CHAPTER FIVE

A Personal Reflection on a Saltwater Man and the Cumulative Effects of Loss

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Introduction

Why, as anthropologists, should we be concerned with the study of death, of mourning, or of grief? For many, the answer will be self-evident: death is a human universal, or as Wagner described it, ‘the ultimate dogma’ which, given its inevitability, leads to ‘the most powerful innovative constructs… which achieve their force against this kind of human limitation’ (cited in Fabian 2004[1972], 57). One only has to consider the widespread (and differentiated) human views on the extension of persons beyond death to get the sense of what Wagner refers to here. Death is of considerable significance to how humans conceptualise themselves (whether religiously or ontologically, if I can make that distinction), and intimations of mortality shape the ways in which humans live their lives, approach their deaths, and mourn the deaths of others. Indeed, Fabian argued that the anthropology of death has been constrained since ‘death as an event is the termination of individual behavior… there cannot be an anthropological study of death, but only of behavior toward death as it affects those who survive’ (Fabian 2004[1972], 51).

As death is an essential and integral part of human daily life, most ethnographies concerning Indigenous Australia have made some reference to death, such as how death is conceptualised and how the dead are buried (for example, Elkin 1944; Howitt 1984; Myers 1986). The tragic phenomenon of premature death in Indigenous Australia, which we know is fairly commonplace, has received far less anthropological attention (but see Sutton 2001; Hunter 2003). Despite the obvious sensitivities involved in
discussing death, and the evident disparity between an anthropological approach to, and Indigenous experiences of, death, the experiential consequences of death and regular bereavement should not, in my view, be overlooked or otherwise concealed. Writing this, I am also cognizant of the loss that many anthropologists who work closely with Aboriginal people over the long-term experience, and indeed, this chapter might also be seen as a reflection on my own experience in this regard. But speaking of loss and absence alone fails to capture how such persons also remain ever-present, and the ways they continue to mediate relations among the living:¹ through their transmission of rights in relation to land; through the avoidance of speaking their names; through their nocturnal visitations to the living in dreams,² through the memorialization of events in their lives, the importance attributed to those events, and through the connections made between such past events and contemporary ones (and see Smith, this volume).

This paper is, in part, a personal tribute to a Bardi man who passed away in late 2003, and partly an attempt to explore something of the personal elements of grief through his life and the losses I saw him endure. There are a number of reasons why I have chosen to approach this issue of the effects of cumulative loss in this manner. Firstly, I think that it is difficult to convey the personal consequences of the regularity of death for Aboriginal people without locating this in an individual in some way. I do not intend by this to diminish the broader consequences for communities of interrelated kin; nor to deny that Aboriginal persons per se extend beyond the individual in many

¹ For example, whenever I meet Kimberley Aboriginal people I know in Perth, our discussions always include reference to those who have passed away since last we met.

² See Glaskin (2005, forthcoming) for further discussion of dreams in Bardi society; and see Hollan (1995) for a discussion of the relationship between dreams of the deceased, and grief and mourning.
respects (Glaskin 2006; Keen 2006). However, despite having seen and participated in many collective and ritualized expressions of grief and mourning, the most personal elements of grief have been expressed to me on a one-to-one basis.3

Secondly, the death of the person on whom this paper centres (referred to here as B)4 saddened me very deeply. Compounding this, within six to eight months of his death, his sister, whom I saw fairly regularly during that time as she was coming to Perth for medical treatment of her own, also passed away (in 2004). During the time she was coming to Perth for treatment, one of the things that drew us closer together was the shared loss of her brother.5 Aspects of this shared loss were sometimes articulated in words; at other times in the contextual silences that lay between those things we discussed overtly; and always made the more poignant because we both knew that it was not certain that she would recover, and that the distance between her life and his death was not so great. His death, followed quickly by hers, raised the issue of the cumulative effects of loss among Bardi and Jawi people whom I knew well in a particular way.

Thirdly, B’s communicative skills, the readiness with which he translated experience into words, and his acute capacity to identify and articulate the finer nuances of everyday inequities that Aboriginal people experience, conveyed on his own and on

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3 Cf. Myers (1979, 347) who, writing of Pintupi Aborigines amongst whom he worked, wrote that he ‘found it very difficult to elicit private or individual interpretations of experience, as in the matter of a parent’s death’.

4 In this paper, I use the initials of the Aboriginal names of B and his deceased brother J to refer to them. B’s contemporary is referred to here as Z; this bears no relationship to his actual name.

5 In saying that our loss was shared, I do not mean to suggest it was equivalent: hers was clearly greater than mine.
others’ behalf, signured his own engagement with the broader society. The day before he passed away, B asked his wife to call me in to see him in the hospital where he lay. He described to me his pain, his fear and the process of his journey to the hospital, and the long ordeal before he finally made it to the intensive care unit, in extraordinary detail. The extent to which he sought to communicate this experience, which remained, to the last, tinged for him with the suspicion that had he not been a blackfella,\(^6\) things might have occurred somewhat differently along the way, makes me think that he would have agreed to me sharing something of this part of his life story.

   Fabian (2004[1972], 57) identified ‘various directions’ for how an anthropology of death might proceed, suggesting that three ‘basic orientations’ would be ‘common to them all.’ The first of these orientations was ‘a processual, constitutive view of culture and, consequently, of cultural conceptions of, and reactions to, death’: the second, ‘a dialectical model of social reality’ in which ‘the event of individual death must be recognized as an inalienable mediator’, structurally and phenomenologically (Fabian 2004[1972], 57). In the discussion that follows, I hope to have captured something of the third orientation Fabian identified: a ‘communicative approach to ethnographic reality’ (ibid.).

   **Saltwater Man**

   To begin, let me tell you something about B. Prior to his birth, he told me that he had existed as a *raya* or ‘spirit-child’ emplaced in the country from a ‘long time before’ (see Glaskin 2005). The third-born of eleven children (five boys and six girls), he was born in 1942 at the UAM (United Aborigines Mission) settlement on the Jawi island called

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\(^6\) The terms ‘blackfellas’ for Indigenous people, and ‘whitefellas’ for non-Indigenous people, are commonly used in Kimberley Aboriginal discourse.
Iwanyi (otherwise known by the English name of Sunday Island), off the coast of One Arm Point. Born into an era in which Indigenous people in Western Australia came under the governmental jurisdiction of the Department of Native Welfare, he lived through the closure of the mission in 1962, followed by the dislocation of living in camps on the Derby Aboriginal reserve, and then the successful (and independent) return of his people to their country and the formation of One Arm Point community in 1972 (for further discussion of this history, see Robinson 1973; Glaskin 2002).

I met B in early 1994, on my first trip to One Arm Point to talk with people about their native title claim. That first time we met, he explained some important aspects of Bardi cosmology to me. He told me that there were *ngulungul* (culturally restricted) places in that vicinity, and that it would be dangerous for me to wander around the area without being in the company of a Bardi person; that unlawful intrusion would precipitate the metaphysical agency of the grounds, and something terrible would be likely to happen. I might get very sick, and certain Bardi people might get sick, or might even die. He told me the well-known One Arm Point story of a nursing sister who had illicitly entered a law ground, and suffered a stroke afterwards. He took me to Jindirron (Round Rock), where he pointed out at the fast-moving currents that lay between the One Arm Point mainland and Julum (Middle Island), which looked close enough to swim to. There he told me about Galalung, an important (public) ancestral being in

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7 The claim, on behalf of Bardi and Jawi people, was determined in 2005 (*Sampi v State of Western Australia [2005] FCA 777*). An appeal was brought before the Full Federal Court of Australia between 26–28 February 2007, and at the time of writing, the decision has not been handed down.

8 See Reid (1983, 5–52) who also discusses dangerous places at Yirrkala.
Bardi and Jawi cosmology, and told me that Galalung’s *niimbal* (footprint or ‘track’) was visible on Julum, which he referred to as a ‘sacred island’.

During the time that I knew him, he was involved with many of the major Aboriginal Kimberley organizations in official capacities at different times. In his younger days, he had worked in the pearling industry and as a crocodile hunter (among many other things). As a middle-aged man when I met him, he was an articulate and outspoken advocate of his people’s rights. He was also a great raconteur, and an extremely funny man. He teased me (and most people, but especially those with whom he had to joke as a consequence of prescribed kinship relations) mercilessly. He smoked, he gambled, he sometimes drank, and he loved telling stories. He was also a senior Law man, a saltwater man, whose life traversed a period of extraordinary and tumultuous change for his people. He loved his family, and much of his activity was

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9 Namely, the Kimberley Land Council, Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Centre and the Kimberley Language Resource Centre. He was also the chairman of One Arm Point community at various times.

10 From a health and mortality perspective, Hunter (1993,194) identifies the mid-1960s through to the end of the 1970s as ‘the period of major social change in the Kimberleys,’ (other than that immediately following early colonization, which occurred in this region from the late 1880s). One of the factors he refers to is the lifting of the ban on alcohol being sold to Indigenous people, which he argues has resulted in significant family, social and health consequences for young adults of the 1980s and 1990s. The 1970s also ushered in a government policy era towards Indigenous people of ‘self-determination’ (later re-named ‘self-management’, see Glaskin 2002, 8–9). It is an aside to note here that contemporary political rhetoric tends to predominantly lay blame upon this policy (and tends to exclude) other factors (such as those identified by Hunter) from its limited analysis of social and health issues in remote Indigenous Australia.
directed towards his frequently stated goals of looking after land and keeping culture ‘strong’.

B suffered a number of significant losses during the time I knew him. Here, I focus on just three of these: his daughter in early 1997, one of his contemporaries, also in 1997, and his older brother in 1998.

*His Daughter (early 1997)*

In January 1997 I heard the news that two young Aboriginal women had gone missing from Broome (the closest township to One Arm Point, 200km to its south). One of them was B’s daughter. Within a number of days of their disappearance, one of the Broome girls was found safely. She had gone out in a pearling lugger and forgotten to tell people she was going. B afterwards suggested to me that this perhaps weakened the seriousness with which the police took his own daughter’s disappearance (although the two were not related). He felt that the other girl’s safe discovery might have created an anticipation that his own daughter had similarly gone off somewhere, and that she would turn up sooner rather than later. Additionally, the Broome girls’ disappearances occurred just under two weeks before a serial killer abducted the first of his three victims\(^\text{11}\) from a nightclub in the up-market suburb of Claremont in Perth, the West Australian capital. B would later tell me that he felt that the disappearance of that first girl from Claremont considerably outweighed the attention his own daughter’s disappearance in Broome was given. Later again, he told me of an article in *The Post* magazine about his daughter’s disappearance, for which he had been interviewed. He told me that the article had said or implied that he was a racist, because he had pointed out how little effort had been expended to find his daughter in comparison with the

\(^{11}\) Sarah Spiers, who was abducted on January 27, 1996. D’s daughter disappeared on January 14, 1997.
missing Claremont girls.\textsuperscript{12} In the interview he had also compared the efforts made to find his daughter with the efforts expended in bringing Indonesians in from off the north west coast of Australia (something which occurs reasonably regularly on this part of the coast, oftentimes from seas and reefs where B habitually used to go fishing, hunting and collecting trochus shell). B had also (apparently) compared the efforts to find his daughter with British yachtsman Tony Bullimore’s rescue in January 1997. Bullimore was rescued after having spent five days drifting at sea in the upturned hull of his yacht, following its capsize in the Southern Ocean.\textsuperscript{13} B’s comparisons with the considerable effort and expenditure involved in bringing people from distant offshore waters in to land (whether as detention or as rescue) reflected his own saltwater orientation, and the comparison was based on having a very clear idea of what efforts were required for such endeavours. His perception of differential effort was measured, and probably accentuated his affront at having been considered in some way discriminatory or racist (pers.comm., 14/3/97).

It is not possible for me to imagine how a person deals with the loss of someone they love, never knowing their fate, whether they live or whether they have died. I know that for a long time, at least the first two years, B hoped and believed his daughter was

\textsuperscript{12} By this time another girl had been abducted from the nightclub, and was later followed by a third. The investigation into the Claremont serial killings has been called ‘the largest, the most sophisticated and the most expensive murder inquiry Australia has ever seen’ (ABC Radio National, Background Briefing: ‘the Courage of our Convictions – the Claremont serial killer’, Sunday 25 June 2000, \texttt{<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/talks/bbing/stories/s146359.htm>} accessed 23 October 2006.

\textsuperscript{13} An account of Bullimore’s rescue is available from:

\texttt{<imprimntehhttp://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/january/9/newsid_2518000/2518229.stm> accessed 23 October 2006.}
alive, and spent considerable time looking for her, pouring out his grief in constant activity, movement, and travel, continually criss-crossing the land between Broome and Darwin, as if sheer movement could pull the bare facts of her disappearance from wherever in that vast area they lay hidden. He spent much of his time working with police, and travelled to the Northern Territory on a number of occasions to personally check on reported sightings, some of which were sparked by a re-enactment of her last known movements shown on the television show ‘Crime Stoppers’. He lost weight and grew thin. His interest in things political waned. He resigned from the chairmanship of his community council so he could spend time looking for his daughter. His effervescent humour diminished. B told me that his wife was a strong woman, and that during that time, she ‘pulled him through’ on a couple of occasions. His wife, who also suffered terribly, told me it was a very difficult time for the two of them, as they each withdrew into their grief. It was particularly difficult, she felt, being in the community, being surrounded by everyone who knew, but who could not fully participate in their grief, who didn’t talk to them about it. Her sense of isolation during that time was palpable. Meanwhile, others in the community had dreams about what had happened to their daughter, and talked with each other about her possible fate. The dreams alone indicate something of the profound impact her disappearance also had on them.

Their daughter has never been found. Unlike one other person I have known of who has disappeared, no memorial service has ever been held for her, because, it seems, until there is evidence to the contrary, her family consider her to still be alive. Her disappearance was, in the words of many people, a pivotal moment in B’s life. Many people – members of his own family – told me that he was never quite the same
afterwards, and in my own view, this is true, as though in losing his daughter but not being able to put her to rest, he could never come to rest himself.

Much later, he was diagnosed with cancer. And although the name of the disease was not publicly referred to, many people attributed his illness to the time he lost his daughter.

*His Contemporary (late 1997)*

Z passed away in late November 1997. He was roughly the same age as B; both were born on Sunday Island and they’d known each other all their lives. That said, in the time that I’d known them both, I hadn’t known them to be particularly close. There was ongoing conflict and feuding, if not openly between the two men, certainly between members of their two families, which had been going on for some considerable years.\(^{14}\) Though their houses were less than two minutes walk from each other, and from the verandah of each you could see the other, I did not see them visiting with one another or speaking in an especially friendly way.

Just over a month after Z’s death, B and I were in Perth at the same time, having come down from the Kimberleys for Christmas holidays. B rang me on Boxing Day and suggested catching up. I met him in Fremantle, and we went to the local betting house to check on his bets (he’d had two significant wins), before going to the hotel for a beer. It was there that B talked with me about Z’s death, and it was apparent to me that he was enormously sad, grieving for the loss of his contemporary. It was not quite a year

\(^{14}\) This conflict sometimes erupted into fights between younger members of their families, into which older family members were usually drawn. While it is hard to say with certainty, it may be that some of this conflict had a very long historical genesis indeed, for B and Z’s older brother famously had similar conflicts when they were teenage boys growing up at Sunday Island.
since his daughter had gone missing, and this may have accentuated his grief. He spoke of how he and Z had grown up together, how they had been through Law together, how they had been ever-present in each other’s lives. I had known that there were several competing versions of the story as to why Z had passed away, which attributed the blame for his death to supernatural causes arising as the consequence of various people’s actions (depending on which version you went with). B did not seem particularly concerned with these political ramifications or competing attributions of blame, but rather (and I would also suggest rather privately), was grieving for someone whom he had lost. I say privately, because although he shared this with me, we were on very neutral ground when he did so, and I was a safe person to share it with: not a member of the community, not a member of Z’s family, sufficiently connected to appreciate the loss, but not connected enough to be implicated in any ramifications arising from the expression of his loss.

*His Brother (1998)*

J was B’s oldest sibling, and was a very gentle, quiet and unassuming man, far less outspoken than B. He passed away in 1998. For his family, their sense of loss does not seem to have been significantly ameliorated by the years that have passed since his death. He is frequently mentioned – although not by personal name – and only with great respect. I have often heard his brothers talk about the considerable knowledge he had of the country: saying, *our older brother, he was the one, he really knew a lot.*

The first time I met J, in Broome, I recognized him from his family resemblance to his brothers, whom I knew, and we began talking. All the brothers were close: at One Arm Point, I regularly saw them together at each other’s houses, as though they were permanent extensions of each other’s selves. J, who lived in Broome, was not there as
frequently: but whenever his brothers were in Broome, they were usually with him and one of their sisters, who also lived in Broome. When in 1998 J suddenly became extremely ill and was flown to Perth, B and another brother flew with him on the ‘doctor plane’ (as the Royal Flying Doctor is often called) to the Royal Perth Hospital. Soon afterwards came the news, disembodied through its transmission via the telephone line, that he had passed away. Like others whose critically ill relatives are taken to hospitals only to die, his brothers wished he’d been able to die at One Arm Point: not in a distant place, not in a hospital environment: but at home, in his country, with family. His brothers told me that they were glad to have been with him, that he had not been alone.

Several days after his death, the rain that fell on One Arm Point was said to be water from his estate. There is a whirlpool (Iwalajalajala) that he and other members of his estate inherit patrilinearly as one of their totemic affiliations (see Bagshaw 1999, 37–8; Glaskin 2005, 303), and it was said that water from that whirlpool had been drawn up into the sky and was now falling down as rain. People knew, because it tasted salty: he had passed away, and the place with which he was consubstantially identified was obviously registering his death (and see Glaskin 2006).

B 2003

The second last time I saw B was in Perth in November 2003. He was passing through the city on his way to Korea. He had been invited to Seoul prior to a large international indigenous festival that was to be held there the following year, to set things up for the Bardi dancers and singers whom he would take there to perform ilma (a public genre of performance) in 2004. He, some other friends from the Kimberley and myself had dinner together, and I caught up on some of the news from One Arm Point.
B was not well. He had not been, for some time. Ever since I’d moved back to Perth in 2002,\(^{15}\) I had seen him in Perth often. He and his wife had been travelling regularly to Perth so he could have chemotherapy at Royal Perth Hospital, for the disease that was rarely referred to by name. The first time that I ever heard anyone mention the name of the disease was sometime before this encounter: I had asked his brother, and his reply came in hushed tones, *we think it's cancer, but no-one’s talking about it. They’re not saying that’s what it is.*

B was plainly ill when I saw him, before he went to Korea, but he had no apparent fear of travelling, or of being sick while he was away. If he had concerns, he did not let on.\(^{16}\) He seemed to look forward to the trip, though he was tired, and clearly physically weak: I remember us crossing the road, walking very slowly along the footpath, to accommodate the rate at which he could walk.

The next time I saw him was a couple of months afterwards. His wife rang me on a Sunday to tell me that they were both in Perth, that he’d had to be flown down suddenly, that he’d had some kind of heart attack and was in the intensive care unit, that he’d asked her to ring me to let me know he was there and that he wanted me to visit. I went in to the hospital an hour or so after I got the call. His wife had gone out for a while, and I did not see her that day.

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\(^{16}\)A few years previously, while on a trip in New Zealand, his diabetes had led to an episode in which he’d returned with an amputated toe.
B, saltwater man, senior Law man, raconteur extraordinaire, was all rigged up to various monitors and machines in an environment that was as sterile socially as it was hygienically. The nurses told me I was allowed to go and sit with him for a while.

I asked him how he was feeling, and what had happened, and he told me the latter in great detail, how he’d had another problem associated with diabetes, that had put him in Broome hospital for the night, and how, at about three o’clock that morning, he’d had a heart attack. He told me that he had not known that it was a heart attack, how painful it was, and how he had waited through the night for daylight to come, thinking that when it was light he would get on the doctor plane they had told him he would catch to go to hospital in Perth (a flight of about two and a half hours). Then, there had been the interminable wait until he could get on the plane. How time had ebbed so slowly. How he had finally got onto the plane the following afternoon, approximately twelve or so hours after his heart attack. When he arrived in Perth, there was no bed for him immediately available, so he had spent that night, the night following his heart attack, lying on the floor in the hospital Emergency, finally going in to the Intensive Care Unit on the Sunday that I saw him. He told me this story as he told me all other stories, in exceptional detail. I thought I was a goner, he had said. And I remember many things about this now: how I had not wanted to believe he could have been so close to death; how I had not known what to say to reassure him that he would be okay, and how this was one of those moments in which he, the characteristically outspoken but rarely expressively vulnerable man, had named his own fear about whether he would continue to live, and in the most direct of ways. I asked him about his trip to Korea, as I had not seen him since he had returned. He told me something of his time there, how he had
been seated with all the dignitaries at all the functions he attended. *They treated me like a king*, he said.\(^{17}\)

Meanwhile, in the hospital ward at Royal Perth, the nurses were treating him as though he was invisible: picking up his chart and talking about his condition at the foot of his bed as though he wasn’t there. I could see him straining to understand what they were saying; I strained to hear them also.

The following night, my phone rang. It was a young Bardi woman, a niece of his I hadn’t met. She told me that her auntie, B’s wife, had asked her to ring me and let me know that her uncle had passed away. B’s wife was there with her, and we spoke. Neither of us had imagined that he was that close to death the day before. But thinking back upon it, I think he knew. His words kept going around in my head. *They treated me like a king*, he had said, and his face had lit up briefly, like in the old days, before he lost his daughter.

**The Cumulative Effects of Loss**

An expectation of anthropologists, quietly embedded within the social sciences category to which our discipline belongs, is that anthropological research is empirical, objective, and grounded in observation. Equally embedded in academic anthropology’s defining methodology, participant-observation, is our subjective experience with those who allow us into their lives, amongst whom we work. In this chapter, I have included myself as a participant in, as well as an observer of, loss, taking the view that it would not have been possible for me to approach the topic of the cumulative effects of loss

\(^{17}\) In an email to me from Korea, B’s travelling companion wrote that: ‘The trip has been amazing and [B] has been accorded great respect and was always placed at the number one table with all the Mayors and Presidents’ (S. Moran, pers. comm., 16/10/03).
without the inclusion of personal experience and the relational contexts through which the consequences of such loss were forcefully conveyed to me. Rosaldo says that ‘by invoking personal experience as a human category one risks easy dismissal’ (2004[1984], 172), but, along with him, I would argue that the inclusion of the personal can create a more accessible understanding of the cumulative effects of grief, in particular, than ‘more detached modes of composition’ (Rosaldo 2004[1984], 172) otherwise might. Rosaldo describes his own account of his wife’s premature death during their fieldwork among Ilongot people in the Phillipines, as ‘an act of mourning, a personal report, and a critical analysis of anthropological method’ (ibid.). This chapter is not so much the latter, but it does, I think, demonstrate not only that relationships between anthropologists and those with whom we work extend temporally and spatially beyond ‘the field’; but that anthropological fieldwork is, as Fabian (2002[1983]) reminded us some time ago, an inherently intersubjective endeavour, in which the ‘epistemological conditions of ethnography’ necessarily include ‘subjectivity and individuality’ (Fabian 2007, 140).

Here, I have attempted to explore something of the impact of cumulative loss, and have focused on an individual as a means through which this might be conveyed. But the individual continually – relationally – spills over to other individuals. One could take an extensive genealogical chart and choose any one person to be ego and measure the deaths that particular ego had experienced over a given time, and because of the nature of Aboriginal kinship, and the small communities in which people in remote Australia generally live, the extent to which any one person would have experienced loss of close kin would be extensive. I could as easily have chosen any other Bardi or Jawi individual I know, and there would similarly be too much loss in their lives. I
could have spoken about how one of the men I know lost his daughter (who was beaten to death), his wife (through illness) and several contemporaries within a twelve month period, after which, he spent his time sitting listlessly on his wire-framed bed smoking log cabin (tobacco) in his room. His daughters, who had experienced the same losses, described him as ‘broken-hearted’. One of his sons subsequently murdered another, and, as in the case of B’s missing daughter, I find it hard to imagine how you would reconcile such a loss. He himself recently passed away. I could have spoken of how one of the women I knew died of a heart attack at her own daughter’s funeral, of mothers who have told me that you do not expect to outlive your children, or of the grieving relatives of young men who committed suicide.

At the beginning of this chapter I described how B’s sister had died not long after him. Shortly after his wife’s death, B’s sister’s husband, having been drinking, fell from a cliff in Broome, and lay with broken limbs for many hours, with the tide coming in, trying to stay conscious, ‘worrying for crocodiles’ (about the threat that they might come and take him while he was helpless). From his bed in the hospital in Perth, he spoke openly of how her death was too much to bear, coming as it did on top of other deaths, his brother’s baby, his mother, his brother-in-law, and others. He told me of how, when he was lying fallen, his deceased wife had come to him and told him that he had to be strong, how he had to hold on, to survive, for their children. One can have an instinct about the cumulative effects of loss, and one might possibly be regarded as ascribing such effects to others, where perhaps this is not the case. This is an intensely subjective arena, after all. But comments such as his about how unbearable the losses were, heaped as they were upon each other; along with the extreme consequences for him of his accident – and afterwards for one of his daughters, who then had to look after
him during his prolonged recovery period, having lost her mother – indicate something of the exponential toll such frequent losses can bring.

Speaking of Pintupi, Myers (1979, 343) says that emotions are ‘theoretically translatable in terms of descriptions of universal inner states… but have particular salience in terms of Pintupi culture.’ His understanding of the way Pintupi emotions are embedded within Pintupi relatedness is equally salient among Bardi and Jawi. He says that:

Pintupi ethnopsychology… seems to view an individual’s internal states as extensively connected with a “web” of significant others or with “objects” that European observers would describe as external to the self. The much described Aboriginal “spiritual kinship” with the land, the special identification of persons with “place” in Aboriginal thought, should be considered part of this “web” (Myers 1979, 350).

He thus describes ‘grief’ (yalurrpa) among the Pintupi as being ‘felt as a loss of part of oneself’ (1979, 358). The argument can readily be made that all humans are relationally constituted: that being human means being intersubjective. Yet while many people in other societies who experience profound loss would similarly experience it as ‘a loss of part of oneself’, the understanding of what this means is also contingent on how ‘oneself’ is experienced ontologically. In Indigenous Australian societies where concepts of personhood extend persons ‘in space and time beyond somatic boundaries and the normal life-span’ (Keen 2006, 12; and see Glaskin 2006), with such extensions being mediated and expressed through relatedness, then the culturally-formed intersubjective experience of loss is likely to reflect these ontological foundations of personhood. Thus B, who did not appear to be particularly close to Z when they were both alive, nevertheless experienced his death in an evidently more profound way than I would have imagined based on their observable interactions alone.
There are a number of other issues that this account raises. There is the obvious one of the extent to which being Indigenous shapes a person’s experience of death and loss, not only ontologically, nor just in the cumulative sense of experiencing it frequently, but also with respect to how medical treatment (and also police assistance) may be sought, given, what you make of it, what you have to go through to get it, and how you interpret this, given your life experience of, for example, discrimination. Other issues arising from this account include the extent to which some Indigenous Australians in remote communities may be constrained from speaking about loss, disease and death. To what extent might such constraints be gender related? B’s disease, cancer, was not publicly declared except by the medical treatment he had for it, although in 2004 his sister acknowledged her cancer quite openly. While this might simply reflect temperamental differences, expressed in degrees of willingness to disclose personal information, it could be that there are gender differences with respect to how people speak about such issues, or that cumulative personal experiences have something to do with the extent to which individuals do or don’t speak of such matters. To what extent might community politics affect the capacity to speak about such issues? Might it have to do with attempts to keep some kind of emotional privacy in a social environment where very little is private? To what extent do such constraints derive from cosmological beliefs in the metaphysical causes of illness and death (for example, see Glaskin 2005), or represent this in combination with other matters referred to above? The question following from this concerns the effects, not just of experiencing

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18 I’m reminded here of seeing how women have used the activity of de-lousing hair to have ‘private’ conversations even when among larger groups: their physical proximity allows them to speak in a voice only audible to the person immediately in front or behind them.
loss, disease or death, but also of possible constraints on speaking about them. How does all of this add up within small communities where everyone, to some extent, is affected by every death that occurs, and by the particular circumstances of some of these deaths, as evidenced by the dreams community members told me they had following B’s daughter’s disappearance?

This account also raises the question of how loss can ever be reconciled when the fate of the person lost remains unknown, something that neither fits into what Robben (2004a, 6) calls ‘natural death’ nor ‘uncommon death’ (such as death by suicide, murder, sacrifice and sorcery). Loss through disappearance is a tragic loss but remains distinct from tragic death (compare with Robben 2004a, 5).

The difficulty of how those who mourn can conceptually deal with an unknown fate, is, I think, partly illustrated by the following. A Bardi man who passed away in 2006 described how people communicate with the spirits of the ‘old people’, those who have died but remain ‘in’ the country (see Glaskin 2006, Smith this volume), and how these spirits guide and give you the courage to face that which lies ahead:

> Whenever we're fishing, night-time, day-time - someone watching you. Spirit. If I'm not sure which way to go, I stop and think and my heart and mind will tell me which way is the safest. I've done that many times. That's the spirit, maybe our old people or inamunonjin [ancestral beings]… They know all the country. When you die, your spirit goes amongst your old people, your own people.\(^1\)

The poignancy of this man’s words, set against the indeterminacy of disappearance, goes some way to illuminating the lack of emotional resolution that ‘never knowing’ indeed represents.

B once told me that it was possible for an ‘old person that died a long time ago… [to] come back’, and he went on to explain how such persons could be identified by

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\(^{19}\)J.Ejai (Federal Court of Australia Transcript, WAG49/98 01.07.03, T2613.20–30).
certain birthmarks (*lanbirr*). From these, he said, you could tell that the *raya* (conception spirit) of the deceased person was ‘coming back again’ (see Glaskin 2006). I have yet to hear whether any of the new babies at One Arm Point are considered to be the re-instantiation of his *raya*, but I can certainly understand why his family might remain ever vigilant for such signs.

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**References**


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