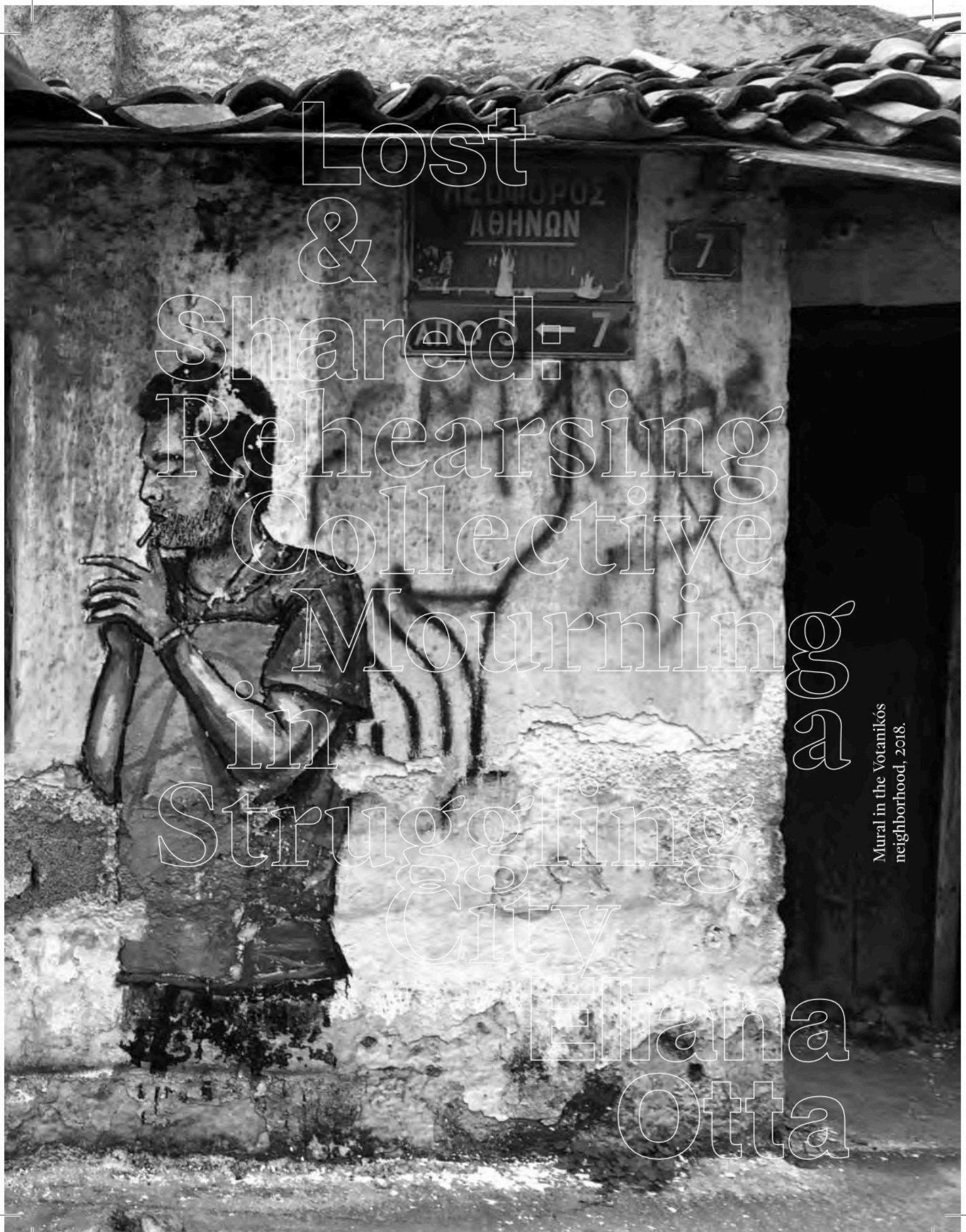
An old inhabitant of Strefi Hill watches that no one tries to privatize its home. Exarcheia, 2019.

Lost & Shared: Rehearsing Collective Mourning in a Struggling City

Eliana Otta



Mural in the Votanikós neighborhood, 2018.

8 **Acknowledgments**

10 **Preface**

14 **(A Long) Introduction**
16 On who listens to whom and on whose grief deserves to be mourned
18 Almost witnessing as an adult what surrounded me while growing up
27 Towards dubious independences and modernities
31 Eternally resigned to react instead of proposing
33 Rehearsing Chronicles, Poems and Scores
35 On imagined and developed approaches...

38 **Athenian Chronicles: On Crises and Collective States of Mind**
38 April, 2019
40 **Score: *Mourning (left wing) militants***
41 About a collective state of mind Anna P., Ilias, Angelos and Helen said:
49 June, 2017
51 March, 2021
53 **Score: *Rehearsing Horizontalities***
56 November, 2017
63 About crisis Eleni, Panagiotis, Anna A., Marios, Helen, Stella, Antonis, Angelos and Electra said:
84 July, 2019
85 April, 2020
87 September, 2017
89 August, 2019
90 March, 2020
97 **Score: *Traced, whispered touch***
100 June, 2020
104 **Score: *To look after what is urgent for a stranger***

106 **Athenian Chronicles: On Depression and Collective Objects of Loss**
106 July, 2020
108 About depression Leonidas, Anna P., Orestis, Eleni, Ilias, Panagiotis, Anna A., Stella and Antonis said:
122 February, 2019

124 About objects of loss, Helen, Stavros, Anna P. and Electra said:
132 September, 2020
134 **Score: *Olive Trees Knows No Borders***
135 February, 2020
140 **Score: *Mourning a house (in memory of Koukasa)***
142 April, 2021
143 September, 2020
148 **Score: *A flying kiss thrown to the air: a guided meditation guided by a plant***
154 April, 2017
154 September, 2021
157 **Score: *Aching places, screaming words, premonitory agreements***

159 Athenian Chronicles: On Mourning and Politics
159 January, 2020
161 ***Score: Rehearsing Farewells***
163 December, 2021:
164 About mourning, Eleni, Leonidas, Marios, Angelos and Anna P. said:
170 June, 2021
173 October, 2021
186 November, 2019
189 **Score: *Poooooooool? Iiiiiiiiii? tiiiiiiiiiics?***
191 April, 2022
195 About politics, Leonidas, Orestis, Ilias, Electra and Antonis said:
201 October, 2020
204 **Score: *Messaging through the roots***

208 **A conclusion shaped as a collective challenge: Fertilizing Mourning as an Offering to a World in Flames**

220 **References**

227 **People and places whose complicities, stories and words shape Athenian Chronicles and Putting voices to converse: poems unfolded from conversations.**

This book is about collective mourning in Athens. I began the research on which this book is based in 2018, when I moved to Vienna having lived all my life in Lima.[5] While commuting between Lima and Vienna, I adapted to life on a continent where I never imagined I would live. Covid-19 brought me closer to Peru, to the urgency of its losses and threatened life forms. Just when I had decided to focus on exploring how to mourn political, abstract, economic losses, the massiveness and injustice of death brought me back to human loss.

Lost and Shared explores how art can enable the collectivization of mourning. During my first visit to Athens in 2017, I found depression was a common diagnosis, both on the individual and the collective level. After a year there, I decided to research the relationship of depression to mourning. If being depressed has to do with unresolved processes of mourning, what would be the object(s) of loss in a period of economic crisis and political disillusionment? How can art help to mourn abstract losses, such as the loss of a political project, of a sense of dignity, of a particular relation with time, or of a role in the familiar structure? How could processes of mourning be shared, allowing communities to reframe and resignify those objects of loss, towards transforming our relations to the economic and the political?

South of Crete, 2017.

The book shares collective experiments in connecting emotions and critical thinking with body and space. It brings into dialog theory and affective labor. At the core of the book are the intuitions and questions that arose from conversations with Greek activists and artists; as well as practices collaborating with grassroots organizations and artist-run spaces. In writing the book, I also drew upon my experiences of growing up in a (post?)colonial country, deeply affected by economic and political crisis, as well as the affective bonds I developed in Greece. I included myself as a participant in a potentially transformative process, convinced that to contest the ubiquitous jaws of neoliberalism, accumulation through dispossession, and the privatization of every dimension of life, radical politics should be renewed from and through affect.

This introduction describes my engagement with mourning over the past decade and the methods developed throughout this project.

[5] I moved to Vienna to undertake a PhD at the Academy of Fine Arts. This opportunity provided me with a job as a researcher and a residency permit, which allowed me to travel in Europe. The PhD in Practice Program is directed by professors Anette Baldauf and Renate Lorenz. I graduated in January 2023.

Towards dubious independences and modernities

Since the pandemic affected commemorating their independences in 2021, I learned that both Greece and Peru achieved them in 1821. And I read that in 1780, a five-year old Thomas Cochrane was enlisted into the British Navy, through an illegal practice providing him the years of service later required for his promotion. In 1793, when he reached eighteen years of age, Cochrane joined the Navy; in 1818 he went to Valparaiso, where he became Chilean Naval Vice Admiral, aiding Chile in the war against the Spanish Monarchy. In 1820 he was sent to support José de San Martín in the Peruvian War of Independence. Later, Cochrane was declared Marquess of Maranhão by Emperor Pedro I, first ruler of Brazil, for his help against the Portuguese. Meanwhile, London signed a second loan to Greece, which was then also struggling for its independence. The British considered the first loan misused, and called a naval hero to administer it. Thus, the British Chilean Marquess ended up supervising the Greek Navy. Ironically, the guardian of the loan was given a less heroic nickname by San Martín, who criticized his material motivations, calling him "Lord Metallic".[28]

Which stories weave the independentist current that led Greece and Peru to coincide in their bicentennial celebrations? Which threads connect their indebtedness to foreign creditors or the creation of their borders and nation-states? Both countries built their republics by excluding women and non-white citizens, praising ports and urban centers while dismissing the mountain and rural areas as representing the past.[29] The urban/rural opposition was created parallel to those between East/West, ancient/contemporary, conservative/progressive, serving as paradigms of the modern condition, as Neni Panourgiá explains when referring to the Greek nation-state.[30] The future was overseas and up north, nature a resource to attract investors: an exploitable field for borrowed machines. The dependency on foreign capital and the lack of national industry led Greece and Peru to surrender to tourism, constantly seeking the visitor's approval.

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[28] David Cordingly. *Cochrane The Dauntless: The Life and Adventures of Thomas Cochrane*, (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2007), 21-29.

[29] Dimitra Kotouza. *Surplus Citizens: Struggle and Nationalism in the Greek Crisis*. (London: Pluto Press, 2019), 225.

[30] Neni Panourgiá. *Fragments of death, fables of identity: an Athenian anthropography* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 29.

and Amazonian communities are the sacrificial casualties of self-proclaimed 'development agents'.

Eternally resigned to react instead of proposing

My parents were left-wing militants in the 1970s and 1980s. I grew up accompanying them to demonstrations and started to go consciously when I became a teenager. Since 1992, when Alberto Fujimori shut down the Congress and changed the Constitution, my political life has been consumed by fighting his dictatorship and comeback, as most other leftists' had. The emergence of the Shining Path and MRTA had divided the Peruvian left. My parents had friends who joined those organizations, probably without imagining how violent and disconnected from reality they would become. The unfruitful attempts to reunite the left persist, while the neoliberal consensus strengthens. The last decades saw a left that knows what to reject, but can't unite around an affirmative, mass project.

In Peru, we never mourned the defeats of the left. Its leaders updated their political program, appearing less dogmatic, but without considering the economy of affects shaping a story of deceptions and disputes. The story of a left where the personal never became political, subject to patriarchal and colonized structures. A left still in need of reconnecting the political with our most vital energies and passions.

The Greek situation made me reflect on my disenchanted upbringing, among people disappointed by political leaders, skeptical about change, who had lost any imaginative horizons.[45] While affected by those deceptions, I didn't have the distance to carefully consider their creative challenges. Thus, this project aimed to engage with collectivities and individuals trying to transform the Athenian context politically and artistically. By fostering discussions about depression and mourning, I found that it is through affective work that our political commitments may cohere around what seems missing. I had lived for one year in Athens before I initiated this research, experiencing how—

2005), Silvia Federici. *Calibán y la Bruja. Mujeres, Cuerpo y Acumulación Originaria*. (Madrid: Traficantes de Sueños, [2004] 2018), Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale. Women and the International Division of Labor*. (London: Zero Books, 2014), Achille Mbembe. *Necropolitics*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), among others.

[45] Most comments about the Greek crisis address the period before the pandemic, since Covid-19 began during the final stage of this project.

Score: *Mourning (left wing) militants*

Activity designed with the activist, mother and researcher Mar Daza in Lima, after discussing how open wounds within the Peruvian left complicate the flourishing of militancy, especially among women. How do parties and movements clash with their discourses and what happens when the militants' image doesn't match their micropolitics?

Characteristics:
An indoors, cozy and quiet space.
Approximate duration: two-three hours.
Up to 15 participants.
Materials: big papers, markers, sound system.

1st moment:
Everybody introduces herself through a poem or song connected to their militant experience.

2nd moment:
Write and draw what was presented, creating a collective mural on papers pasted in the wall. Discuss differences and coincidences: Is there a collective idea of what is it to be a (leftist) militant?

3rd moment:
Split into groups and share contradictory experiences that caused divestment, break up and mourning in militancy.

4th moment:
Each group draws a human body representing such experiences, their marks and traces.

5th moment:
Each group presents their drawing and the other groups analyze it.

6th moment:
Discussion about mourning within militancy: how could it lead to transformation? Shall pain be hidden to act politically? How is the personal related to the political within patriarchy?

7th moment:
Each person mentions her sources of strength and ways of healing. Write them in post-its and paste them in the wall, making clusters, identifying interconnecting individual and collective practices.

8th moment:
Groups are formed again. Each group takes the other group's drawing of the human figure to transform it according to what was discussed, creating a restored, enriched being.

9th moment:
The drawings are pasted on the wall, as if doing something together (Dancing? Playing? Resting?). Surrounded by the posters, the militants are ready to say goodbye with new, regenerative ideas.

Optional:
T-shirts can be made with the transformed drawings. Now the militants can be daily accompanied by the beings created collectively!

About a collective state of mind Anna P., Ilias, Angelos and Helen said:

Together

Syriza movements
revolutionary potential
imagining to do
things differently.

Reasons to move to Greece
Berlin nothing.

A left-wing government,
first time
all this history
a mandate a promise.

We wanted to be part of it.

We had come
questioning
towards change

a life
politically meaningful

Guys setting fire to the banks,

I didn't recognize this or that fraction.
People never seen before, very determined.
They had tools taking off the traffic signs.

I thought "to smash the windows of the bank".

I asked, "What are you doing, comrades?
take off the traffic signs
to smash the ATM?".

He replied: "We will fuck the bank,

but they're not going to tell us how to be on the street,
where to turn,

where to stop, how to drive in the city".

A completely Lacanian moment an unconscious, the real
against the symbolic, in front of my eyes.

Because normally, who thinks

that what I need is to think if someone is telling me
how to behave inside a city?

The fucking traffic signs!

June, 2017

I had a shift at the "Women Space" in Khora, the community center where I volunteered, which provided services for refugees and people in need. I offered to make an art workshop, yoga classes, and a collective multilingual newspaper. Finally, I agreed to help where needed, like in the only room where men and children were not allowed, intended for women to rest. The room had books, painting and knitting materials, makeup and one computer used mainly to watch music videos. Another favorite activity for visitors and volunteers was to paint each other's nails and draw our hands with henna.

The volunteers were young and from various European countries. That day I shared responsibilities with an Italian woman, one of the few ones living in Athens, always asking to make volunteering easier for the permanent residents' schedules. That day she left early, so I had to close the space. There were only two women left. Both of them were probably around sixty; they were sitting quietly. The Greek woman looked tired, and her shoes seemed tight for her feet. The other woman's clothes were simple but in better shape. A white handkerchief covered her head.

The Italian was making announcements before leaving, when something compelled the Greek woman to address her in English. She said that she should go back to her country and mind her own business. The Italian woman replied seriously and calmly, that she lived in Athens and had the right to do as she pleased with her time. The Greek woman said she was tired of foreigners coming supposedly to help, but not really helping those in need. The woman with the white handkerchief observed and listened silently, like me. The Italian woman said it was difficult to compare who needed more and that such a contest didn't make sense in the first place. The Greek woman said that all the help went to foreigners, leaving nothing for the locals who were also struggling to survive.

She meant the other woman, who was Syrian, although the Greek woman didn't necessarily know that. The Italian woman said she had to leave and couldn't continue talking, but that everybody was welcomed there, as long as we all respected each other. The Greek woman continued, indifferent about the Italian woman leaving. She described people in their houses without anything to do, all day locked inside because of the cold, without heating. She said she could eat only pasta

to observe or hear diverse and contradictory manifestations of the ways in which the locals received migrants in the city, depending on looks, place of provenance. Nevertheless, I was not being placed as the menacing other that Dimitra Kotouza talks about: "the fetish of the unified society contained within the nation-state, the imaginary 'national community' of households headed by men, is linked to the myths and concepts of the essential (white) European or Greek supremacy, of the migrant as an invader carrier of disease and crime."[56]

March, 2021

After months of being unable to work due to the lockdown, I decided to read a book I postponed reading since I heard about it in 2018. *Laments from Epirus*, written by the vinyl records collector and music producer Christopher King, is an ode to the musical genre called myrologia, which induces trance-like states through collective dances in the panygiria. The panygiria are traditional festivals blending cultural and religious life, with ancient roots, adapted and reinforced through the Orthodox Christian faith, which honor saints or the Virgin. By encompassing religious rituals, music, dance, food, the communities renew their bonds among each other, the surroundings and the gone. Myrologia are mostly dedicated to the loss of someone who died, who went away, even to the daughter about to marry, leaving her family house. The instrumental myrologia inaugurate and close each panygiri's night, including loss in the most awaited and joyful festivities. Instrumental versions are performed by male musicians, while its vocal dimension is traditionally performed by women, the myrologistries or lamenters. Its origins can be traced back to thousands of years ago, as shown by archaeological evidence portraying women in ecstasy, raising hands to the sky, pulling their hair and hitting their chests.[57] The women were usually relatives of the dead and professional mourners, combining antiphonal singing with cries, moaning and unintelligible sounds.

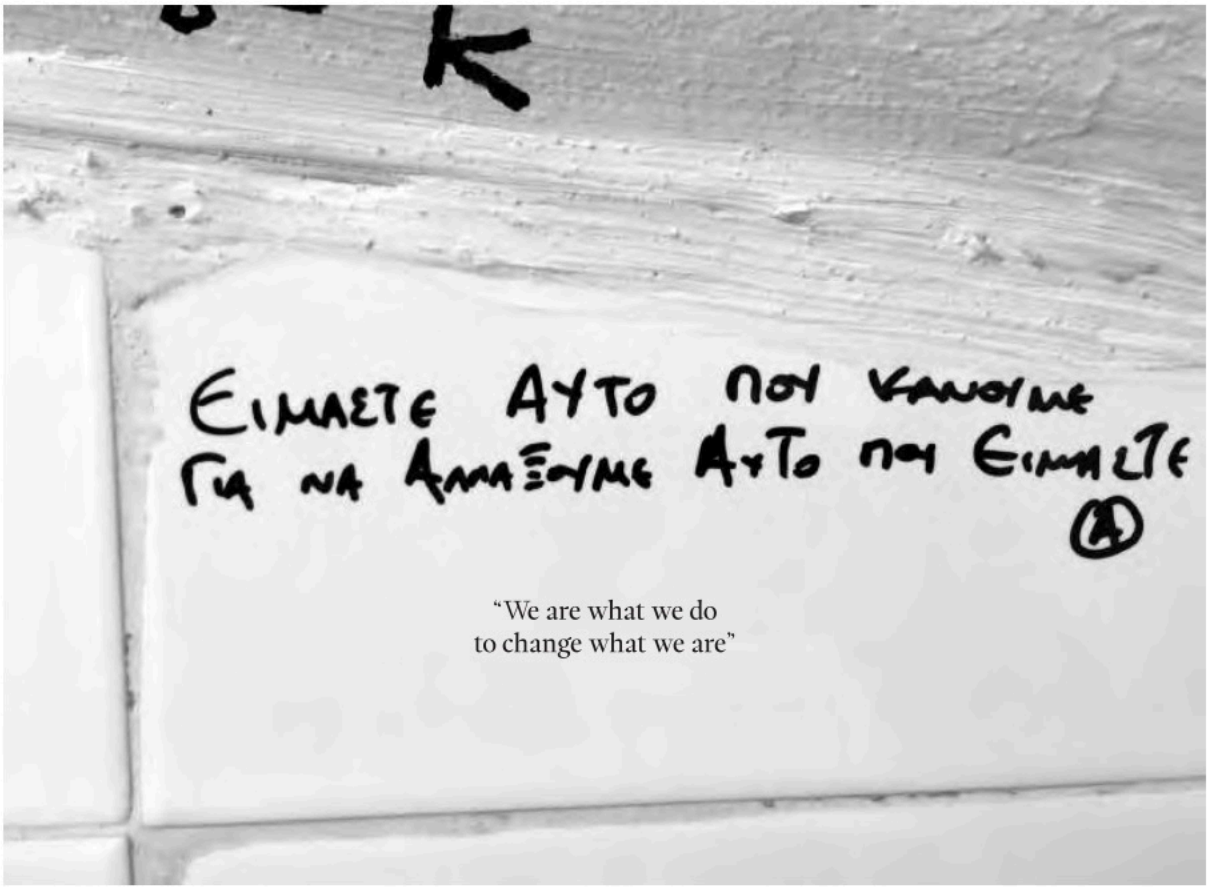
Since I first came to Greece, I noticed the cultural relevance of this tradition. But I didn't want to focus my explorations of collective mourning on music or voice, acknowledging the impossibility of getting to know and honoring this cultural expression in such a short time. I attended events related to it and learned about it through its quotidian manifestations, but kept my distance, avoiding an approximation that

[56] Kotouza, *Surplus citizens*, 235.

[57] Alexiou, *The Ritual Lament*, 12.

despite our transgressions and rebellions and our ideals of revolution, our struggles do not structurally jeopardize our survival: we have a choice to show up or not, to become visible or not, to be arrested or not, to take risks or not.[73]

Which "we" could I assemble from my in-between position, still with one foot (and part of my heart and my senses?) in Peru, funded by an Austrian institution to write about Greece, comparing the Athenian present with my Limenian upbringing? The complex position from which I tried to attend to mine and others' vulnerabilities brought to mind another graffiti, one painted in the toilet of a favourite bar.



Toilet at a kafeneio recently replaced by a restaurant with white tablecloths, Metaxourgio, 2019

[73] Machado de Oliveira, *Hospicing Modernity*, 52.

We deconstructed the word by writing acrostics. If you don't know or remember, an acrostic is a short poem in which the initial letters of the lines, taken in order, spell a word or phrase, from, oh surprise, the Greek akrostikhis, from akros "at the end, outermost" plus stikhos "line of verse", literally "row, line". These are some of that day's results:

Pleasure
Of
Links
In
Togetherness
Is
Counter
Suffering

Polis
Order
Lines
Ideology
Try
Innovation
Cry
Storm

Precapitalistic societies
Of many kinds
Live now
In
The present
Insisting
Courageously on
Socialism

Pirate
O
L
I
aTheism
I
C
Sex

Parents/ersonal
Omonia
Luck/ack
Is this for real
Truth
Intern/mpossible
Cross/risis
Scum/ex

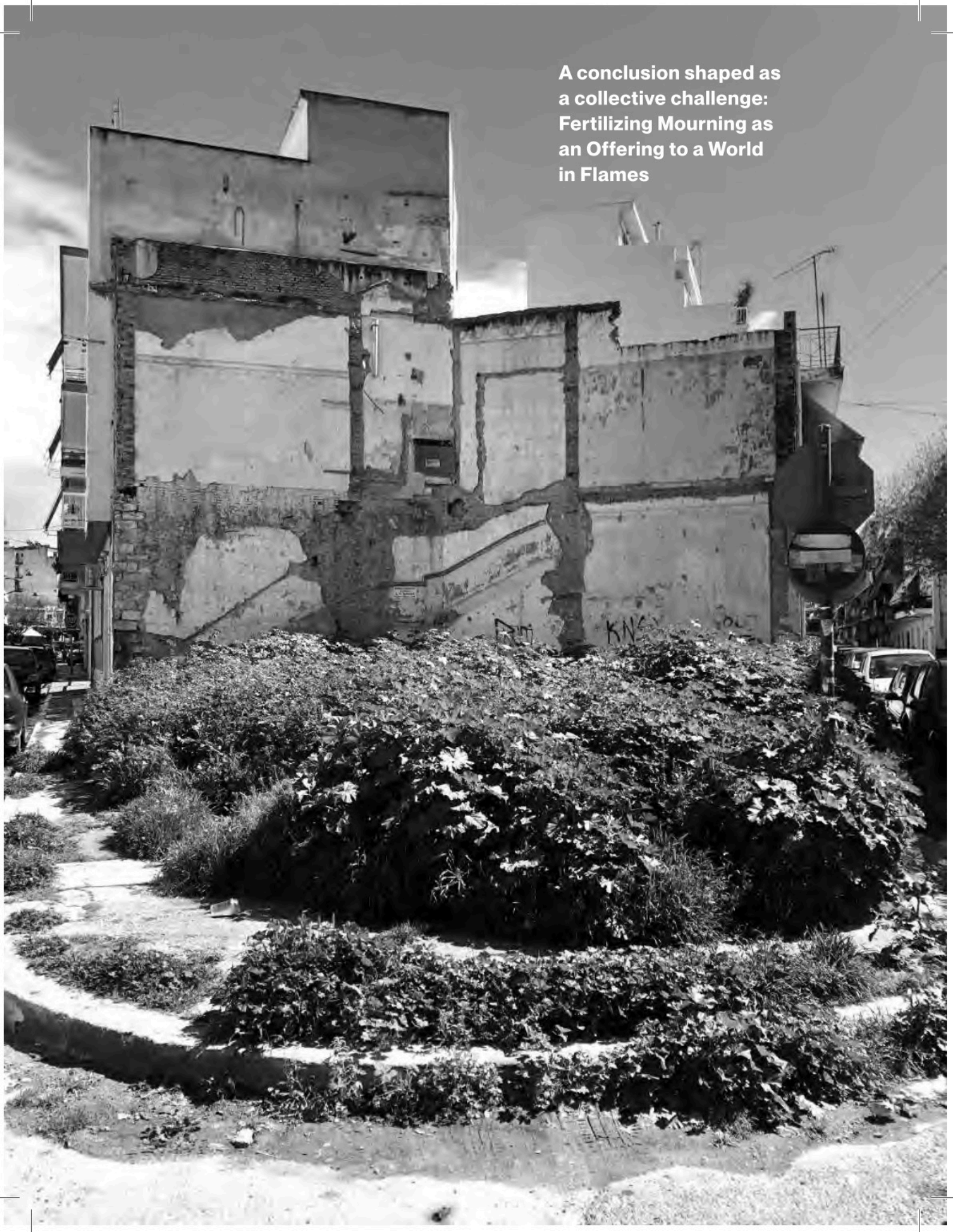
Places to meet
Outside of our heads
Livers are meant to have
hands
Inhale
Transform one's ears
In
Channels to breath
Spices a lot of spices

Possibilities to
Overcome
Limitations
Impossible
Try-outs, tactics and
Incendiary
Challenges to
Selfishness

Police
Oppression
Lives
In
The
Interstices of
Capitalist
Societies

People
Oxi
Liberalism
I
Totality
Ideology
Chaos
Sex

sPace
cOllapses
sLowly
In
This
Instantaneous
Capitalist
Catastrophe



A conclusion shaped as a collective challenge: Fertilizing Mourning as an Offering to a World in Flames

Over the years that I have worked on this research, I have seen friends and acquaintances start taking antidepressants, go to therapy, and actively engage with their mental health. While I am highly supportive of these initiatives, I often wonder if we are paying too much attention to our moods and individual problems.[134] I sometimes invited them to try to consider how our desires, fears, and emotional needs fit into a broader understanding of ourselves as part of relational networks that transcend human societies. I encouraged us to collectively learn to frame our troubles within an initial recognition of the abundance of gifts that the Earth provides and of the things we already have at our disposition in our lives, at least for those of us who have access to a book like this one.[135] The invitation is to acknowledge what depression and other mental health issues have to tell us regarding economic and political conditions, but simultaneously framing them within the broader context of our shared experience of belonging to life.

In this process, two influences emerged as subtle yet continuous forces for me: the traditions of Greek laments and Peruvian Amazonian healing. I view their practitioners as mediums who channel affects and knowledge transcending their individual selves to assist their communities in processing complex phenomena and events. These practices have survived for millennia by adapting to nurture their social fabrics and maintain their responsive and responsible relationship with nature. Both Greek mourners and Amazonian healers call upon what is usually described as spirits, to help people navigate trauma and painful transformations. They put their bodies, knowledge and voices at the service of loss and maladies experienced by individuals but understood and treated as collective. They know that illness and loss are usually consequences of disrespecting the relational codes needed for nature to thrive and that human actions have consequences for future generations.[136]

Many researchers, activists, and artists from the Global South signal the insufficient conceptual and methodological resources available in Global North institutions to address the civilizational crisis. A growing

[134] A proposal to collectivize mental health issues, inspired by the work of solidarity clinics in Thessaloniki, can be found in Cassey Thornton. *The Hologram. Feminist, Peer-to-Peer Health for a Post-Pandemic Future*. (London: Pluto Press, 2020)

[135] On conceptualizing economy from abundance and not from lack, see: Robin Wall Kimmerer. *The Serviceberry. An Economy of Gifts and Abundance*. (London: Penguin Random House, 2024).

[136] Stefano Varese. *Ethical Cosmologies in Amazonia*. UCLA. MESTER, VOL. XLIX (2020), Robin Wall Kimmerer. *Braiding sweetgrass: indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge and the teachings of plants*. (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013)

Not such an uncommon sight
these years, Kolonós, 2019.