

On the ground

An Ecosystem of Displacement

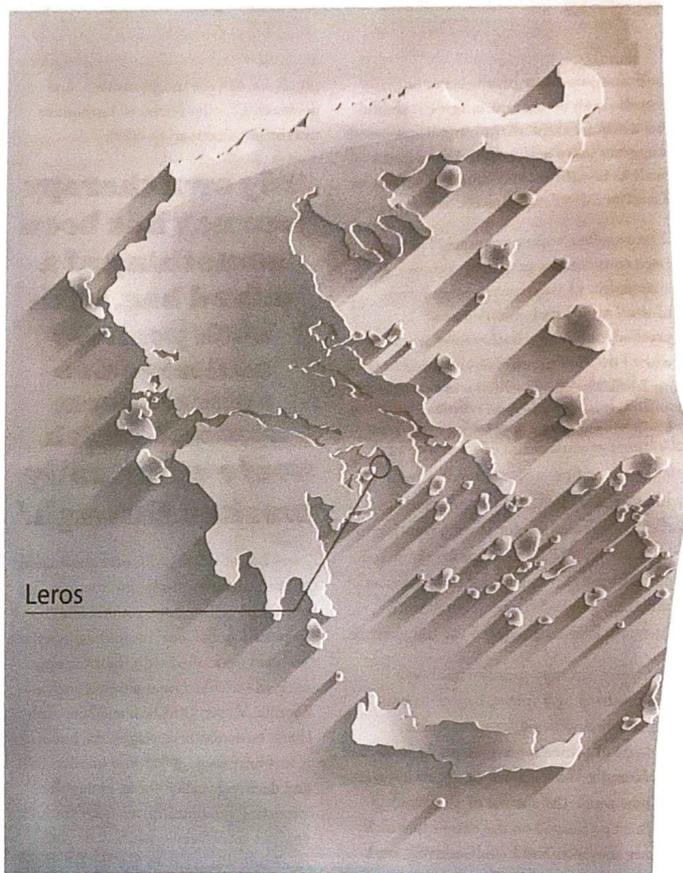
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On a plane to Athens back from Leros, a small and beautiful Greek island in the southern Aegean sea, from where Turkey can be seen across the sea on a clear full moon night, I found myself thinking about the shared conscious and unconscious experiences of groups and how individual and group trauma interact with each other. I was preparing a debrief on the two weeks I spent in one of the most crowded refugee camps in Greece, where I had worked closely with an Austrian NGO team assisting the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). Leros hosts one of the 'hotspots' established by the European Commission in 2015 and run by the UNHCR and the Greek government, where approximately 1,500 refugees live for an average of 18 months, mostly in metal containers that can house up to ten people each, until their application for asylum in Europe is accepted or rejected. In 2015 most people making the journey across the Mediterranean were escaping war-torn Syria, but when I was in Leros the largest group in the hotspot were Palestinians from Gaza.

The ecosystem of Leros is historically defined by processes of domination, confinement and exile. The island is used to host the Other and is home to what once used to be the country's largest psychiatric hospital, where the most 'mentally ill' and uncontrollable patients and the opponents of Greece's 1970s military junta were exiled. In the experience of many, on the island and beyond, refugees represent an unknown, threatening Other who want to destabilize and contaminate their physical, socio-political and psychological borders, as the mentally ill and the political dissidents exiled on the island did before them. Fragmented identities and unsatisfied needs lead to a splitting between good and bad objects. The Other, the Outsider, becomes the site of projected uncontrollable anxieties and an easily identifiable enemy. It is no coincidence that the hotspot is located on the grounds of the old and now disused psychiatric hospital. This is why the work of the NGO becomes essential – it offers the refugees the opportunity to leave the grounds of the hotspot and to spend the day in an environment that is not surrounded by barbed wire and police officers, and where many different activities are available, from Greek lessons

to film classes, from barber workshops to cooking afternoons. If these displaced and often deeply traumatised individuals were provided psychotherapy, the task of the therapist would be to help them feel safe and connected to others again, so they could experience a sense of normality despite the trauma they hold within. The work of the NGO facilitates this sense of normality, but it often comes at a high price for those who work on the ground. The working day is long and exhausting. Whilst on the island I worked alongside the staff so I could experience their daily challenges and provide the NGO with new training guidelines based on trauma-informed care. It soon became very clear that the physical and emotional strain were significant and, given the little time I had with them, simple explanations of psychoanalytic principles such as projection, identification, reaction formation and displacement and attachment theory offered some new tools to better understand their work and to manage their own self-care and the relationships with each other and the refugees. Furthermore, the establishment of something similar to a peer supervision group that we tested whilst I was there was very well received and continued after my departure.

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Back in my airplane seat, another peculiarity of this little island came to mind, its architecture. Occupied by fascist Italy in the '20s and '30s, Lakki, Leros' main town, was built to celebrate the fascist rational architecture that emphasized a design based on ideals of geometrical rationality and monumentality. However, the architects tasked with the design of the town, maybe taking advantage of the distance from Rome, experimented and succeeded in integrating rationalism with imaginative creativity. As I pictured in my mind the town's school, a mixture of modernist and Byzantine styles, I thought of the Greek-born Italian artist Giorgio de Chirico. His early paintings, although filled with well-defined geometrical forms, also contain dream-like and ambivalent images, a significant contrast to the crude and monolithic fascist state art. Leros needed much more than bare-bones psychological training guidelines for r'

aid workers. To enable Leros to achieve reconciliation with the trauma of the past and to give meaning to the trauma of the present, a relational and creative approach that enables understanding of both the refugees and their hosts, and promotes the co-creation of dialogue, collaboration and integration, rather than division and fragmentation, may help in dealing with the trauma of the transient population as well as that of the people (local and from the outside world) who live alongside them (Volkan, 2013).