Journal of Greek Media & Culture
Volume 8 Number 2
 https://doi.org/10.1386/jgmc_00060_1
Received 12 August 2021; Accepted 5 July 2022

ELIANA OTTA
Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna

Manifesto: Fertilizing mourning – Global South's offering to a world in flames

ABSTRACT

This manifesto takes the coincidence of Peru's and Greece's bicentennials of independence, and their overlap with the COVID-19 pandemic, as a departure point, in order to propose a different understanding of mourning from the Global South. The article is an open invitation to reinforce mourning's capacity to be a reproductive life force, responding to contemporary experiences of loss in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic and the accelerated processes of extinction, especially in resource extraction zones, like the Amazon. Taking inspiration from ancient Indigenous techniques for soil regeneration, fertilizing mourning is a call to merge traditional knowledge, collective practices and non-anthropocentric world-views that resist individualism and capitalism both in the Global South and in places that defend communal life in the north of the planet. This manifesto proposes that to transform prevalent colonial, modern structures, it is necessary to develop a different relationship with nature, by reconsidering the entanglements between life, death and regeneration.

KEYWORDS

extractivism
necropolitics
Indigenous communities
Yana Allpa
sacred struggles
collectivity
Amazon

In 1793, Thomas Cochrane joined the British Navy, and in 1818 he went from the United Kingdom to Valparaiso, where he became Chilean Naval Vice Admiral and helped in Chile's Independence War against the Spanish Monarchy. In 1820, the first president of independent Chile, Bernardo O'Higgins, sent him to support San Martín in the Peruvian War of Independence, where

on 6 November 1820, in what became one of the most famous incidents of the War, Cochrane captured the Spanish frigate 'La Esmeralda'. While Peru continued defending its Independence, which was gained in 1821, Cochrane was declared Marquess of Maranhão by Emperor Pedro I, the first ruler of Brazil, owing to his contribution towards expelling the Portuguese from Brazil. Meanwhile, London signed a second loan to Greece, which was also struggling for its Independence at the time. But since the British considered that the first loan was misused, they decided to call a naval hero to administer it. Thus, after returning from Brazil, the British-Chilean Marquess ended up supervising the Greek Navy. Ironically, the guardian of the British loan was given a less heroic nickname by San Martín, who criticized his material interests, calling him Lord Metallic (Cordingly 2007: 21–29).

Which stories weave the independentist current that led Greece and Peru to coincide with the bicentennial celebrations of their Independence? Which common threads run through their indebtedness to foreign creditors for the creation of their borders and nation states? Both countries had their republics built by power groups that excluded women and non-white citizens, praising buoyant ports and urban centres while dismissing the mountains and rural areas as synonyms of a frozen past (Kotouza 2019: 225). The future was overseas and up north and nature a resource to attract investors: an exploitable field for borrowed machines. These countries' dependency on foreign capital and their lack of robust national industry led them to surrender to tourism and to constantly seek the other's, the visitor's, approval. Greece shares with Peru the fact that their independences did not come from a national, endogenous bourgeois movement. Their modern state apparatuses, constituted through external power dynamics, produced a mode of governance largely subjected to capitalism's ruling elites. In spite of its central role in Europe's self-built myth of origin, its recent tense relationship with the European Union, and a decade marked by austerity measures, brought Greece closer to what has recently been called the Global South: the subalternized, those who have been victimized but offer resistance by using their knowledge in different ways; people who do not necessarily agree but have similar problems and challenges (de Sousa Santos 2018: 27). In this sense, the Global South is not constrained by geography but a possible 'we' that imagines and convokes transnational political communities emerging from shared, contemporary experiences of subjugation within global capitalism (Mahler 2017: n.pag.).

Historically, while establishing the Greek and Peruvian states, the ruling elites in both countries also shaped what power excluded. Both countries, connected to old civilizations, built their national identities as heirs of glorious pasts and relied on traces of that past to compensate for the lack of economic diversification and autonomy. On the one hand, an ancient classical Greece constructed by Europe as the cradle of western civilization and, on the other hand, the Inca Empire, which included Ecuador and parts of Colombia, Bolivia, Chile and Argentina, provided inspiration for a future that underestimated the present, seen as a synonym for backwardness and conformism (Kotouza 2019: 18). Forming the nation state required negating the Indigenous rural, culturally diverse, pre-capitalistic and traditional ways of life, which were largely rendered urban and westernized in the name of progress (Méndez 2000: 19), as well as 'archaeomodern' in the name of a 'classical tradition' (Plantzos 2021: 61).

However, for diverse reasons, most of the Global South and many resisting communities in the north did not fully succumb to the corrosion of communal bonds and rituals promoted by modernity. Although the process

of disassembling collectivities and spreading individualistic ideals succeeded widely, its cracks and limits are visible where local economies depended and depend on what the soil provides. Here and there, villages and urban centres reveal the fundamental place nature has in communal imaginaries and practices, where collective spirits still prevail in people's relations with food, dance and music. In Greece, particularly, one way in which such communal bonds hold strong concerns the social and public expression of *mourning*. In contrast to the private event that a death constitutes in northern Europe, it is easy to find in Athenian streets posters inviting neighbours to a wake. Equally ubiquitous are references to pain and loss in forms of music through which trauma and death are collectively processed. The dichotomic separations that the colonial-modern project tried to impose could not fully permeate a society in which life and death dance together through voices and bodies surrendering to ecstatic *Panigiri* (King 2018: 106) and where mourners have for centuries weaved poetics, discourse, pain and truth (Seremetakis 1991: 223).

Back to the present, then. Peru and Greece could not fully commemorate their Bicentennial, as 2021 found them fighting the pandemic with precarious health systems. But in Peru the scale of deaths due to the pandemic was reminiscent of the violent period between 1981 and 2000s, a period of extreme economic crisis and war between the State, the subversive groups The Shining Path and MRTA, and Alberto Fujimori's dictatorship. This period left the country with a postponed task of mourning: thousands of deaths and disappearances were suppressed in the name of the illusion of progress brought by the twenty-first century. Now the virus and the short-sighted approach of the Peruvian government to the complex worlds it administrates brought about another apocalypse. Once again, especially in the Amazon, the inhabitants confirmed that apocalypses have been happening daily since colonization (Mombaça 2019: n.pag.). Contrary to recent 'end of the world' fantasies caused by global warming in the Global North, for the Global South apocalypse is an actual memory, an ongoing traumatic and constitutive process – an inherited open wound.[1] As feminist, decolonial, Black and Indigenous activists and scholars constantly remind us, the capitalist extractivist pattern depends on exploiting the vitality, labour force and reproductive capacities of women and communities perceived as closer to nature (Anzaldúa [1987] 2016; Gómez 2005; Federici [2004] 2018; Mies [1986] 2014; Mbembé 2003; de Sousa Santos 2018, among others). In Latin America, the Indigenous communities that try to resist extermination, Andean and Amazonian, are the sacrificial casualties of local and foreign self-proclaimed 'development agents'.

The pandemic mocked any celebration of the Bicentenary that highlighted freedom and emancipation, as it attested to the fact that democracy in Peru is far from distributing resources and power equally. The sinister confirmation of this can be found in the numbers of Indigenous losses, including leaders and *maestros* ('teachers'): these people disappeared taking with them their embodied, inherited, deeply territorialized knowledge, which combined tasks of healing, struggle and translating between worlds.[2] The outbreak of COVID-19 accelerated an extinction process of the above people that was already unfolding as slow death, resulting from their constant, gradual extermination due to opposing deforestation, mining, oil extraction, and drug trafficking. In communities displaced by violence, contaminated rivers and shrinking territories, the virus eliminated the defenders of remaining ecological balances. The Peruvian (and Brazilian) states' necropolitics contrast obscenely with recent proclamations of the Amazon as the world's 'lung'. And although in

1. For a critical review of 'end of the world' narratives, see Viveiros de Castro and Danowski (2017).
2. Until August 2020, the approximate number of Peruvian Indigenous leaders killed by COVID-19 was 27 according to the Sociedad Peruana de Derecho Ambiental (Peruvian Society of Environmental Law) (Anon. 2020).

2021 the Amazon produced more carbon dioxide than it absorbed – a breaking point for the planetary breathing system – no attention has been drawn to the letting-die politics applied to its people (Carrington 2021: n.pag.).

Which alternatives emerge from the lethal entrapment shaped by the matrix of capitalism–colonialism–patriarchy? Pre-modern epistemologies understood the world as alive and full of spirits, positing humans as an element amidst animals, plants, minerals and stars. Disrupting this holistic understanding was necessary for the capitalist project, which disenchanted the world and organized it through anthropocentric principles and binary, hierarchical relations: rational–irrational, culture–nature, civilization–barbarism, men–women, human–animal and life–death (Federici 2018: 209). Thus, as we consider alternatives today, I want to draw attention to the practice of *Yana Allpa* (Quechua for *black soil*) that was devised thousands of years ago by Amazonian communities to guarantee soil regeneration. Unlike the Fertile Crescent – currently a series of deserts after being the cradle of civilizations – the Amazonian rainforest increased its fertility, thanks to the practices that merged agricultural knowledge and spirituality. The romanticized view of a 'virgin' rainforest hides how its inhabitants, carefully interacting with its life cycles, made it more fruitful (Tindall et al. [2017] 2019: 237). *Yana Allpa* consists of burning organic debris under conditions of reduced oxygen, creating a carbonized biomass that regenerates the soil. Ancient finds prove that vegetables, fruits and human faeces were burnt with ceramics and the dead person who made them, offered to the orchard's spirits: bodies, ceramics and organic matter fed the soil (Tindall et al. [2017] 2019: 178). The interest in this *biochar* as a response to industrial agriculture is growing, but insufficient attention is paid to the spiritual richness permeating its origin and current presence in the Amazon.

In Peru, the Kichwa-Lamistas still offer broken ceramics to the orchard's spirits. For them and many Indigenous people, the earth, the cosmos, is alive, conscious and has will as humans do (Varese 2011: 117). Animals, plants, waters, forests, mountains and celestial bodies are considered relatives, part of a reciprocal network of mutual care. Instead of controlling nature, Indigenous people (are) co-create(d) with it. Industrialized agriculture suppresses decomposition and death, eliminating micro-organisms that provide the soil's life. By assuming that chemical additions increase productivity, this invasiveness into microsystems and biodiversity denies that degeneration and death also constitute life. But Indigenous communities around the world are heirs of an ethical order connecting what from a western paradigm seems disconnected, if not opposite: life and death.

In the face of a modern, globalized world ruled by scientific,'rational'logics, diverse communities defend their right to live otherwise. They defend their right to develop relationships beyond the laws of ownership and privatization, following long-standing non-anthropocentric codes of reciprocity premised on pre-capitalist, gift economies (Kimmerer 2015: 27). They defend their right to experience time at a different pace, not moulded by productive demands or by the extreme flexibility and availability demanded of neo-liberal subjects. They defend their right to exercise jurisdiction on the concrete, historical manifestation of their place in culture and to preserve its own epistemic structure and praxis. Their territorial claims are rooted in intimate relations with biophysical networks, where to be rooted implies an organic link to a cultural framework and an interpretative system: earth as production, consumption and sacred celebration (Varese 2011: 119).

Today, due to COVID-19, important Brazilian, Colombian, Mexican, Bolivian and Peruvian community leaders are dead. How to mourn those who organize their worlds? Those who connect life and death through chants, plants and visions? Those who taught others to carry their lands' struggles? These questions resonate with communities as they try to maintain their joy, wisdom and sense of justice to defend their threatened existence. How can we, urban, western-minded people, stay in respectful adjacency with that grief, even allowing it to teach us something about life and death?[3] Can COVID-19 help the Global North feel the touch of an escalating death that makes entire worlds and epistemologies disappear?

Let us then turn once again to practices of mourning. Although historically most societies had public manifestations of mourning, the contemporary western relationship to death generally implies an individual, private process, after the subtraction of mourning from communal life due to the First World War's incalculable losses (Leader 2014: 69). Due to COVID-19, the obscene improvised burials, sudden mass graves in New York, bodies left in the streets in Ecuador and Peru, the uneven distribution of death and loss and the impossibility to say goodbye to the dying on a planetarian scale should shift our views on mourning. Reconsidering the value of life and loss acquires renewed urgency when the north concentrated two-third of the vaccine's production and consumption, demonstrating how power in modernity administers which lives are worth saving. COVID-19-induced deaths piled up, even literally, on pre-existing unresolved processes of mourning, like the ungrievable losses that occurred in Peru's recent history: peasant women's and Indigenous lives only acknowledged by the relatives of the deceased.[4]

These losses, amidst global processes of loss, call on us to create something new: the possibility of a 'fertilizing mourning'. Acknowledging the alarming fragility of the extremely complex web of which humans are part, we shall nurture mourning's agency as a reproductive life force. Fertilizing mourning implies embracing life as a force of cosmological dimensions that surpasses the modern oppressive, extractive ways that shaped human interactions with what is called nature and their anthropocentric, possessive character. The pandemic compels us to reground in the most expansive sense, reconsidering our bonds with places and territories (Ray 2016: 2). The task is to nourish specific roots and links while recognizing the loss of those who are gone. But to create and practice proper farewells for what dies and disappears does not aspire towards closure. On the contrary, acknowledging and remembering human and more than human losses in times of ongoing extinction can make these losses mobilizers for political action (Athanasiou 2017: 82).

Fertilizing mourning should constitute a forceful response to the destruction brought to the Global South by the extractivist colonial–capitalist matrix, because 200 years of complicity with modernity's biopower and contemporary necropolitics are more than enough. By responding collectively to loss and death, especially where life is treated as already lost, fertilizing mourning should gradually spread, denouncing and contesting the conditions that condemn entire populations to the permanent status of living dead (Mbembé 2003: 40). Fertilizing mourning shall sprout especially from resource extraction zones (Mbembé 2003: 24), like in the Amazon, where mining, wood felling and drug trafficking kill lands, rivers and people, and in more and more areas of the Global South, which are already condemned to be the first casualties of global warming. By giving a specific response to each loss, fertilizing mourning shall defy the habituation of death produced by capitalist dynamics, which

3. The word adjacency is used in Tina Campt's sense: 'recognizing the disparity between your position and theirs and working to address it [...] choosing to feel across that difference rather than with or for someone living in very different circumstances' (Campt 2019).

4. Like responding to Judith Butler's question: 'What counts as a liveable life and a grievable death?' (2004: 15).

succeeded in diminishing the value of life in the Global South. Learning from nature's own regenerative capacities, malleable qualities and welcoming, non-discriminative features, fertilizing mourning shall defy modern, colonial fears that are linked to humans treating nature as their master (Mbembé 2003: 24). Instead, a non-hierarchical relationship with nature could be explored through the collective creation of fertilizing mourning practices.

Figures 1 and 2: Photos taken by Eliana Otta as part of the project 'Sketching rituals for the regeneration of the forests' by the collective Oi Mouries (Evia, Greece, 2022). © Eliana Otta.

Figure 3: Photo taken by Eliana Otta, as part of the project 'Virtual sanctuary for fertilizing mourning' (Nuevo Amanecer Hawai 2022). (c) Eliana Otta.

The current civilizational crisis, a multidimensional crisis of colonial modernity which destroys the conditions needed for the production and reproduction of life on the planet (Lander 2020: 8), compels us to transform our alliances, to mix and reconcile with what we conceived as standing in opposition to us.[5] COVID-19 invites us to rethink life and death, loss and future, wound and struggle. Mourning as a fertilizing practice shall learn from the *Yana Allpa*, from the only civilization that steadily improved its lands, since the richness of what it offered to its soil equated what it took from it. Mourning as a fertilizing practice calls on us to engage with our bodies, corporeal fluids and soil to create partnerships between our dead and the seeds growing among them. It is never late to mourn the loss of a life, human or animal, a forest or a river, an idea or a dream. It is never late, because their disappearance erodes the thick webs in which animals, dreams, forests, ideas, rivers, humans exist and existed. Nothing disappears without touching something or someone on the way out; not even the 6 million people who died without saying goodbye to their loved ones.[6] We breathe the dense air around their beds now, with or without masks. Some days we feel it, and feel suddenly heavier, dizzier or just skeptical of people's attempts to get 'back to normal'.

That is why we shall now listen to our dead. We shall be quiet long enough to hear them, to let them help us respond to what these times ask from us. Those who died recently signal those who died before them, reminding us of our debts to the past. They want us to learn from the powerless, reminding us that we may feel or seem like a minority but we never are. As destruction moves fast, they remind us that empathy with the victors only benefits the rulers, those who conquered and destroyed before (Benjamin 1968: 256). By co-creating with non-human and more-than-human entities and matters,

5. *Crisis civilizatoria* ('civilizational crisis') is a recurrent diagnosis of the current historical moment for Global South decolonial activists and theorists, especially in Latin America and following the works of Ramón Grosfoguel, Immanuel Wallerstein and Enrique Dussel (although Aníbal Quijano would call it 'crisis of the horizon of historical sense').

6. The actual numbers would be between 14 and 23 million worldwide, according to *The Economist*, using the 'excess deaths' method, which takes

> the number of people who die from any cause in a given region and period, and then compare[s] it with a historical baseline from recent years [...] in most places, the number of excess deaths

(compare[s] with our baseline) is greater than the number of covid-19 fatalities officially recorded by the government.
(Anon. 2022)

the Amazonian inhabitants survived massacres, contamination and infection, without fighting for a dominant position (Kopenawa and Albers [2010] 2013: 312). Capitalism wanted an infinite, always young, virile and conquering world. We resist it by looking at sites where decay coexists with beauty and the border between strength and vulnerability dissolves. Fertilizing mourning should be created by learning from the people who have lived, died and live, once again, 1000 apocalypses.

Such communities offer a departure point for the formation of subjectivities that are not shaped by logics of domination but recognize humans as part of something immeasurable, something that defies comprehension but deserves care and responsiveness. For these communities, reality is constituted through complex and rich worlds that do not subscribe to a paradigm of ownership and fixation but of fluidity and circulation of goods and knowledge (Butler and Athanasiou 2013: 9). Attending communities that defend a life exempted of possessive individualism implies decentring the illusion of sovereignty over 'my body, 'my' feelings, 'my' ideas (Calvo [1981] 2009: 137). As COVID-19 shows, this civilizational crisis demands that we be responsible parts of the relational networks that our bodies contribute to saving, preserving or destroying.

This is a call to let our modern, urban, individual subjectivities be affected by those remaining worlds where life is organized through the conviction that everything is animated and alive. Thus, a call to reject the destiny that contemporary necropolitics forges for life. This is a call to acknowledge our belonging to a network that exceeds the borders of a body, a family, a city, a country, a planet, and that which permeates everything that vibrates and resonates: those things that will continue to exist in spite of and without us (Braidotti 2012: 326). Do we still want to belong to life or will we perish without addressing this question? Will we be able to look those we kill or let die in the eye, assuming responsibility for our actions and omissions? (Rose 2011: 65) Will we acknowledge how pain circulates and shapes the world? (Ahmed 2004: 31) Will we denounce the way death and loss have been dismissed and exiled to the private, so as not to obstruct the march towards progress – at least when a public death cannot be instrumentalized to create heroic narratives that reinforce borders and nationalisms?

Fertilizing mourning is an urgent collective task for the Global South's disappearing forms of life and worlds. An invitation to imagine, create and practice what the world could be for those willing to 'contaminate' politics with spirituality and for those who envision a revolutionary politics that is ready to defend what is still considered sacred in the world, even though such consideration is violently marginalized. For those who die today defending rivers, mountains, fruits and the air their grandparents inhaled, there is no doubt that we inhabit sacred worlds. It is by naming and defending their homes as sacred that they have been able to save them until now. They have always called out the loss of a species, a forest or a lake when extractive forces took control. They have merged mourning with resistance, and survival with life-affirming struggles and celebrations.

People defending what is sacred do not only inhabit the Amazonian or Andean Latin American territories. Communities that do not put individual property at the centre and still collectivize meaningful dimensions of life populate many areas of Global South, in which I also count Greek urban centres and villages. Beyond the spotlights, there are countless places – unspectacular, not touristic yet – where people eat, dance, cry and love with, among and for others.

This is not a call to return to an idyllic past that never really existed but to acknowledge which contrarian forms of collective mourning and processing of emotions can inspire us to transform what it means to live and die. Those places, both in rural and urban areas, with lively bonds and surviving collective practices and rituals, shall embrace the richness of pre-modern and pre-capitalist positions. For what was seen as backwardness shall enlighten alternative paths to the vicious fiction of infinite growth. Not conservative or regressive paths, but paths shaped by scrambled temporalities and ways of doing. Fertilizing mourning shall expose time as non-linear, dismantling the illusion of progress and exposing the coexistence of past, present and future through circular regenerative practices. It shall disorder time and space, informed by lived experiences of time as different from the temporality and rhythms of money and productivity imperatives; it shall pursue bonding and social relationships that transcend commodified exchanges. Thus, like coming out of the worst nightmares of Lord Metallic and his imperial bosses, new autonomist currents will rise up from the south: ungovernable movements not searching for victory but for dissolving our inheritances as colonial modernist nation states. For us to be able to look our dead in the eye, to listen to their demands, and continue from there towards the unimaginable.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

Otta, Eliana (2022), 'Manifesto: Fertilizing mourning – Global South's offering to a world in flames', *Journal of Greek Media & Culture*, 8:2, pp. 247–57, https://doi.org/10.1386/jgmc_00060_1

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Eliana Otta has a degree in art and a master's in cultural studies from the Universidad Católica del Perú. She has exhibited her work in cities such as New York, London, Barcelona, Cali and Cusco and has participated in artistic residencies such as Gapado Air, Capacete (Athens and Rio), Sommerakademie im ZPK and Planta Alta in Madrid. She co-founded the artist-run space Bisagra in Lima and is member of the collective Oi Mouries in Athens. She coordinated the curatorial team for the permanent exhibition at Lugar de la Memoria, la Tolerancia y la Inclusión Social, Lima. She has taught at the Art Faculty of Universidad Católica del Peru, Corriente Alterna and Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes, Lima. She is a Ph.D. candidate at the Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna, working on the project 'Lost and shared: Approaches towards collective mourning for affective and transformative politics'.

Contact: Academy of Fine Arts, Schillerplatz 3, 1010 Vienna, Austria.
E-mail: elianotta@yahoo.com

https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6867-9871