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“Helpless”: reflections on grief and sociality in three Amerindian societies

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Introduction

In many ways, “Helpless” (Gow, 2000) is a foundational article, starting with its location in a seminal work, *The anthropology of love and anger: the aesthetics of conviviality in native Amazonia*, that spelled out the concept of “conviviality” as understood among Amerindian groups. This concept gathers a range of salient issues experienced in everyday life and strives to understand them from the point of view of Amerindian people themselves. Recognizing the importance of emotion and affect to everyday life, Overing and Passes and the many contributors to the volume demonstrated how sociality is comprised of both social and antisocial affective characteristics and the whole range of their expressions, from love to anger and all that there is in between. Committed to working through the idioms and experiences of Amerindian interlocutors, Overing and Passes argued that at the heart of anthropology had lain an enduring assumption that the “public domain” was fundamentally representative of “society,” with the “domestic domain” subordinate to the public and consequently of negligible importance to social analysis. Indigenous moral thought, they argued, recognizes no such distinctions that would externalize “society” as something separable from the affective, involved, and intersubjective relations that characterize everyday life.

This turn to the ordinary, everyday and the amplification of affective states and intersubjective relations involved recalibrating the emphasis in Indigenous Amazonian moral thought on “foreign politics” and the importance of relations with alterity in constituting sociality. Equally at home in the University of St Andrews as he was at the Museu Nacional in Rio de Janeiro, Peter Gow, perhaps more than most, stitched his work across the various approaches to conceptualizing Amerindian socialities and added to them an insistence on recognizing the historicity of Amerindian lived worlds.

The “ethnography of the ordinary” had the precise goal of highlighting what makes sociality work and what does not, giving relevance to what in the past may have appeared as “unremarkable and boring” (Overing and Passes, 2000: 9) but what, instead, fully and vividly brought out the Indigenous philosophy and metaphysics of sociality. Yet the emphasis on the production of sociality through everyday affective relations, and indeed the very production of persons through the sharing of food and wider convivial relations, risked forgetting the problem of mortality. If persons, and, through their quotidian intersubjective relations and dependencies, sociality, are produced, then what happens when a person dies? What is the work of effecting a separation between the deceased and the lives of those who must go on living?

To this question, Pete¹ responded with “Helpless.” “Helpless” condenses the crucial aspects of the creation and maintenance of everyday social life amongst the Piro/Yine,² elaborating on constructive/virtuous and destructive/disruptive forces that are part of the relational and interactive experience of being human. Throughout much of his writing, both in “Helpless” as well as other works, Pete’s ability to place himself in the shoes of others, to empathize and imagine the world through the lives and experiences of others, stands out. As such, his work is never merely analytical, but always grounded in lived worlds and empathetic imaginings of the lives of others. Our contribution to this issue considers some of the aspects he highlighted to reflect on the relevance they have in our own work, as well as in our individual and personal experiences working with Amerindian people. Each author offers a fragment containing a personal reading of the “Helpless” material, rooting the theory and the ethnography in the analysis proposed by Pete and finding connections between Peruvian Amazonia and three other locations: Southern Guyana, central Brazil, and southern Chile.

Courtney Stafford-Walter’s section takes us to Southern Guyana to the Wapishana people, one of nine self-identified Indigenous tribes of Guyana. They live predominantly in the savannas that make up the borderlands between Guyana and Brazil, residing in both countries, with a long history of contact and movement between these groups (Myers, 1944; Farage, 2003). The Wapishana population is estimated between 10,000 and 11,000 (Farage, 2003),³ and their language is Arawakan. Courtney’s section highlights Pete’s analytical stance regarding the vulnerability of individuals at a particular stage of their life, elaborating on related social aspects such as the interplay of singularity and multiplicity, intersubjectivity and the individual, and cosmological consequences of grief as experienced by mourners. She briefly relates it to the Guyanese Wapishana’s experience of loss and the inherent danger represented by affective connections between the living and the dead.

Elizabeth Ewart’s section draws on fieldwork with Panará people in central Brazil. Numbering approximately 450 individuals at the time of fieldwork in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Panará people are members of the Gê linguistic family and, like many other speakers of Gê languages, reside in circular villages that are important manifestations of Panará socio-spatial organization. This section elaborates on Panará people’s attitudes towards death and grief, reflecting on personal events that intertwined with ethnographic experiences, indirectly illustrating the fusion of the anthropologist’s personal life with the lives of her Amerindian hosts. As both sides, interlocutors and anthropologist, struggled to understand each other’s elaboration of loss, what emerges is the universal necessity to separate the dead from the living as part of the process of accepting the death of a loved one, whether through affective memory or through actively removing that memory.

Giovanna Bacchiddu’s section is devoted to Apiao, a small, rural island in the archipelago of Chiloé (southern Chile) with a population of approximately 600 people of Indigenous origin who are predominantly Catholic. Their relative isolation from the mainland and the distance of Apiao from social, economic, and religious centers has led to the development of a local version of Catholicism, centered on cults to miraculous saints and the dead, with little to no presence of the official Catholic Church. This section brings the focus to the collective, ethnographically reflecting on a crucial aspect of sociality that is continuously rehearsed in Apiao: the action of asking something of someone. People reveal themselves as vulnerable when they ask to be “accompanied” in both mundane and ritual practices. Some actions must be performed collectively to be meaningful, such as the prayer sessions organized for the dead. An affirmative response to pleas borne out of “pain” benefits all those involved and confirms their belonging to the same community, the multiplicity inherent in individuality.

In drawing on our diverse case studies and engaging with Pete’s writings on death and grief, we consider key themes in Amazonianist literature on mourning, such as the emphasis

1. We write this article as a joint tribute to Peter Gow. As his former students, supervised at different stages of Pete’s academic career, we also all three of us counted Pete amongst our dearest friends. It is for this reason that we oscillate between citing his contributions under his surname “Gow” and the name by which we knew him, “Pete.” Apart from illuminating different ways of thinking about death present in each of our field sites, this exercise has also been invaluable for processing our own grief around the loss of our supervisor, our mentor, and one of our dearest friends. He is no longer with us, and yet we can see Pete, his guidance, his presence, emerging from all of our ethnographic accounts in different ways. On the one hand, his death has allowed us all to know ourselves as helpless in our sadness and anger, but has also afforded us the opportunity to be compassionate towards one another, drawing us closer together, allowing us to see ourselves within each other.

2. In Pete’s writings, he tends to refer to “Piro people,” in keeping with ethnographic conventions of the time. We here use the term “Yine” to reflect more recent practice and the preference of Yine people themselves.

3. While this citation is dated, there are no more recent statistics available. In the most recent Guyanese census, all Indigenous people are in one category—Amerindian.

on forgetting the dead, or the challenge posed to notions of the person when a part of one's own personhood is challenged by the death of a close kinsperson. At the same time, our work shows up the limits of generalization through the specificity of Wapishana, Apiao, and Panará people's own concepts, histories, and lived realities. Death and mourning are indeed quintessential moments where the universal and the personal, the conceptual and the experiential are profoundly entwined. Yet more than this, just as they did in over 500 years of colonization, today, too, experiences of loss, grief, and indeed helplessness resonate deeply with the contemporary lives of Amerindian peoples all over South America, as they contend with the continuous intensification of attacks on their lived worlds.

Kinship as humanity, humanity as multiple

Piro people do not mourn collectively, or in small defined groups of mourners. They mourn alone, because each person has lost a part of themselves. (Gow, 2000: 48)

In Pete's article "Helpless," he provides an insightful description of grief in the Yine community where he conducted decades of fieldwork by exploring a particular way of characterizing young babies and grieving adults as *wamonuwala*, which Pete translates as "being helpless." He goes on to illustrate why this is the common condition of those seemingly disparate groups of people. By exploring what sets these two groups apart from the rest of their Yine kinspeople, Pete draws connections with a theme found throughout the region, the intersubjective shape of everyday sociality often described throughout lowland South America. The goal of these processes of sharing space and substances with their community is to ensure humans are not alone, that they are always one of many, among their kinspeople.

Following this conception of intersubjective personhood, in order to be and understand oneself, one must recognize the mutuality one has with one's kin and wider community. Kinship for the Yine inherently implies "the multiplication of identical entities" (ibid.: 49). This is evident when taking a closer look at the Yine language, as Pete does in his article. He highlights that the singular term for "human" in this language, "*yine*," is "the singularization of what is intrinsically plural" (ibid.: 49). He also notes that any other terms for groups of humans, like white people or neighboring groups like the Conibo, do have singular forms in the Yine language. This reinforces the idea that Yine people understand themselves as one of many kinspeople. This corresponds to Joanna Overing's characterization of the Piaroa's "multiple other selves," which Pete explores in greater depth in his article "Helpless." He argues that Overing's characterization fits well with two aspects of the Yine world in particular, stating,

First, there is the predication of 'humanity' and 'kinspeople' as intrinsically multiple. Second, there is the predication of one's own selfhood, one's own definition of one's humanity, as lying with other people, in 'the eye of the beholder': this is the Piro formulation of self in *nshinikanchi*, 'mind, love, memory, thought'. (2000: 48)

Pete describes *nshinikanchi* as the "intersubjective 'organ' of kinship" (ibid.: 51). And while he does provide the above definition, he also carefully clarifies that the translation of *nshinikanchi* might not line up with Western notions of memory or love, as it is not an interior state, but rather something that can be manifested in practice. The ultimate realization of *nshinikanchi* is village co-residence, to be in ongoing and constantly reinvigorated intersubjective relationships with kin. Pete offers an alternative translation of *nshinikanchi* later on in the article, explaining that it can also mean respect. To respect someone, again, takes place in practice, and in order to do so, Yine people must pay "careful mutual attention to the multiplicity of their kin relations" (ibid.: 52). This all comes together to build the foundation of Yine social life, which, in Pete's words, consists of "the ongoing realisation of their multiplicity in a ceaseless round of attention towards others as kinspeople" and leads to *gwashata*,

“to live well.” In order to live well, Yine people must live together and continually recognize the multiplicity of their humanity, and see their kin as other parts of an interactive whole.

Building on this foundation of understanding Yine social life as a physical manifestation of humanity, let us return to the two groups of people Pete identified as “helpless” and strive to understand what sets them apart from others. Both newborn babies and mourning adults have one key thing in common—that they are singular, without kinspeople. They are alone. By comparing the singularity associated with young babies and that associated with older people who have lost their kin, he highlights the vibrant and foregrounded intersubjectivity of Yine people’s sociality. On one hand, the newborn child has not yet been made into a person, into one of multiple, and on the other hand, the mourning adult is unable to maintain their multiplicity, as they have lost a part of the self through the death of another. In both cases, we see this breakdown of *gwashata*, to live well, allowing us to understand this concept of sociality as intersubjectivity in more depth.

In order to understand how babies are made into proper humans by their kin and community, we have to unpack the relationship between *nshinikanchi*, the intersubjective organ of kinship, and the *samenchi*, or the nonsocial condition that Pete describes as “intimate personal uniqueness” or simply “the self” (ibid.: 53). While Yine people are born with *samenchi*, *nshinikanchi* must be cultivated over a period of time and through a communal process. Until Yine babies are enveloped in intersubjective relationships, and through this turned into kin, all their experience of the world is governed by the delusion of a *samenchi*. In order to make babies who are born with the potential to be humans into proper humans, they “must be fed ‘real food’ and respond with kin terms” (ibid.: 47). It is prior to this transformation, when babies remain in the “delusional” world of the *samenchi*, that they are associated with *wamonuwata*, or understood as “helpless,” by the rest of the community. This is because they have not yet been shaped into humans by their kin, which is done in practice by encouraging the child to focus their attention outwardly on others. Through this, their kin generate *nshinikanchi*, and it is only through these “dynamics of compassion” that a baby can become a full human in the eyes of their kin and community (ibid.: 54).

Many scholars of lowland South America have noted the combination of fierce individualism and social responsiveness, and the process Pete describes of shaping a baby, entirely *samenchi*, into a kinsperson through the cultivation of *nshinikanchi* hints at balancing these two characteristics. Looking to the literature to see other examples of how this collective care is cultivated among young people in practice, Mezzenzana describes how Runa parents of Ecuador balance the individual will of their children with the social-responsiveness aspect of personhood. She illustrates this with a discussion of how parents and elders in the village only respond to the children’s wills if they are able to also demonstrate “thought” through regard for other people’s needs and desires. They frequently refuse to honor the requests of the child until the child can demonstrate this social awareness. Once these young people can acknowledge and make decisions that respect the desires of others, these children are transformed into full social persons (Mezzenzana, 2020: 549).

In both the Yine and Runa examples, you can only be a proper human if you realize your will must be channeled in ways that respect the needs and desires of your kin and community. As such, these people understand themselves through the intersubjective relationships they cultivate with those around them. Yet if the self is only understood through the eye of the beholder, what happens when a kinsperson, one of their multiple selves, dies?

Pete argues that the relationship between *nshinikanchi* and *samenchi* that we see shaped and molded by members of the community after a child is born, is thrown into stark relief by a kinsperson’s death (Gow, 2000: 54). He explains that while the body itself is lost at the point of death, the *samenchi* retains its agency and maintains *nshinikanchi*. This puts those who

knew and loved them in a vulnerable position, as they may encounter this *samenchi*, which, as Pete describes, “continues to haunt the living, crying in loneliness for them, and evoking a lethal nostalgia” (ibid.: 54).

It is important to understand how Indigenous people of lowland South America conceive of persons and their bodies as composite, made up of multiple parts. While this varies from one group to another, McCallum describes this among the Cashinahua of Brazil and Peru, highlighting the many souls residing in the body, including two main souls—the eye soul, or true soul, and the body soul (1999: 448). When a person dies, these souls depart from the body and have very different journeys. The eye soul departs the body and journeys to the sky in the shape of a bird or a beetle, with the ultimate goal of joining the sky gods (ibid.: 447). However, the body soul lingers, even after it is asked to move on, and, taking a grotesque form, it seeks out and scares remaining living kin (ibid.: 450). For the Araweté of Brazil, the journey of souls looks a bit different than for the Cashinahua, but they too make a key distinction between the soul that travels to the sky to become eternal and the dangerous ghosts that cling to cadavers (Viveiros de Castro, 1992, as cited in McCallum, 1999). In both of these cases, we can see that dying is processual and involves the transformation of a person with an embodied set of souls into a series of discrete souls with different destinies. In Amazonia, therefore, a simple dead/living dichotomy is insufficient.

Conklin, in her research with the Wari’ of Brazil, notes the danger posed by the process of death in a few different ways. She notes, “Living people can encounter the dead in two ways: as ghosts, or as mental images in memories or dreams. Both kinds of encounters are potentially harmful” (2001: 159). It has been noted time and again in the literature that in lowland South America, people often go to great lengths to protect themselves from both their dead kin’s ghost, spirit, or double and the life-threatening danger of grief. For example, Lux Vidal (1977: 171) notes Xikrin people in Brazil place a gourd of milk by a child’s grave so as to prevent them from returning to their mother. In these rituals, we see kin treating the lingering aspect of the dead as enemies, strangers, or Others.

There are practices throughout lowland South America that allow for the breaking of relationships between the living and the dead. Some common examples consist in burning the houses, the clothes, and other belongings of the deceased and ceasing to utter their name (Vilaça, 1992; Conklin, 2001). In other cases, in the past, different Amazonian groups participated in endocannibalism, which was thought to release the deceased’s soul through the consumption of the body and help the living to forget their deceased kin (McCallum, 1999; Vilaça, 1997; Conklin, 2001). Roth (1924) described the many different funeral practices present in the Guianas alone, including endocannibalism, burial, cremation, mummification, and various practices around the preservation of bones (cited in Chaumeil, 2007: 244). Meanwhile, Caiuby Novaes shows how for Bororo people in central Brazil, a death triggers a series of transformations involving the unmaking, or “defacement,” of the deceased’s body, followed by the reconstitution, or “refacement,” of individual members in the world of the living. “Funerary rituals are a means of reconstructing Bororo society after the destabilisation caused by the death of one of its members” (Caiuby Novaes, 2006: 184). A key concern, then, here as elsewhere, is to reestablish an orderly relation between the world of the living and that of the dead.

One of the ways in which the separation between the domains of the dead and the living may become blurred is through the memories the living hold of the deceased. To long for deceased kin can put a person at risk in many communities in lowland South America, and as such, the clothes and belongings of the deceased and the memories associated with these things can also be dangerous. For example, as McCallum describes amongst the Cashinahua, “Too much longing brings on a fit of grief, a sense of total loneliness and abandonment. Such people,

subdued and morose, are seen as easy prey to possibly mortal illness” (1999: 455). In order to avoid this danger, many Amazonian people go to great lengths to forget their kin when they die. Anne-Christine Taylor elaborates on the sharp contrast between Indigenous groups that maintain relationships with their ancestors after death and lowland Amazonian people, stating:

Far from stressing continuity with their ancestors and enshrining their memory in names, epics or monuments, lowland Amerindians expend considerable time and ingenuity in losing their dead, forgetting their names and deeds and emphasising their remoteness from the world of the living. (1993: 654)⁴

In a chapter entitled “Bones, flutes, and the dead: memory and funerary treatments,” Chaumeil provides a comprehensive overview of a wide variety of funerary practices throughout lowland South America, and through this challenges the assumed paucity of Amazonian rituals around and attitudes towards death. While he recognizes that the “absence of cults, cemeteries or even visible places associated with the dead, as well as the shallow depth of genealogical memory among these populations, the widespread forgetting of the dead or the taboos placed on their names” (2007: 243) might lead scholars to assume that there is a commonality in the alterity assigned to the dead, he argues that this assumption flattens the diversity of funeral practices in the region that took place in the past (as evidenced by archaeological remains) and are still practiced today.

Chaumeil argues that there is a level of complexity that this “single model of a radical discontinuity between the living and the dead” (ibid.: 248) fails to recognize. For example, while the Araweté do treat their dead as enemies, they have no desire to forget them (Viveiros de Castro, 1992). Graham (1995) notes that amongst the Xavante, the dead are incorporated as “immortals” and are not feared. She also notes that Thomas (1980) argues endocannibalism could be understood as a way to conserve certain attributes of the deceased kin, rather than as a destructive process (cf. Chaumeil, 2007).

Chaumeil (2007) also encourages us to recognize that diversity in attitudes towards and practices around death not only vary from one group in lowland South America to the next, but also that even within a single community the way particular people react to death and grief will not always be consistent. He importantly notes that a person’s treatment after death can also vary based on the status of the dead, their role in the community, and where and how they died. All of this is to indicate that generalizations across all groups in lowland South America regarding practices around death collapse some of the range of human responses to grief and loss. While recognizing this diversity, Pete’s description of Yine people’s reaction to death presents many parallels within our own fieldwork in different ways, and it provides a useful way to explore the interrelationship between sociality and grief in this context.

For example, I (Stafford-Walter)⁵ also found a reticence to discuss the dead or mention the names of dead kinspeople to be present among the Wapishana people during my fieldwork in Southern Guyana. It is a difficult thing to perceive at first, because the absence of a particular kind of conversation is more difficult to notice than the presence of discussion. Eventually, however, I realized that there were only a handful of times Auntie Doley, my Wapishana host mother, spoke to me about her parents, who had passed away, or her siblings, who lived outside the village. She talked about her living children more often, even though they were also living away from the village, but she only told me the story of her two deceased children once. While Etta, my host sister, was the first to tell me her two eldest siblings had passed away early on in my fieldwork, and Uncle Beltram, my host father, had shared some details a few times when he was “high,”⁶ this was the first and only time I ever heard Auntie Doley speak about them. The following is an excerpt from my fieldnotes:

We were all sharing a meal of fried fish and *farine* along with the first batch of homemade pineapple wine that I had made with Auntie Doley’s guidance. After dinner, all three of us were feeling the effects of the tropical

4. Nevertheless, “during [Bororo] celebrations all dead people are remembered by their living relatives” (Caiuby Novaes, 2006: 178).

5. Throughout this coauthored article we at times write in first person singular, given the interweaving of specific ethnographic materials and personal lived experiences. We bracket the surname of the relevant coauthor in order to clarify who the “I” refers to at specific points in the text.

6. “High” is the term used in Guyana to indicate mild intoxication from the consumption of alcohol. It has a similar meaning to the term “tipsy.” “Drunk,” on the other hand, indicates a serious level of intoxication.

wine, and Uncle began telling me the heartbreaking story of their eldest daughter. Auntie Doley interjected, explaining that they had just returned from the farm one day and they were preparing to cook for her in-laws. She sent Andronnie, their first daughter, out to fetch water. She said, “How stupid am I to send such a small girl to fetch water?” Auntie Doley was so occupied with getting everything ready she forgot about Andronnie. It was guava season, so she absentmindedly assumed her little daughter had just gone to eat guava. Leo, the baby at the time, wasn't yet two. He kept repeating “Andronnie fell, Andronnie fell.” But they didn't pay him any attention because he was so small. Auntie Doley said gravely, “This is why it's important to listen to young children.” A little while later, when she actually thought about how long it had been since she saw Andronnie, she ran out to the pond⁷ and saw the girl's toy floating there. This was during the rainy season, so the water was high. Uncle had to dive three times before he found her body. It was so deep he almost couldn't hold his breath long enough to pull her up. Auntie Doley said her mother was deeply vexed with her after the girl died. In fact, she was so sad about losing her granddaughter that she died shortly afterwards. The guilt and loss Auntie Doley felt over this was palpable and etched on her face.

7. This is the word used in the village to refer to a household well.

The fact that Auntie only spoke about her dead children once is a reflection of the approach to grieving the death of a loved one that involves a reluctance to speak about them or utter their name, producing silence. Perpetually grieving a loved one puts the living at risk, as illustrated by the death of Auntie Doley's mother, who died after suffering deep grief over the loss of her granddaughter.

We have many examples in the literature that reflect a similar danger as the one Pete describes of a lingering *samenchi* calling out to its living kin. Butt Colson also notes this danger in an Indigenous Guyanese context, explaining that ghosts of a dead family member can actually cause someone to die as the ghost attracts their living kin to him or her (2001: 225). There are other ethnographic examples of similar concepts and practices around grieving and vulnerability throughout lowland South America. Conklin describes the *jima*, one way a dead person's spirit can appear on earth amongst the Wari' of Brazil, who wait in dark places hoping to pounce on a solitary passerby. She explains:

Wari' fears of *jima* are strongest in the first days and weeks after a death for this is a liminal period during which neither dead person's spirit nor the bereaved family has adjusted to the new state of affairs. The dead person and the loss of the dead person are constantly on the minds of the living, while in the underwater realm of the ancestors, the newly dead person's spirit is said to be homesick for the people and places it knows. (2001: 162)

Taylor describes something very similar amongst the Achuar in Ecuador, stating, “When a person dies or is killed, his image remains in the vicinity to harass the living[...] The dead are acutely lonely and they are sightless and perpetually hungry; hence their reluctance to part with the living” (1993: 662). There are many practices in place amongst lowland Amazonian communities to protect living persons from the ghosts of the recently deceased, particularly close kin, a point to which we will again return below, in relation to Panará mourning practices.

In “Helpless,” Pete illustrates how the Yine people navigate this well-known danger and vulnerability associated with grief. He describes two reciprocal social emotions that members of the community feel towards one another as the key defining aspects of mourning. Here, we first examine again the concept of *wamonuwala*, which can be translated to mean “to grieve, to be sad, to suffer, to be cute, to be cuddly” or to be “helpless,” alone, without kinspeople. As kinspeople are thought of as “a multiplicity of identical elements” (2000: 49), to lose a close kinsperson is to lose one of one's “multiple other selves,” to be rendered alone in this social world. But to be alone is the antithesis of being a human, which in this context means one of many, as personhood is made and remade through kinship relationships. So, unsurprisingly, there is a particular way in which other kin and members of the community respond to this grieving, to this helplessness. This is called *getwamonuta*, or “to see the grief, sadness, suffering, cuteness, cuddliness of another” (ibid.: 47). In practice, Pete describes this as, “an intensification of the general sociability that characterises Piro village life” (2000: 50-51). He describes this socially reciprocal emotion in action, stating,

Here the ‘compassion’ of other living kinspeople, and their ‘good thinking’ leads them to intensify their solicitude for the mourning adults, searching them out, keeping them company, and insistently and steadily replacing the presence of the dead *samenchi* in the experience of the mourning adults with the presence of themselves (2000: 55).

The social experience of living in this community means that when someone is grieving, when someone is alone, their kin and community will respond with *getwamonuta* – by “compassionating” to you, drawing you back into the social space, and bringing you back to the vibrant, multiple world of the living (2000: 49).

The loneliness of grief

Unlike Yine people, who actively search out grieving people, keeping them company and in that way gradually drawing them away from the longing for their dead kinsperson to redirect their attention and care towards their living kin, Panará people in central Brazil leave those in mourning to sit quietly and alone. Whilst they are cared for by bringing them food, or watching over them from afar, those in mourning are not expected to engage in sociable conversation, sit together with others, or involve themselves in the productive work of preparing food and tending to their gardens.

After my mother died, it took me a long time to return to what I (Ewart) thought of as “doing fieldwork.” Not that I did not return to the field (I did, some three months or so after she had passed), but while I was present in the Panará village of Nansepotiti in central Brazil, my thoughts and mind were elsewhere, and as I remark in my book,

[...] my inclination to lie in my hammock for hours on end and to drastically reduce social interactions corresponded very closely to what Panará people expect and do when hit by the death of someone close to them. Thus they left me to be quiet during this time, while still keeping a watchful eye over me. (Ewart, 2013: 7)

It is a truism to say that people everywhere know about death and grief, but as it happens, Panará people in the late 1990s really knew about death and grief in profound and traumatic ways, having lived through the massive loss of kinspeople and loved ones during the devastating years of “contact” in the early 1970s. It was against this backdrop that my Panará family knew very well why I was sitting quietly, and perhaps even why I had chosen to travel so far from my home to live in Sokriti and Suakje’s house in Nansepotiti. Even as it is a truism to say that people everywhere know death and grief, so, too, is it true that nobody can pretend to fully understand grief, much less the grief of another, let alone grasp death and dying. Nevertheless, sensibility, empathy, and a concerted commitment to see the world through the eyes of others characterize ethnography, a trait evident in so much of Pete’s work. Marcio Goldman (acknowledging Tânia Stolze Lima) suggests, “[I]n this sense, a fundamental characteristic of anthropology would be the study of human experiences based on a personal experience” (2006: 167).

Taking my cue from Goldman’s observation, in the following, I describe some instances of mourning and grief among Panará people in the late 1990s by reflecting both on the attention my own grief at the death of my mother received, as well as the ways Panará people lived their grief and expressed their mourning. In doing so, I seek to resist the anthropological compulsion to explain precisely that—what it is to lose a loved one—which arguably by its nature defies explanation. In what follows, therefore, I do not claim to explain Panará attitudes to mortality, and nor do I intend to analytically dissect Panará expressions of grief and mourning. Perhaps what is at stake is an attempt at approximation that relies on personal experience, observations, and reflections arising from time spent in the field at a particular time in my own life.

In the mid to late 1990s, many a conversation with Panará elders would involve their listing names of individuals who had died during the years of contact in the early 1970s. It sometimes

seemed to me that they listed the names of the dead with a village in mind, going round the circle of the residential houses, listing members of each house in turn. Others would list their relatives, sometimes naming them, sometimes naming their relationship, and in doing so bring into the present the names of all the kinspeople they had lost, or indeed in the naming of dead clan members repopulating the clans, and, therefore, the spaces in the village circle. In this way, a fully populated circular village, where people are visible and socially available to one another, is perhaps another version of what Pete describes as the intrinsically multiple condition that is humanity (Gow, 2000: 48). The visual and social availability of people in a Panará village also resonates strongly with Pete's second aspect of what it is to be human for Yine people, namely, that humanity lies in the eye of the beholder. Yine *nshinikanchi*, which, as we have seen above, can be translated broadly as "memory, love, thought, thinking," is consequently profoundly intersubjective and refers not simply to an interior state of mind, but rather to an exterior visible surface of the person: "[...] *nshinikanchi* is both the organ of sociality/kinship and the surface of a person, or rather, that surface as it is constituted in the mutual visual experience of related persons" (ibid.: 51).

For Panará people, too, "mutual visual experience" is an important aspect of living beautifully among fellow humans, and its absence during periods of mourning is very noticeable. As part of everyday life, women in particular often gather together, having painted themselves with red urucum, prior to heading out to work in their gardens. In the early evening, similarly small groups of women and children can sometimes be seen strolling round the residential houses, an activity described as "to go looking" (*sampun ahê*). By contrast, people in mourning will avoid the public places they might normally frequent, such as the village center or the communal bathing spots, choosing instead to bathe at quiet places at some distance from the main village bathing sites. Rather than sitting in the plaza to the front of their houses in the late afternoon, kinspeople in mourning remain quietly inside their house or may sit close to the walls, often outside the rear entrance of their home. While rarely visible to others, those in mourning can be heard, often many weeks after a death has occurred, when they intermittently wail from inside or behind their houses. Similarly, they refrain from going out to their gardens or engaging in other sociable productive work such as preparing food or going fishing. Remaining inside the house during the day is very unusual for Panará people other than during periods of mourning or illness, and even in the evening, people tend to retire inside together, preferring not to be alone in the house, much less inside a dark house. It is not unusual for a bright fire or candles to be lit, or indeed latterly to switch on an electric light in the empty house as night falls and prior to entering the house.

As Pete shows for Yine people, the "self" (*samenchi*) separated from the body at death continues to be bound to the living by "memory, love, thought and thinking" (*nshinikanchi*), and as such seeks out the intersubjective relations that constitute real human beings. Yet such relations are now delusional, as death renders identity of selves impossible. A part of the self of the living has been lost through the death of their kinsperson, and to follow the links of memory, love, and care, far from producing human sociality, now potentially results in the living kinsperson themselves falling ill and dying. For it is delusional to try to maintain intersubjective relations of kinship with the dead.⁸

As Pete beautifully illustrates for Yine people, to be kin to one another is to be surrounded by and connected to "a multiplicity of identical entities" (2000: 49). Kinship is for the living, and as Pete showed us that, for Yine people at least, kinship is memory, so, too, do these memories need to be disrupted at the point where the dead ceases to be a kinsperson and instead becomes a deceased person.

Following Beth Conklin (2001) and Aparecida Vilaça's (2000) discussions of Wari' people, this transition is not a given, "natural" process, but rather demands the emotionally and perhaps

8. While for Yine people as well as for Panará people, the idea of maintaining social relations with the dead was frightening and dangerous in equal measure, it is worth noting that at least for some Amerindian communities, social links (for example through transmission of names or status) to preceding generations are very much part of the constitution of living persons (e.g., Hugh-Jones, 1979; Guerreiro, 2015).

physically taxing work of the living. This is precisely the work of affecting a transformation in the living, from seeing the deceased as a kinsperson imbued with and generative of all the memories of love and care that characterize ties of kinship to seeing them become nothing more (nor less) than a corpse, devoid of the human-person characteristics that would render them part of the world of living kin. This work of getting the living to accept the dead as truly dead is compassionate work, another form of love and care for the living. As Pete suggests in his chapter, this is compassion for people who have been rendered “helpless” by virtue of the loss of their kinsperson. It is the same compassion, he argues, that Yine people bring to small babies, not because they have lost their kinspeople, but because they have not yet created enough memories of love and care, and hence have not yet become kin to others.

Death narratives

In “Helpless” Pete describes how, following the deaths in his absence of two very close friends (his *compadre* Artemio Fasabi and his brother-in-law Pablo), he was bewildered to find that, when he visited after many years of enforced absence due to the civil war in Peru, residents in Santa Clara felt the need to take him aside not just to tell him of the deaths of his two close friends, but also to describe in great detail the circumstances of their deaths. Coming from his Scottish background, Pete was puzzled by this, given that, in his culture, death is cloaked in the many euphemisms of “passing away” and “being at peace now.” Perhaps the only time when the manner of a person’s death is invoked is when they are said to have “died peacefully in their sleep.” Not so among Yine people in Santa Clara in the 1990s.

Pete explains this emphasis on what he terms “death throe narratives” as arising from a need to convince a loved one that their friend or kinsperson has truly died, and thereby hopefully to hedge against the danger of a living person becoming consumed by the desire to join their loved one who might be longing for them. Perhaps the death throe narratives persuade the listener that a loved one is truly dead, and that they must leave them to be truly dead in order for themselves to remain truly living. Perhaps gravestones and carefully crafted “Orders of Service” with their account of the funeral program and the images of the deceased do that same work—persuading the living that the dead are dead, and that we must continue to keep on living, even as we hold the dead in our thoughts and memories.

Not unlike Yine people, Panará people also describe the deaths of individuals in considerable detail, including the nature of any illness and details of the deceased’s final days and hours. However, and perhaps unlike Pete’s experience with Yine people, Panará “death throe narratives” often follow a very similar path at the end. Finally, a person becomes thinner and thinner, weaker and weaker, and eventually dies. With few exceptions, Panará people, at the time of my fieldwork in the late 1990s and early 2000s, would attribute this form of extreme weight loss, illness, and death to the work of those with malevolent spiritual powers (*sonpâri*). While such narratives did not stand out to me in quite the ways that Pete describes, I found people’s, and particularly children’s, repeated curiosity about death and grief at odds with the kinds of conventions around death that I was more familiar with. “Are you crying?” a child asked me with genuine curiosity on the occasion of a very young child’s funeral. With me being neither a kinsperson nor affinally related to the deceased, it seemed genuinely puzzling to the child that I should be manifesting excessive sadness at this death. What was evident to the child was that no memories, or mutually constitutive social relations, bound myself and the deceased, and there was therefore, from their perspective, literally no reason for me to weep. As I would walk down to the river in the evening, but also during the day, for weeks after returning to Nansepotiti, small children would address me: “*Ha jyty’ ka napie?*” “Is your mother dead?” Painful though it seemed to me at the time, I would answer, “*Paa, jyty,*” “Yes, she is dead.” Adults would often add a further question: “*Pian he ti pini?*” “What killed

her?” As described by Anne-Christine Taylor in relation to Shuar mortuary practices (1996), for Panará people, too, every death has a cause, and every dead person has been killed by something or someone, a fact that may also play a part in Yine people’s emphasis on “death throo narratives.”

Why did those children insist on asking me whether my mother had died? In a village in which gossip could travel at lightning speed, precisely carried by the swift legs of those small children, why did they repeatedly need to seek my answer to their question? Even today, I remain puzzled by this, and I draw here on what I know about Panará lifeways to offer some possibly plausible answers.

1) Maybe they were puzzled at the fact that I had not altered my appearance at all; in the wake of a death of one so close to me, I should ordinarily have certainly shaved all my hair, and also given away all belongings that might remind me of my mother. Could it be that my mother had really died, when I apparently still looked the same and apparently still owned all the same material goods?

2) Did the children seek my confirmation of my mother’s death as it was simply implausible to them that I should a) be so far from my other close kin in the light of such a death, and b) be evidently frequenting public and visible spaces, such as the communal bathing places?

3) Or were they really confirming that a “*hipe*” like me had actually had a mother in the first place? Could the question “Did your mother die?” really be about asking, “Do you, too, have kinspeople who live and die?”

In some societies, the dead should remain present in the form of loving memories, and visually available through photographs, video footage, and material markers such as gravestones. The future that might have been of one whose life is cut short is wept over as much, or more, than the long life of an elder. The dead are by choice also talked about among close friends and family. Here, grieving may involve remembering the deceased every day, even as the day inevitably arrives where they have not been thought about all day. Here, then, what is remembered is the distinctive individuality of the deceased person, recalled through specific events and their particular ways of being.

As discussed previously, in many parts of Indigenous Amazonia, after a death has occurred, people go to considerable lengths to “forget” the deceased. Belongings are destroyed or buried with the corpse, photos ripped up, and names no longer uttered. So too, among Panará people. For example, when, many months after the death of a small baby, fragments of the baby’s carrying sling were found in a garden, these were carefully burned so as not to leave any visible trace of that baby’s former presence. Panará graves, too, do not bear longterm visible testimony to the deceased. Most Panará people are buried behind their natal clan house, and the mound of earth piled over the grave usually washes away in the course of just a few rainy seasons. Following a death, close kinspeople, having cut their hair short, withdraw from sociality by remaining out of sight, quietly in their residential house, avoiding interactions with others, and bathing away from their usual bathing spots. Preferentially, they might leave the village, which is replete with the memories of the deceased, their presence seen and felt through the space in which they walked, worked, talked, and laughed with others. In the past, people might temporarily relocate to another village, or go trekking in the forest for a period of time, while more recently those in mourning might seek to spend time in a nearby town.

This “forgetting” is particularly intensive in the immediate aftermath of a death, but it seemed to me that, over time, memories of the dead could once more be allowed to resurface. For example, while the names and images of the recently deceased were stringently avoided, Panará people actively asked to be shown photographs of deceased kinspeople from the 1970s. Thus, while people do their best to “erase” the presence of the person in the immediate aftermath of their death, over time, names of dead people come to be mentioned again, but now

always with a postnominal, *pinkyâ*, that marks the name as belonging to a deceased person. In that sense, the dead over time reemerge in the form of names, either because the name of the dead person is borne by a living person, or by referring to “XX *pinkyâ*” (the deceased XX). The passage of time is important here, and while initially names of the dead are not uttered at all, later they are spoken in a very quiet voice always accompanied by the aforementioned postnominal.

After a death, the kinsperson remains present in the form of memories of love and care, powerfully expressed in the wailing of the bereaved that is audible to all in the village even as the person wailing remains largely out of sight inside the house or just outside the back.¹⁰ The very memories that constituted kinship in life, in death pose a danger to the living. To remember and think longingly of a dead kinsperson is to run the risk of heeding the call of the dead, and hence to fall ill and potentially die oneself. Sometimes, the dead appear to the living in their dreams, a sign that they are walking nearby and missing their kinspeople. One young Panará man, having discussed my mother’s death and the fact that she might be calling to me in my dreams, recounted how he had once dreamt of his grandmother, who had come to him and wanted to take him with her. According to the old woman, his mother and father were not looking after him, nor was his wife. “Come with me, there will be a wife up there for you to marry,”¹¹ but he refused, and she went away. Had he accepted, he would have become very ill and then died.

The compassionate acts and careful attention to not remembering the dead are in this sense crucial to the production and maintenance of a lived world populated by the living, producing and eating proper food and sharing this generously with their living kinspeople. But this process of forgetting the dead is hard, and the desire to keep the loved one close is strong. Witness the heartbreaking loneliness of the mother of a very recently deceased baby, lighting a small fire by the side of the grave to keep her baby warm the first nights after her burial. The living yearn for the presence of the deceased, but so, too, do the spirits of the deceased desire the company of their former kin.

Craving the company of the living, spirits linger around the edges of the village, eating bad things, the discarded remains of honey, the scrag ends of pumpkins that are thrown out in the rubbish area behind the residential houses. Here, they may try to entice people away to join them, resulting in their illness and ultimately death. This longing on the part of the dead souls to remain close to their living kinspeople is a widespread phenomenon among Amerindian populations,¹² captured, for example, in Antonio Guerreiro’s ethnography of Kalapalo mortuary practices:

The soul of the dead feels a strong desire to remain close to its relatives, and this feeling may strengthen it and enable it to be seen or heard by a living person. If this happens, it is a sign that the spirit of the deceased has succeeded in transforming the living person into something similar to the soul of the dead, that is, a dead person. (Guerreiro, 2015: 254; *my translation*)

We are reminded here of the fact that, evidently, the dead desire to be remembered. And while this may be a feature of relations to death that is important in many contexts, memory comes with perils for many Amazonian Indigenous people. “To forget” in Panará is the same term as “to cause to disappear” (*ti ho pintori*), while the term “to remember” is the same as “to hear, understand, know” (*mpari*). To think longingly of a dead kinsperson is to run the risk of succumbing to the allure of the dead—the dead are calling, and they wish to be seen and heard.

According to Vanessa Lea (2012: 168-70), Mëbêngôkre dead kinspeople return to the village during naming rituals, when they occupy the circle of residential houses, left empty by the living for this purpose. While Panará people, to my knowledge, do not say that the dead return to the village during rituals, they do experience rituals as moments of intensified

10. For an interesting account of mortuary practices and links between wailing and memory among Warao people, see Allard (2020).

11. This narrative was preceded by the same young man asking me whether white people know that dead people live up in the sky. Answering his own question, almost, he followed this by saying, “‘Crente’ (Evangelicals) know this, don’t they?”

12. See, e.g., Guerreiro (2015), Lea (2012), Cohn (2010) among many others.

sadness. This is because during rituals they are reminded forcefully and intensively of those who went before, who sang and danced, but also who taught the songs and dances to those of today. In this way, too, rituals disrupt the desirable quiet of everyday life among kinspeople,¹³ by reintroducing the memories and the longing felt for deceased loved ones.

Vinciane Despret suggests that, in many contexts, remembering takes on a deliberately material dimension. "As is well known, remembering is not a simple act of memory. It is a creative act involving fabulation, captioning, and especially fabrication. [...] In this regard, *remember* in English allows for a nice metaplasm, *re-member*, as in recompose" (2021: 47). Perhaps it is fair to say that the problem for Panará people is not so much to remember, as in recompose or fabricate, but rather the opposite: that the assemblage of memories accrued over the years, during which loved ones have been mutually socially (and, therefore, visually) available to one another, needs now to be disassembled, metaphorically dismembered, such that the delusional image of the kinsperson who is no more may fully disappear.

What it means to ask something of other people in Apiao

The following section is devoted to illustrating two snippets of social life in the small island of Apiao, Chiloé (Chile), delving into the ethnographic fact that often relationships on the island are articulated around requests people make of one another. Verbal requests materialize the constant need that people have of each other, and define a community of alike people, who alternatively ask and respond to the pleas of others, because such is the nature of social life in this island. The local request to "accompany" someone to do something/perform an action comes with the expectation of a positive response. This is because it presupposes a bundle of values that corresponds with a frame of mind similar to that evoked by the concept of *nshinikanchi* as elaborated on by Pete Gow. Requests that are honored are the perception and recognition of the other's vulnerability and helplessness, and a form of providing compassion and consolation through offering a helping hand, for ritual as well as mundane circumstances. The corollary is that there are actions that only make sense when performed collectively, or, at least, in someone's company; these actions represent the alternation of suffering/consoling that articulates Apiao's social life and binds its inhabitants to one another.

February 11th. It's a hot summer day in Apiao, and its inhabitants work tirelessly to collect *luga* and other types of seaweed, a lucrative seasonal activity that occupies people for four to five months. The extracting activity enables them to earn good cash to buy products and items needed for the winter, when it is more difficult to work for money in this isolated, rural setting. My (Bacchiddu's) host family gets up at around 5am to work at the beach for as many hours as possible, taking advantage of the tide, which, depending on the moon cycles, allows access to a wider portion of coast, and therefore seaweed collection is particularly convenient. After treating it (drying it and mixing it with sand), they sell it, earning a certain amount per kilo; an attractive occupation for all the islanders, just minutes from their homes.

Each family member works for hours, getting wet in the cold sea water, without any food or drink—what matters is getting as much *luga* as possible. But that day was special: it was the day of Apiao's *fiesta*, celebrated every year on this day. As the island's *mayordomo*, Don Francisco was in charge of the church; he had to make sure everything was in order for the arrival of the priest from the nearby town and the celebration of the Catholic mass, an annual event. One of his responsibilities was ringing the church's bell, producing the characteristic sound that announces the imminent mass, a sound that all islanders recognize. The bell tower is quite high, with several flights of stairs and no railings. It is difficult as well as dangerous to go up and firmly ring the bell according to a specific rhythm. Don Francisco asked his grandchild Claudio, ten years old, to help him in the task: he was going to ring the bell, but he needed someone light, agile, and fast to accompany him up the tower

and give him instructions throughout the process about when it was time to hold and pull the bell's chord. "*Te animas?*" ("Would you have the guts?") he asked the young boy, who enthusiastically agreed. Claudio had never been up the church's tower, nor had he ever been close to the bell. He was a bit scared, but the invitation was coming from his grandfather who had raised him, and could not be refused. After having worked at the beach for hours, exhausted and hungry, they went to the church to attend the mass, the procession, and the *fiesta*. Everybody heard the bells as Claudio's face was popping out of the small aperture of the bell tower, checking the situation below in the church esplanade, ready to give instructions to his grandfather.

March. Elderly "Auntie" Julia decided to organize a one-day praying event in honor of her late husband, who had died several years before. Praying events—also called *novenas*, or *noches de rezo* (praying nights)—are quite common on the island; they are celebrated in private households and can be organized for deceased family members, or for the local miraculous saint. These events can last one, three, or nine days and always involve a host who attends to the guests whose participation she or he has requested. Guests take part in the praying to honor the host's request and are compensated for their participation with plenty of drinks and cooked food to eat and to take away. The organizer must summon several personnel, recruited amongst neighbors or other locals, each for a specific task.

Large-scale *novenas* require up to twenty people to cover all the necessary chores. "Auntie" Julia's praying event was a simpler, shorter event that she chose to celebrate with a small group of individuals. This was unlike most *novenas*, which are open to anyone who is willing to attend them, and usually the presence of many attendants indicates a successful *novena*. Together with one prayer specialist, a few cooks, and a few men to butcher the pigs whose meat was going to be used to prepare the meal, two more specialists were needed. These were a woman able to bake the ritual bread offered as a gift to take away, and another woman capable of cooking a demanding dish called *mazamorra*, a salty porridge offered only on ritual occasions. Julia personally visited each person who took part in the praying event, asking them for help in a ritual formula, a local tradition called *suplicar*, to plead. Such a request is familiar to the members of this little community, and it is usually taken quite seriously.

Suplicar is considered a sacred action with cosmological implications: the person who pleads does so in her own name, but her action points to a higher good, since *novenas* are organized either for the souls of the dead or for the local miraculous saint. Both the dead and the miraculous saint are considered extremely powerful and dangerous. This is why the living need to regularly "remember" them in a special, ritual expression of the "active memory" that keeps kin relations alive (Bacchiddu, 2011, 2012, 2017). The living, however, must ritually take care of the dead not so much to remember them as to appease them, and in order to protect themselves from their wrath, which they would display if neglected by the living.

This ritual expression—the *novena*—implies great expense on the part of the organizer, who commits to properly attending to the numerous individuals who convene in the name of the host, but also in the name of the deceased family member or the saint. Failing to participate would flag anti-social behavior, lack of respect, and even arrogance; it would be disrespectful towards the fellow islander and both the dead and the saint. This is why it would be extremely offensive to deny the request, always uttered ritually and justified with the phrase "I come with a tremendous pain." The "pain" is figurative, and is mentioned to alert the interlocutors that they are seriously needed. The implication is that whoever organizes the praying event needs help to deal with something crucially important, serious, and painful. The importance of such occurrences is illustrated by the fact that they always involve a considerable expense; Julia's praying ritual, which was quite small scale, required butchering two pigs and nine

chickens, plus various vegetables produced on the family's land, abundant store-bought soft and alcoholic drinks, and other snacks to offer the guests throughout the event, together with cash for the praying specialist.

I (Bacchiddu) was present when Julia asked my landlady to cook the *mazamorra*; she unexpectedly happened to be around, having moved away from the island a few months before. “*Te trajo Dios!*” (“God brought you!”), said Julia to her former neighbor with a palpable emotional state that fluctuated between excitement and anxiety, waiting for an affirmative reply. Given the importance of the request, my landlady decided to postpone her return to her new home in order to honor it and cook the ritual porridge, aware that she was one of the few women on the island able to prepare the ritual dish.

The *suplica* that those who organize a *novena* pronounce, generally addressing the cohort of bystanders, is always articulated with a fixed formula that includes the expression “*Ojalá nos acompañaran a rezar!*” (“Hopefully you’ll accompany us to pray!”). To this formula of invitation—which is more a pleading—corresponds, after the event (or after the sequence of events, in case of multi-day events), an appropriate expression of gratitude mirroring the previous one: “*Muchas gracias onde nos acompañaron a rezar*” (“Many thanks for having accompanied us to pray”).

The focus of the collective action of praying, an action that only makes sense if done collectively, simultaneously, and with people gathered in the same place, is evident in one more detail. Just before each praying ritual starts, the host addresses the assembled guests with a formal greeting and the rhetorical question “Have you come to accompany us to pray?” (“*Vinieron a acompañarnos a rezar?*”). This sequence is repeated twice, once addressed to the women and once to the men. This question is rhetorical, for it is addressed to a group of people who have already responded to the plea, having walked in some cases for hours to attend the event, and who won’t leave until the ritual is over several hours later, no matter the distance or the weather. The action of “accompanying to pray” is so crucial that even young children are sometimes asked to interrupt whatever game they are playing and urged to take part in the prayers using those same words.

The prayer specialist recited three rosaries, singing several religious songs in between them. After each rosary, the three candles that were lit on the small table turned into an altar were blown out and replaced with new ones. A family member circulated among the guests, offering snacks and drinks, and people relaxed briefly; then another rosary started. When these were completed, a long list of litanies and other prayers were recited specifically for the deceased family members, who were mentioned according to a specific order—Julia’s late husband first, and then several of their children, who mostly had died young. When the prayers were finished, the hosts set the table and served abundant food and drinks to all guests; however, before anyone started consuming the fragrant food, the table had to be blessed by the prayer specialist. This routine is repeated in every *rezo/novena*. The dinner is characteristically long and relaxed. After the food is eaten, each guest is given gifts to take away: bread, smoked meat, and abundant porridge.

Only after all the food is distributed does the gratitude ritual take place. The host, visibly emotional, brings herself close to the ritual specialists (starting with the one praying) and discreetly asks them, whispering in their ear, what is the cost of their work. The prayer specialist discreetly but perceivably answers that “It’s just [according to] your wish” (“*Su voluntad nomás*”), after which the host, usually crying, hands them an envelope with some money in it, accompanied by a fixed thank-you formula, pronounced among the tears while holding the interlocutor’s hand. This same gesture of gratitude (but without the monetary recompense, which is limited to the prayer specialists and the musicians) is repeated to every single person who helped during the event. If the guests are not too many, one or more family

members personally thank them in the same way, one by one. This gesture calls for a further acknowledging formula on the part of each guest.

In this specific case, Julia significantly addressed prayer specialist Don José with the vocative term *ahijado* (godchild), publicly reminding him that, besides the commitment that he had been called upon for that evening, there was a much older connection between them, since she had baptized him. Julia's mention of a previous commitment between them (godparents are meant to take special care of their godchildren, and vice versa) strengthened the importance of the occasion that had summoned the man that evening. He had responded affirmatively as prayer specialist, offering his service as an expert; as a fellow islander, generously devoting an entire evening to the bereaved lady; and as a godchild, honoring an old bond. Don José replied appropriately, addressing her in return as *madrina*, godmother, thereby confirming and reiterating the relation.

This exchange underlines the alliance between an individual who asks and one who is asked that is at the root of the praying ritual, because each person involved in it is either someone who asks, or someone who is asked. Those who ask do so because they have “a tremendous pain” to heal, and this pain can only be healed with the “accompaniment” of fellow human beings willing to collectively be present and, through their presence, make the gathering and the actions behind it meaningful.

These two episodes allow me to reflect on what it means to ask something of other people in Apiao, and why asking others “to accompany” one is a crucial action, required to transform mundane occurrences into meaningful action. Requests remind people that, in order to accomplish tasks or undertake commitments, other people are needed, and that individuals are helpless if alone. This is true for simple, menial tasks (like Don Francisco needing little Claudio to climb the bell tower on the feast day) or complex and articulated responsibilities, like organizing a *novena*.

Prayers cannot be uttered in silence, individually, for they would never count. In order to be meaningful, prayers have to be publicly formulated, in a collective situation, with the appropriate ritual formulas, inserted in a ritual context according to an ordered sequence, and within a context of hospitality (cf. Bacchiddu, 2019), or one that implies expenses. This is the “proper” way to appease the powerful others who are remembered in the ritual. Likewise, a prayer specialist cannot pray for his own dead—he has to pay another to do so in a collective situation, where he feeds a group that has come to “accompany” him (cf. Harris, 2006: 55 ff, on the importance of payment for ensuring the efficacy of prayers). In Apiao, like for the Yine, “the cycling of helplessness, compassion and consolation [...] makes up everyday sociability” (Gow, 2000: 58).

The compassion that Pete recognized as being the motor of meaningful action among the Yine is, for Apiao people, the willingness to respond to a plea that is usually a dramatic request, often originating in “pain.” It is the recognition of a familiar need, one that every single individual experiences in their lifetime. It is an urgent need that can only be resolved through the availability of the community, which by definition is mutual. Accompanying a fellow human being is, then, a form of “compassionating,” as pointed out by Courtney in her section above, as well as a practice expressing a relationship between people.

Pete's work “Helpless” elaborates on the term and concept *nshinikanchi*, illustrating its meaning as it unraveled intersubjectively among the Yine as he lived among them: “Memory, thought, love, thinking” (2000: 51), but also “respect” (ibid.: 52), as in “careful mutual attention” that shapes everyday life, where ideally everyone is attentive to every other individual's needs. *Nshinikanchi* alleviates “that little bit of suffering” (ibid.: 51) that is part and parcel of the everyday, such as being hungry and having someone offer food. Pete also elaborates on the absence or lack of *nshinikanchi*, which marks “thoughtless, forgetful” people and, ulti-

mately, those who do not care about their fellow humans' needs—a constant possibility, in Apiao like in the Bajo Urubamba.

Apiao people's intersubjective, mutual experience of each other that ultimately "holds people together, and leads them to feed each other" (ibid.: 54) is expressed in requests people make of each other. When a grandfather asks something of his grandchild, he is doing much more than just asking for a small favor: he is reminding the boy of their mutual bond, and he is looking forward to having "memory, thought, love, respect..." materialized with an affirmative answer followed by a concrete gesture. He is also invoking the bond that they have developed over the years they have been living together, eating together, engaging in activities together, keeping each other company. In a sense, he is constituting himself as a grandparent and reciprocally actively constituting the boy as his grandchild (cf. Gow, 2022: 20).

When an elderly lady asks her neighbor for her active participation in an important ritual, she is invoking her compassion, confessing a "pain" that needs to be taken care of, but she is also declaring their mutual belonging to a circle of fellow islanders who happen to live close and who are there for each other when circumstances require it. In confessing the pain that motivates the request, the lady was showing her vulnerability, but she was also confident that her plea was going to be welcomed—more so because her request was motivated by an act of memory in honor of a deceased (and therefore powerful) member of the community, her late husband.

Requests are ways people have to remind others of their mutual belonging to a community. Those who ask demand attention and dedication, knowing that, in this small and relatively isolated community, soon it will be their turn to be asked, soon it will be their turn in alleviating someone's helplessness.

Can the dead really ever be forgot?

In this paper, it has been our aim to address the themes from "Helpless" in relation to specific instances of death and grief, as observed and experienced in the three locations in which we have conducted long-term fieldwork. What does it mean to be grieving, and what does it imply both for the individuals and for the community? The answers that we have gathered in our respective fields, and the practices that we have described, show how the connections between the living and the dead are always a sensitive issue, not only because they stir painful, emotional sentiments, but also because dealing with the dead is extremely dangerous to the living. Death demands the unmaking of ties of kinship constituted through memories of love and care, the very opposite of how the living constitute themselves as kinspeople, that is, as people who ask things of one another. At various points in our discussion of death, grief, and mourning, we have also highlighted the limits of what can be known (and asked) through anthropological engagement with others.

Throughout, we have been inspired to think with Pete's observation that memory, love, and care are what constitutes kinship through acts involving compassion and mutual social availability. The compassionate acts of the living towards those who are "helpless," whether through bereavement or being not-yet-kin, are key to the production of a tranquil everyday where nothing much happens. By the same token, to live as one amongst one's multiples is a delicate matter, for the possibility of becoming "other," whether by illness, death, or some other form of capture, is ever present.

While we have focused this article mostly on postmortem practices and emotional states involving the unmaking of ties to deceased kinspeople, it is worth noting how those ties first come to be formed. When Panará people sit with small babies, they often interact with them by making sudden noises in an effort to elicit a response from the infant. It is by acknowledging the other that first steps are taken in building the intersubjective relations that will come to

constitute memories of love and care. Dead people, for many Amerindian communities, pose a problem because they demand to be remembered, and therefore to maintain what are now delusional relations with the living. In order to overcome these delusions, social relations, memories, and love need to be severed. Meanwhile, babies pose the opposite problem, so to speak, in that social relations, memories, and love, some of the affective preconditions for social life, are yet to be built in order to transform the helpless infant into a real kinsperson.

Bringing the focus back to the dead, notwithstanding their desire to remain close, death robs them of their ability to remain socially available to their kin, and by that token robs kin of the possibility of asking things of their now deceased fellow humans. As we have tried to show, the tight web of mutual dependency and availability that makes life good is precisely what needs to be carefully disentangled at the death of a kinsperson in order for it to be rewoven by the living.

But can the dead really ever be forgotten? And what becomes of the dead once they have been forgotten? In Apiao, what the living do through the regular celebration of *novenas* for recent and long-deceased relatives is not exactly “remember” the dead; rather, they devote much effort to trying to make the dead “forget” about the living. They hope that the often pantagrueic abundance of food, drinks, and prayers shared throughout the *novenas* in the deceased’s name will appease and satisfy the dead. That way, the dead should agree to stay away, to ignore the living, making what had been a painful separation truly and crucially definitive. However, there is always the risk of impending returns, which is why *novenas* need to be regularly repeated to preserve peace and tranquility. This seems to show that a complete separation between the dead and the living is impossible: the mutual implications between individuals who built strong ties through relationships remain after death, and dangerously so.

In the example from Guyana, we see, through the Wapishana’s lived experience, the risks that arise when the living are unable to untangle themselves from their deceased kinspeople. For example, when Auntie Doley’s eldest daughter passed away, the girl’s grandmother was unable to cope with this dangerously powerful grief, and soon after passed away as well. It was only through relying on the affective relationships with the living that Auntie Doley and Uncle Beltram could navigate the danger of missing and longing for their kin.

Meanwhile, in central Brazil, Panará people try to persuade the living to keep their distance from the dead by erasing visual, verbal, and material markers that might evoke the affective ties and interdependencies that characterized relations before death. For Panará people, the desire of the dead to remain close, to be remembered, that could cajole their living kin into joining them is precisely why death and mourning are dangerous. The work that goes into undoing the ties of mutual dependency and social availability between the living and the dead results, among other things, in the visual reemergence of the dead, now not as problematic individual spirits calling to the living to join them, but rather as a generic assembly of those who have gone before, whose ear ornaments can be seen sparkling in the night sky, big stars for women’s ornaments, smaller ones for the men.

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