

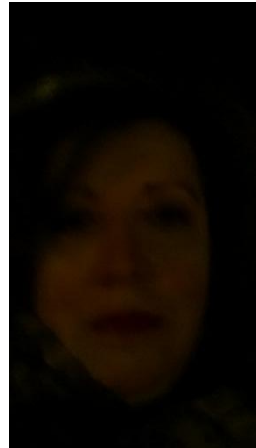


“The ashes of our dead were discarded”: Grief as a claim for justice, from Sophocles’ Antigone to the collective trauma of the Tempi collision³

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Summary:

The social impact of the deadly train collision on 28 February 2023 at Tempi, Greece, has been characterized as a collective trauma. In handling its effects the Greek state has systematically disregarded the psychological needs of both survivors and victims’ families, resulting in the retraumatization of individuals, families, and the wider community. A multitude of unresolved questions continues to affect citizens at the core of their humanity. The statement of a victim’s mother -‘The ashes of our dead were discarded’- encapsulates the collective experience of witnessing the collapse of an unwritten norm rooted in emotional attachment. In Sophocles’ Antigone, Creon’s sovereign decree denies Polyneices the status of ‘grievability’ (Butler). “By performing the last rites for her brother and demanding recognition of the social value of attachment, Antigone constitutes herself as a political subject. In a similar manner, the relatives of the Tempi victims seek justice—namely, the restoration of their dead to a condition of grievability within the polity—in order to reclaim their psychic objects and begin the process of mourning.

Key-words: collective trauma, collective mourning, retraumatization, emotional attachment, grievability, crisis of meaning, biopolitics, human rights

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The Train Collision at Tempi as Collective Trauma

At the outset, I wish to clarify that none of my relatives were among the passengers on the trains involved in the Tempi collision. I am, however, acquainted with a family connected to a university student who died that night. My own children are of an age comparable to the youngest victims; the term *victims* is used here to refer collectively to the deceased, the survivors, and the bereaved.

This clarification is necessary because the train collision of 28 February 2023 constitutes an exceptionally painful and complex event, one that touches multiple dimensions of shared social existence.

A brief review of media and online sources indicates that, shortly afterwards, the implications of the collision was already being framed as *collective trauma*:

The magnitude of the tragedy at Tempi is such that its consequences extend beyond the victims' families and affect society as a whole; individual trauma is transformed into collective trauma.

Within the Greek sociocultural context, collective memory includes multiple traumatic historical referents, such as the Asia Minor Catastrophe, the German Occupation, the Civil War, the Cyprus issue, the economic crisis, and recent wildfires and floods, alongside the Tempi disaster.

The concept of *psychic trauma* presupposes survival of the precipitating event. By extension, *collective trauma* implies that members of a society experience themselves as survivors of a shared event that is perceived as unexpected, widespread, and “unthinkable”, a characterization frequently invoked in public discourse following the Tempi collision. Informal discussions with individuals across age groups suggest that, from the earliest media reports, the event was experienced as disrupting temporal continuity and generating a crisis of meaning. This experience extended beyond those directly or indirectly involved to include the broader population observing the event from a distance.

A 19-year-old woman who lost close friends in the disaster articulated this disruption as follows:

I believe that the lives of those left behind are divided into a before and an after. And, in general, the same holds for all of Greece [...] I find it very difficult to remember who I was before, how I saw the world before, how I felt about my country before, what I believed in.

Similarly, the mother of a 19-year-old victim described, in more confrontational terms, a collapse of her prior mode of being:

Struggling to survive and to raise my children in the way the system demanded and facilitated, I was unable to see the grim truth [...] I was blinded by fear and insecurity, along with the



artificially constructed need to belong to this particular society that is being presented to me. Our children [...] would simply become pawns in a voracious system.

The deaths of 57 individuals and the injury of 140 others at Tempi have also been described, in both official and public discourse, as constituting a *national trauma*. According to Neal (1998), national trauma cannot be ignored by a country's citizens and is associated with widespread emotional and behavioral responses, including anxiety, anger, grief, and fear, at both individual and collective levels. These responses derive not only from the grievous consequences of the event itself but also from its existential dimension, particularly the crisis of meaning it engenders.

Similarly, Kai Erikson (1976) conceptualized collective trauma as a process that disrupts the fabric of social life and emphasized the importance of reconnecting with others who have experienced the shared threat in order to reconstruct meaning collectively.

A Collective Assault on the Sense of Meaning

An analogous personal need for connection and meaning led me to organize a roundtable discussion on the Tempi disaster as collective trauma at the 2nd Panhellenic Conference on Women's Mental Health, despite the complexity, ongoing nature, and emotional weight of the issue.

Accounts describing the immediate aftermath of the collision—including narratives of horror, solidarity, and mutual aid, as well as testimonies from survivors and victims' relatives—elicited intense emotional responses in me. At the same time, extensive public discourse—including partisan conflict, expert reports, technical analyses, political decision-making, investigative and judicial processes, public protests, and cultural productions (e.g., documentaries, books, music, and theatrical performances)—gave rise, for me, to a sense of cognitive and emotional overload, experienced metaphorically as submersion and uncertainty about re-emergence.

Dori Laub (1992) described the listener's engagement with trauma testimony as an "internal battlefield", highlighting the psychological impact of bearing witness to traumatic narratives. A similar dynamic characterized my present experience, accompanied by the recurring image of the Lernaean Hydra (see Figure 1).

"Grievability": The Sociopolitical Dimension of Emotional Attachment

The immediate adoption of the familiar parental plea 'Call me when you arrive' as a slogan during the first protests following the disaster clearly reflects the value of emotional bonds and the vital, indestructible significance of attachment, as described by Mary Ainsworth and John Bowlby. Bowlby also recognized the sociopolitical dimension of attachment when he wrote in 1951:

If a society values its children, it must cherish their parents.



Emotional attachment is not a matter of choice, as Judith Butler emphasizes in *The Force of Nonviolence*; it constitutes a primary condition of existence. The human subject does not exist prior to the relationship. It comes into being within its relationality, and its continued existence depends on bonds formed by birth, care, dependency, and social inclusion. Given that all subjects share a common condition of vulnerability and dependency, the value of life cannot be selective; it must be universal. A life is accorded value only insofar as its loss is recognized as significant—namely, insofar as that life is considered *grievable*.

The concept of *grievability*, therefore, refers to a differentiation among bodies—a biopolitical classification continuously enacted by the media, institutions, governments, and states, and one that is also deeply embedded in national narratives: friend/enemy, one of “us”/other. Within this classificatory framework, certain lives are deemed worthy of recognition and protection, certain bodies worthy of posthumous honor. Others may remain invisible, devalued, or, in the most extreme cases, classified as expendable.

“It seems that we are expendable”, remarks a young survivor of the Tempi disaster in the documentary *Survivors: The Cycle of Memory*. Shortly thereafter, another survivor, in his 40s, states:

How much were our lives worth to them? That is all I care about. I want to know, for each one of us individually, how much our lives were worth.

In her despair, the mother of a 23-year-old victim conveys the vital importance of psychic attachment for the constitution of a community:

We trusted in the state, in justice. But for the [Greek] state, my child’s life is worth nothing... A child who said ‘my mother, my father, my dog, my city, my job at the shop’... Where is this ‘my’ now? Why are you killing these ‘my’s’?... If [a state] kills these ‘my’s’, there is no tomorrow.

Mourning and the Sociopolitical Framework

In h Sophocles’ homonymous tragedy, Antigone is mourning her two brothers. Her mourning, however, comes into conflict with the political order, which imposes the following classification: Eteocles (despite having previously usurped power), defender of the city—friend; Polyneices (though wronged by his brother), attacker of the city—enemy. Creon, now in power, orders that Polyneices’ body be cast outside the city walls and left unburied, to be consumed by wild animals. Biological death alone is insufficient. Polyneices must also be annihilated as an individual person—he must be nullified, dehumanized, and rendered exemplary. Through law, his body is thus designated as *ungrievable*.

At all stages of life, human beings remain vulnerable, and the continuation of existence is inherently precarious. Even in the absence of explicit distinctions between grievable and ungrivable lives, the networks of care, the healthcare systems, and the institutions upon which individuals depend frequently fail to protect life, leading to neglect, exclusion, or even death.



At an event organized for Mother's Day by the Federation of Women's Associations of the Cyclades (May 2025), one speaker expressed this vividly:

Society expects, above all from the mother, that she be a parent approaching perfection, that she care for her child responsibly and with self-sacrifice... the mother trembles at the thought of what her child will encounter once it leaves her sphere of control. And she hopes that, in what lies out of her control, there are others—those in positions of authority, those democratically elected—who will assume responsibility and provide safety for her child: in schools, in hospitals, in public transport. But what does every parent, every mother, ultimately realize? They realize, in the most tragic way, that not everyone embraces responsibility; that those in charge abandon their responsibility at the first opportunity, leaving parents with empty arms. [She pauses, overcome with emotion.]

Ritual Care of the Deceased as a Necessary Stage in the Process of Mourning

One of the factors that has significantly complicated the mourning of relatives who lost loved ones in the Tempi disaster on 28 February 2023 is the universal prohibition against viewing the bodies of the deceased or what remained of them. Mourning in the presence of the body of the deceased, its care within the home, and the vigil kept beside it—as still occurs in certain regions of Greece—followed by burial or cremation as the closing of the life cycle, facilitate the apprehension of the reality of death and enable mourners to grieve and bid farewell to the deceased. In the Tempi case, however, no such form of closure was possible.

Speaking at a press conference on behalf of the victims' families on the first anniversary of the collision, the mother of a 22-year-old victim stated:

A few days after the disaster, while the investigation by the experts was still ongoing and [name] was still missing, the removal of the surface soil began, to a depth of approximately one meter. This soil contained the ashes and DNA of 30 charred victims, including [name], as well as personal belongings. We know that after cremation, the ashes are returned to the relatives. But the ashes of our dead were discarded.

The only relative who defied the prohibition and viewed his deceased son—perhaps drawing on the authority of his role as a priest—was the father of a 23-year-old Cypriot victim:

I said, please, whatever remains of his body... I want to see it. They told me this is forbidden and did not allow us to see him... At some point, we obtained permission, but then came the decision that no relative would see anyone. No one, anyone... I asked, but why? They told me that no human being could bear to see his body in the condition it was in... When I finally got his remains from Larissa and we were on our way to Thessaloniki, I told the man who had undertaken the transfer free of charge, through arrangements by the Greek government... I said, 'Stop here, we will open the coffin—I want to see Kyprianos.' In the middle of the road we found a spot... The truth is that when I saw him, he was whole—he was my Kyprianos, injured, but still Kyprianos... his body was intact. I took a photograph... And when his mother saw it, she calmed somewhat... We brought him home and spent four hours... washing him, preparing him, and our other children were considerably soothed when they saw and processed the body.



From Grief Over the Event to Anger at Its Management by the State

Indignation, anger, and outrage have been widely expressed in connection with the Tempi disaster and continue to be expressed. Collective indignation at the systemic failures that allowed two trains to travel on the same track for 12 minutes—despite available technological safeguards—and shock at the number and young age of the victims were followed by anger over the hasty removal of debris and the subsequent handling of the incident by state authorities. This process later resulted in the discovery of human genetic material among the train remains.

The relatives of the deceased understand their protest not only as a struggle for the punishment of those responsible for the deaths of their loved ones, but also as an indictment of systemic dysfunction within the Greek state:

Tempi will remain in the history of Greece as the greatest act of barbarity since the establishment of the Greek state. There is no greater desecration of the dead... As a father, and even more as a Greek, I feel ashamed... It is unacceptable for body parts and bones to be discarded... There are still bones at the Larissa Prosecutor's Office.

With regard to the obligation of states to safeguard the rights of individuals after death, it is instructive to compare this case with the Mytilene Declaration (2018), an initiative of the *Last Rights* program concerning the bodies of deceased refugees. The Greek National Commission for Human Rights officially adopted the declaration, calling upon the state and competent authorities “to take into account the obligations and rights set out in detail in the text of the Declaration, which are consistent with the international obligations of states, as reflected in international conventions and interpreted by international and regional judicial bodies”.

Indicatively, the following provisions concern the care of the bodies of deceased or missing migrants and support for their families:

We, the undersigned, adopting the present Declaration, recognizing the inherent right to life and the importance of respecting and ensuring the right to truth, in order to end impunity and promote and protect human rights, and recognizing that individuals have the right not to lose their identity after death, call upon all States to treat all persons equally, irrespective of race, nationality, gender, gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, religion, age, abilities, skills, or any other status, and in accordance with their international obligations:

A.5. Collect, examine, and preserve all bodies.

A.6. Respect the bodies of the dead and guarantee chain of custody of the bodies from recovery to the final destination.

A.7. Take all reasonable steps to identify the deceased and to determine the cause and manner of death.

A.8. Undertake effective investigations to deliver justice, accountability and reparations.

[...]

B.3. Family members of a missing or deceased person have the right to be kept informed and be consulted at all stages of investigation, administrative and legal procedures, in the search for



and recovery of, missing and deceased family members and their personal effects.

B.4. Family members of a missing or deceased person should receive from State authorities, all necessary support and assistance to facilitate their right to appropriate and effective participation in the investigation and be provided with legal aid, access to documentation involving the search for recovery of missing and deceased family members and their personal effects whether on land or at sea.

Testimonies from survivors and relatives, as presented in the media, make clear that in the management of both the dead and their families—during the initial response as well as in subsequent developments—the state and its institutions fell far short of these principles. This is particularly striking given that the bodies in question were not unidentified individuals of foreign nationality, but identified fellow citizens, most of whom were very young.

Anger and outrage are still widespread across the population. What is striking, however, is the manner in which these emotions are expressed in interviews by those who either lost loved ones or survived the collision, in contrast to the broader public discourse. In this context, they acknowledge these feelings and articulate them verbally, yet do so in a measured and restrained manner, without escalation, while remaining firmly committed to what they describe as the ‘vindication of the dead’. This vindication is understood not only as the just punishment of those responsible but also as the assurance that such a disaster will not recur.

A 28-year-old survivor who was traveling with her six-month-old infant stated:

[I felt] anger for what happened, anger for what I was hearing... in the news, anger that everyone had something to say about what happened, but no one assumed responsibility...

The husband of a 30-year-old victim, speaking in a restrained but steady tone, remarked:

They have the audacity to come forward and still wag their finger at us, telling us how we should mourn, that our grief should be silent. No. How silent can it be when a child is asking for their mother at one in the morning?

A 30-year-old survivor noted:

I feel deeply insulted—like all Greeks—at the level of our intellect... insulted at a moral level, in my very soul. But I do not allow this to overwhelm me, because it would take away my composure and prevent me from thinking clearly.

Nevertheless, a dominant perception emerges that the state is not only failing but is experienced as adversarial by the bereaved, the survivors, and the Greek population in general.

We the relatives, are engaged in an intense struggle against a very powerful adversary: the state,

stated the father of a 20-year-old victim. Similarly, a close friend of two 19-year-old victims declared:



I consider as enemies those who knew about the condition of the Greek railway system; I consider as enemies those who covered up the Tempi crime and continue to do so; and I also consider as enemies those who wag their finger at us who mourn.

Mourning and Public Discourse

The gradual transformation of mourning into a demand for clarification and administration of justice, and subsequently into protest over the state's failure to respond to this demand, is, in my view, clearly reflected in the official statements issued by the Presidency of the Republic, as published on its website.

On 1 March 2023, the President of the Republic referred to the Tempi collision expressing grief and solidarity:

We are faced with an unthinkable tragedy. [...] I express my deep sorrow and my support for the families of the victims. We stand by them.

On the first anniversary, the trauma and anger are acknowledged, along with the unanswered questions, framed as legitimate concerns requiring answers:

One year later, the tragedy of Tempi continues to wound and anger the Greek society. The pain is undiminished, and the questions remain unanswered.

On the second anniversary, it is explicitly stated that the state's failure to provide answers undermines public trust in its institutions. Reference is also made to the collective demand for truth, accountability, and justice:

The Tempi tragedy is a dark page in our history. The accident and the unresolved questions that accompany it undermine citizens' trust in institutions. Two years later, the demand for truth, accountability, and the administration of justice is universal and of fundamental importance for our State.

The multifaceted questions that have arisen—and continue to arise—from the Tempi collision remain inadequately answered:

I want to know exactly what happened. And I do not think that is unreasonable. I believe that, in reality, all Greeks want to know what happened... We more or less know the causes and what went wrong, don't we? No system was functioning, contracts, subcontracts, funds whose destination remains unclear... Nevertheless, we want to know exactly what happened. We are not asking for anything unreasonable... I want to know what was said that night, and it was the responsibility of the justice system to provide that. I should not have had to search for it myself,

stated the daughter of a 55-year-old victim, two years after the event.



The bereaved and survivors address institutions collectively and persistently, articulating an unwavering public discourse through every available means—formal and informal, legal and extralegal—including protests and even hunger strikes.

The relatives of the victims have already articulated a discourse that extends beyond their personal loss to encompass broader social injustice: impunity, corruption, institutional decay, and insecurity. [...] The repeated question “what burned our children?” becomes a symbolic inquiry into “what is burning Greece?” [...] The strength of the victims’ relatives lies precisely in the transformation of mourning into public discourse.

The Denial of Validation Leads to Retraumatization

As Dori Laub observes, when individuals speak about their trauma without being heard—or when their words are not acknowledged—the very act of speaking without response becomes retraumatizing. The absence of an available Other capable of validating and recognizing that the trauma has indeed occurred and been experienced undermines the function of the narrator. The invalidation of a narrative that cannot be heard—of a story that cannot be transformed into testimony—amounts to a final blow for those who have endured a devastating event.

In the award-winning documentary *Nostalgia for the Light* by Patricio Guzmán, women searching for relatives who disappeared during the Pinochet dictatorship continue, decades later, to look for human remains by combing the vast Atacama Desert with their hands. One of them states:

At this point in my life, I am 70 years old, and I find it difficult to believe what I am told. They have taught me not to believe anything. It costs me greatly. Sometimes I feel foolish, because I am constantly left with questions, questions, questions, and no one can give me the answer I need... Many will say [she cries], ‘Why do they need the bones?’ Well, I need them! I need them!

In interviews about the Tempi collision, numerous survivors and eyewitnesses report that they have not, to this day, been called to testify. It has also been reported that testimonies voluntarily submitted through official digital platforms were collectively dismissed by the investigating authority as unreliable, on the grounds that the witnesses had experienced shock.

Under these conditions, mourning and the crisis of meaning not only fail to subside but are instead intensified, as reflected in the following statement by the mother of a severely injured survivor:

For two years now, I have been mourning 57 remarkable fellow human beings—their joys and achievements, the marriages and children they will never have. I mourn the future of Greece. I mourn democracy. I mourn justice...

Indeed, one of the most profound consequences of the handling of the Tempi disaster concerns the erosion of trust in the institutions responsible for ensuring justice. The very concept of “justice” appears to have undergone a loss of meaning, subject as it is to misuse and distortion



by certain institutional and political actors. This underscores the need to revisit its definition, as illustrated in the following exchange between a journalist and the father of a victim:

Journalist: Given the widespread public demand for justice today, what would justice mean to you in this case?

Father of a 24-year-old victim: Can you first give me the definition of justice—what is justice?

Journalist: Justice means that when a crime occurs, there is a corresponding punishment.

Father: Exactly. It's very simple, isn't it? But for justice to exist, the truth must come to light, so that we ourselves can be just. So that those who are truly responsible are judged in proportion to their responsibility.

The Political Implications of Collective Mourning

When mourning is compounded by the experience of absurdity and injustice, it acquires significant political force. For this reason, as Judith Butler notes, systems of power often attempt to regulate emotional expression through various means, including outright censorship:

Open grieving is bound up with outrage, and outrage in the face of injustice or indeed of unbearable loss has enormous political potential. It is, after all, one of the reasons Plato wanted to ban the poets from the Republic.

An illustrative passage from *The Republic* states:

We were saying... that a moderate man, when he suffers misfortune, for example the loss of a son..., will bear this loss with more restraint than others... Is it not reason and law that instruct him to resist grief?

By minimizing the intensity of grief and undermining the connection between indignation and mourning, every authority seeks to bring under control the potentially threatening protest of its subjects.

Two brief examples from late February 2025, in a private school, are indicative:

First instance: High school students request permission from the administration to hold a small commemorative event for the victims of Tempí within the school. The administration refuses. When students ask for the reason, the principal closes the discussion, stating categorically: *"We observed a minute of silence at the time it happened. That is sufficient"*.

Second instance (two days later): Before the morning bell, a final-year student posts a two-page sheet on the board titled *Justice*, containing excerpts from poems on the theme, most of which had been taught in class. The Greek Literature teacher enters, asks what it is, and upon hearing that it relates to Tempí, forcibly removes the sheet, crumples it without reading it, and throws it in the trash, exclaiming: *"This is a school!"*



The Vital Significance of the Demand for Justice

I return to John Bowlby in order to recall that he identified, as a central component of mourning, the drive to recover the lost psychic object.

The relatives and friends of the deceased, the survivors, and, to a large extent, the broader Greek public look to the administration of justice as a mechanism that may enable the recovery of the psychic object through its restoration to a condition of *grievability* within the polity—that is, through the recognition of the intrinsic value of the life that was lost.

In the case of a fatal train crash in Buenos Aires in 2012, those deemed directly and indirectly responsible were convicted three years later and sentenced to prison terms ranging from three to nine years, with the shortest sentence imposed on the train driver. It is also noteworthy that, following the accident, the government proceeded to nationalize the railway system:

A court in Buenos Aires has given jail sentences to two former Argentine transport ministers for a train crash which killed 51 people in 2012. Ricardo Jaime and Pablo Schiavi were given six- and eight-year sentences for negligence. The train driver received a three-year prison sentence. Two of the directors of the company Trenes de Buenos Aires (TBA), which operated the rail line concession at the time, received sentences of between five and nine years. After the accident, the government of Cristina Fernández nationalised Argentina's rail system and implemented a major renewal programme. 'I think this was a historic judgement', said Maria Lujan Rey, the mother of Lucas Menghini Rey, whose body was found three days after the crash.

As discussed earlier, in *Antigone* by Sophocles, sovereign authority does not attribute equal value to all lives. It also commits a fatal hubris by entirely disregarding the value of emotional attachment. The dissolution of Creon's family, following the suicides of his son and wife, underscores a political insight emphasized by contemporary scholarship: namely, that recognition of the value of emotional attachment constitutes a pathway toward the sustainability of the *oikos*, understood as the familial and social unit and, by extension, the polity.

It has been argued that the turn to *Antigone* from the latter half of the 20th century to date is best seen in the context of a series of turns to ethics, humanism, or maternalism, each aimed at countering certain forms of sovereignty or rationality (Elshtain, 1982, among others). Lamenting sovereignty's excesses, theorists and critics seem to find in that lamentation a new universalism: 'whatever our differences, we are all mortal and we all lament our finitude, since the time of *Antigone*' (Honig, 2013, p. 1). Jean Bethke Elshtain is a representative example of this approach: writing in the 1980s (1982; 1989), Elshtain argues that *Antigone* models a maternalist, care-centered social feminism that values family ties as resources for democratic politics.



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Table 1

An Attempt to (Re)construct Meaning: Oscillation Between Affects and Thought Processes

Experiencing	Reflecting
Emotional intensity	Cognitive processing
Partial grasp of the issue	Proliferation of multiple additional aspects
Satisfaction	Frustration
Inner questioning	Fear