complex experience of social liminality. This liminality is evident in the contrast between the deeply ingrained traditional social norms and aspirations for increased recognition and equality. Members of the LGBTQ community navigate a transitional space between persistent marginalization and the quest for full inclusion in Tunisian society.

Individuals identified as LGBTQ in Tunisia often find themselves on the periphery of social norms, facing stigmatization and discrimination because of their non-conforming sexual orientation or gender identity. This marginalization creates a liminal space in which these individuals question cultural expectations and existing social structures. Struggles for recognition and visibility become modern rites of passage, placing the LGBTQ community in a transitional phase where the dynamics of resistance and identity assertion emerge.

The liminality of the LGBTQ community in Tunisia is further heightened by the clandestine nature of many nonheteronormative identities. Members of this community often navigate in shadows and seek safe and confidential spaces to express their identity. This secrecy creates a state of suspension, where LGBTQ individuals find themselves on the fringes of social norms but are simultaneously bound by a community that shares similar experiences. Thus, liminality becomes a meeting ground, forming a community within which individuals negotiate their identity and build strong bonds.

Moreover, the quest for visibility within the LGBTQ community is not without challenges as Tunisian society oscillates between increasing openness to diversity and persistent resistance rooted in traditional norms. Hence, the LGBTQ community in Tunisia lives on the border and seeks to transcend social barriers while facing inherent resistance to change.

**The Tragedy of El Tarajal: Liminality and the Performativity of Border Control in Ceuta**

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In February 2014, African migrants attempted to enter the city of Ceuta in a group—Schengenland on African territory. A few migrants made it to the sea and tried to swim around the breakwater that separates the border crossing from the beaches of El Tarajal in Ceuta; the Spanish border police used tear gas and fired riot-control munitions at the migrants in the water (causing many to drown) and detained and deported those who reached the beaches. The episode will be remembered in Spain as "The Tragedy of El Tarajal" (fourteen dead, dozens injured, and nearly five hundred people detained by the Moroccan gendarmerie).

Within the framework of anthropological analyses on liminality, this episode allows us to reflect on and question several analytical and theoretical categories related to contemporary political and normative work. First, we will analyze how political actors represented the border crossing during this episode. Through the concept of liminality, I interpret the creation of new political-normative terminology (e.g., operational borders). Secondly, the judicial sanction of the praxis and political

representation will be analyzed, showing how liminality is a key element in the implementation and performance of border controls.

**At home in the liminal state. Congolese migrants, aspirations, constraints, and (religious) community organizing in Egypt**

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This paper highlights the significance of liminality to understanding the Congolese migratory experience in Cairo. Since the 1990s, a significant migration trend from the Democratic Republic of Congo to Egypt has emerged. The reasons for Congolese coming to Egypt are manifold, ranging from education to employment in international call centers, or becoming professional soccer players, to seeking asylum with UNHCR. Most of them consider Egypt a transitional stage in their life and migratory trajectory.

Constrained by limited prospects for legal integration, economic uncertainty, and racism in Egyptian society, many Congolese seek ways to move on. At the same time, a tremendous increase in the globally fortified migration policies, mainly initiated by the global North, has severe repercussions for migrants within Africa.

Putting the concept of liminality (Turner 1969) at the center of this paper, I show how Congolese migrants in Egypt navigate precarious economic and legal situations while settling in a liminal situation. Liminality offers a nuanced approach to understanding geographies and ambivalences of their political subjectivities, enabling to analyze simultaneous processes of marginalization and control, but also migrants' agency, and practices.

Drawing on ethnographic research on the role of new Pentecostal churches on the migration routes of Congolese, I enfold how Congolese in Cairo, though seeing themselves in a liminal state, build cultural, political, religious, and economic structures at local, and transnational levels, which in turn support their home making in the city.

**Challenging (b)orders: Mobilising Religion between Crisis and Presence in the Transnational Life of Italian Catholics in Cologne**

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Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, this paper examines how Italian Catholics in Cologne mobilize religious practices, knowledge, and materialities to navigate crisis in transnational settings. Their religious repertoire, rooted in Southern Italy yet reshaped in Germany, moves across generations and social classes, offering tools to move between crisis and presence and to shape social realities. In doing so, they engage in processes of doing and undoing liminality, navigating the uncertainties of life and transforming both themselves and their surrounding world.

The Catholic Church in Cologne and North-Rhine-Westphalia is undergoing a significant crisis, with thousands of members leaving its fold. This decline reflects broader challenges to Catholicism in Europe. Amidst this crisis, Italian religious life in Cologne remains vibrant, raising questions about its survival within this shifting religious landscape.

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, this presentation explores how Italian Catholics in Cologne mobilise and re-mediate religious knowledge, practices, and materialities between Southern Italy and Cologne. I focus on (a) the "Experience Group," whose members are linked to a Catholic movement rooted in the Naples area, and (b) the "Living Passion," a re-enactment of Jesus' passion established by Sicilian migrants in Cologne's Kalk district. Building on Ernesto de Martino's concept of the crisis of presence, I re-examine the role of religion in dealing with experience of 'crisis' and modes of revitalising 'presence'. I explore how Italians in Cologne leverage religion to navigate the challenges of migration, the broader religious decline, and their personal existential crises.

I argue that this religious repertoire—developed in Southern Italy from positions of marginalisation and vulnerability—does not travel as a fixed tradition but as a mobile and generative force shaping realities and movements between crisis and presence. As it circulates, it crosses (b)orders, social classes, and generations, continuously reshaping itself in response to new life experiences and contextual challenges. Through this lens, the religious repertoire of Italians in Cologne can be understood as a form of doing and undoing liminality—an embodied, lived response to the uncertainties of life in transnational settings.

**Liminality as an enduring structure of coloniality: Riffian experiences between Morocco and the Netherlands**

*Nina ter Laan, University of Cologne, nterlaan@uni-koeln.de*

This paper offers a feminist decolonial interpretation of liminality, not as a transitional phase, but as an enduring state of suspension shaped by the aftermath of empire. I examine the effects of intersecting colonial legacies in the Rif region of Morocco and the Netherlands on Riffian communities in/between the Netherlands and Morocco, which are connected by labor migration that began in the late 1960s.

Based on Gloria Wekkers' (2016) concept of 'white innocence' and Sara Ahmed's (2012) work on affective economies, I investigate how liminality shapes the transnational lives of Riffians between the Netherlands and the Rif region in Morocco, where they are considered Dutch in Morocco and always 'Moroccans' in the Netherlands. I show that this dual Othering is produced by overlapping regimes of marginalization, rooted in coloniality, in both contexts, which keeps them in a constant state of flux.

Drawing on long-standing, collaborative, arts-based, ethnographic research in Al Hoceima and its surroundings, as well as in the Netherlands, this paper explores how liminality is experienced, practiced, and negotiated through cultural productions, digital media, return visits, real estate investments, culinary fusions, ancestral land claims, and intergenerational encounters.

**Liminality and Migration. To be artist in migration context**

*Khalid Mouna, Moulay Ismail University, k.mouna@umi.ac.ma*

Based on ethnographic research and immersion in artistic groups founded by Cameroonian migrants, this article addresses the complexity of the migration process. Within the well-known strategies of adapting exile narratives to elicit sympathy and organize the conditions for regularization, the interlocutors of the study open up a dynamic perspective on becoming a migrant. Faced with the prescription of a status, these individuals renew their identities through artistic practice; thus, becoming an artist is perceived as an accomplishment. These journeys testify to the role and power of art in re-symbolizing reality, here through dance and sound. We start from the hypothesis that liminality is a moment of transition and floating, a moment of inversion where art in general presents an opportunity to turn a situation around. The aim is to observe the constructed and relative nature of social hierarchies between migrants, and the singular legal dimension involved in regularizing their situations as artists.

**Revisiting Liminality**

*Martin Zillinger, University of Cologne, zillingm@uni-koeln.de*

Mediterranean landscapes are shaped and controlled by both centralized and diffuse networks of power. Various agencies compete to control, connect and divide socialities and ecologies. Hegemonic powers inhabit and control situated forms of decline, social marginality, and exclusion to sustain themselves. In these spaces of dominance and control, liminal formations may arise that cut across and move beyond forms of marginality, engendering forms of empowerment and even powerful political, social, and religious movements. This presentation revisits the ‚matrix of liminality' (T. Turner) to explore the nexus of liminality, power and control.

**Scaling Liminality: Syrian Transitions Across Multiple Levels**

*John Borneman, Princeton University, borneman@princeton.edu*

The concept of liminality has been most insightful when examining individual and small group transitions in ritual contexts. But its usefulness is challenged when it is scaled up and used also to analyze states and regimes in geopolitical relationships. Through an examination of Syria's political transformations and Syrian refugees' experiences in Germany, I explore the disjuncture between scales and the multifaceted interplay of liminal processes at individual, national, and regional levels.

**Le positionnement sociopolitique au prisme de la liminalité : cas des leaders ruraux de l'action collective instituée dans le Moyen Atlas marocain.**

*Noureddine Bahri, Moulay Ismail University*

Les zones rurales du Moyen Atlas marocain, ancestralement animées par un leadership social coutumier et notabilier, voient se produire, en ce 21ème millénaire, une nouvelle vague de militants associatifs, hommes et femmes, aspirant au leadership politique. Ces nouveaux leaders évoluent dans un contexte complexe et sont confrontés à de multiples antagonismes que permet d'éclairer une analyse sous le prisme de la liminalité. Dualité spatiale urbain-rural, dualité générationnelle Jeunes-Adultes, engagement collectif-ambitions personnelles, apolitisme associatif-adhésion partisane, promotion de la citoyenneté-collaboration avec le système, et autres frontières symboliques saisies à travers les résultats d'une étude mixte alliant une enquête par questionnaire à des entretiens biographiques.

**Entre l'avant et l'après, la position liminale dans l'expérience de radicalité violente**

*Sara Azim, Moulay Ismail University*

Dans cette intervention nous mobilisons la perspective de liminalité pour saisir la manière dont elle est vécue et pratiquée par des acteurs engagés dans des expériences de radicalité violente. Ce phénomène représente un processus d'engagement dans des visions de monde, des pratiques, des usages corporelles et des manières de percevoir les mondes directement liés à l'idéologie religieuse radicale et violent. Dans cette présentation nous démontrerons que ces acteurs, impliqués dans ce processus, mettent en avant une position liminale. Une position où ils essayent de se détacher de pratiques et d'habitus précédant conçue comme déviants 'haram', pour s'affilier et d'engager à l'habitus religieux radical, conçu comme licite 'halal'. Cette expérience permet de reconstruire une identité d'appartenant aux valeurs et normes qui les qualifient de 'vrais croyants'.

**Amazigh Culture in the Mediterranean Borderlands: Between Liminality and Authenticity**

*Paul Silverstein, Reed college*

Paper Long Abstract:
This paper explores the persistent tension in Amazigh imaginations of cultural belonging in North Africa and the diaspora between a trope of Mediterranean liminality and an increasingly dominant discourse of authenticity and indigeneity. While the Mediterranean characterizes an Amazigh—and broader North

African—sense of being betwixt and between Europe and Africa, between the Atlantic world and the Middle East, the discourse of indigeneity grounds the Amazigh experience within a set of delimited ancestral territories subject to a history of Roman, Arab, and French settler colonialism. If the Mediterranean frame underlines the dynamic and inclusive qualities of the Amazigh language and its proximity to other regional creoles—from lingua franca to Algerian colonial sabir to Maltese to Darija—a parallel language ideology attempts to purify an entextualized and authenticated Tamazight from its Arabic and Latinate lexicon and transliteration history. Drawing on several decades of archival and ethnographic research with Amazigh activists and everyday speakers in southeastern Morocco and the French diaspora, I trace the history of these two oppositional frames as they emerge in the pragmatics of colonial rule and decolonial resistance. I show how tropes of the Mediterranean and indigeneity continue to divide the contemporary Amazigh movement. I argue that the coexistence of these two cultural ideologies—one open and inclusive, the other closed and exclusive—likewise helps explain how Amazigh activists have ambivalently situated themselves within geopolitics of doing and undoing, sometimes in outspoken support of the global war on terror, sometimes at the vanguard of movements of anti-racism and social justice.