

# Celebrating with the Dead

Julia Ferry

## **Abstract**

This essay seeks to explore the celebration of the dead, with the dead, as a collaborative way of mourning, drawing from the experience of celebrating the fifth anniversary of my grandfather's death with my Japanese-Brazilian family. I will argue that this approach challenges the modern Western perspective on mourning. I draw on the work of

authors from various theoretical fields who advocate for new ways of considering the relationship between the living and the dead. The text aims to explore the potential of mourning as a singular and political gesture, blending tradition and fabulation, joy and pain, conclusion and continuity.

*Adults seem to take death in a double boiler.*

Tatsumi Hijikata

*Is this talking about death?*

Tamara Kamenszain<sup>1</sup>

Last year, my Brazilian-Japanese family<sup>2</sup> and I celebrated the fifth anniversary of my grandfather's death. My grandmother prepared sushi, udon, onigiris, and kimpira gobo—all his favorite foods. For dessert, only mangos were served, not cut in the delicate way that only he knew how to do. And even though we all wanted a sweet made from butter and sugar, we reluctantly had to respect the menu, chosen by the deceased. He continues to worry about diabetes...

My uncles, who live in the countryside of São Paulo here in Brazil, came for this lunch. I don't remember another moment when we were all together in the last ten, or even twenty years; not on Christmas, not on birthdays. My uncles and aunts spent years of their lives as *dekasseguis*<sup>3</sup> in Japan. They returned to Brazil about twenty years ago, and since then have opened small businesses in the cities where they live today. They work every day of the week, and only close their shops on New Year's Day and Christmas. This day, 11 June 2023, was a third day off, an exception, to celebrate the day of my grandfather's death.

<sup>1</sup> Both epigraphs were translations I made into English of works already translated into Portuguese.

<sup>2</sup> My family is part of the history of the first arrival of Japanese immigrants to Brazil in the early 20th century. Currently, the country has the largest number of Japanese descendants outside of Japan. My grandparents were born and raised in a Japanese colony in the southern part of the country. In this context, they met, married, and had six children. The family left these colonies, which were located in a rural area, for a metropolitan region of the country about fifty years ago, and that is where they still live today.

<sup>3</sup> Term used to designate individuals who leave their home countries to work temporarily in another country. In the case of Brazil, this term has acquired more specific connotations, referring to the numerous Brazilians of Japanese descent who immigrate to Japan in search of job opportunities, with plans to save money that will enable them to return and settle back in Brazil. Although it is an immigration with a temporary intention, many *dekasseguis* end up staying longer than they initially planned. Of my grandparents' children, only my mother was not a *dekassegui*. All my uncles and aunts went to Japan in search of work and with the intention of saving income. This says a little about the relationship of many families like mine, where individuals born in Brazil consider Japan as a place of financial opportunity. There, they perform manual labor, often intense and exhausting. On this matter, I recommend the film "Welcome Back, Farewell" by the Brazilian filmmaker Marcos Yoshi.

It is curious to note that in life, *Ditian* (grandfather) could not gather his children and grandchildren as he did in death. Certainly, this would not offend him because, in Japanese culture, the dead are no less active and important than when they were alive. There is a continuous presence of the dead in the lives of the living in gestures that involve the offer of time, dedication, and food. In this sense, the fact that we gathered as never before to celebrate my deceased grandfather is not something to be lamented, as the dead are just as worthy of attention and care as the living.

As Marilyn Ivy points out, many of the practices that the Japanese maintain with their dead involve a series of rituals and memory practices. These practices operate as a form of collaboration between the living and the dead, in which the living, by gestures of care, can ensure the necessary tranquility for the dead to be safeguarded in the place of ancestors. This means that the forms of dedication are continuous and inscribe a coexistence between the living and the dead in which the living provide for the dead, who, in turn, also help the living to carry out their mourning.

Annually, Obon day, which is the day of the dead in Japan, exemplifies these forms of coexistence. On this date, there are a series of performances and tributes that take over Japanese cities and ritualize a kind of encounter between the living and the dead. The existence of a day dedicated to the dead is not exclusive to Japanese culture. In Mexico, the *Día de los Muertos* is an emblematic festival originally practiced by the Mexica people. In Brazil, there is the *Dia dos Finados*, which is a national holiday of Catholic origin, telling of the force of colonization and the erasure and destruction of funeral practices of native indigenous cultures.

I had experienced some celebrations with the dead throughout my life, carried out by my family. Still, over time, I found myself keeping distance from developing a relationship of presence with my deceased loved ones. I believe this distance was mainly caused by my alignment with an intellectual field built on a model of skeptical rationality.

Being with my family and my grandfather on the anniversary of his death made me reflect on the meaning of this moment, what we were

doing there, and the nature of our presence as well as that of my deceased grandfather. I noticed that the way they were dealing with the dead was familiar yet distant to me. That is, so familiar from the perspective of my personal history, but, at the same time, distant from the perspective of my intellectual work, even though my research, which I have been developing for years, was about mourning. At that point, I decided to start searching for theoretical and conceptual perspectives that challenge the modern Westernized and hegemonic perspectives on the dead, which also speaks to the ways we conceive History and life itself. In this sense, I seek to establish a theoretical approach to mourning that encompasses ideas from these claims as well as concepts from psychoanalysis, which, I argue, offer opportunities for exploration in light of non-Westernized and decolonial perspectives.

The authors whose research I delve into next are contemporary researchers who develop critical conceptual work about the dead and their relationships with the living. In addition, they shed light on the concept of mourning and provide elaborations on personal and collective experiences of loss. They belong to varied theoretical fields of philosophy, literature, and anthropology.

One of these is Belgian science philosopher Vinciane Despret, who conducts extensive research on a particular form of existence of the dead. Her research engages in an important dialogue with that of American anthropologist Anna Tsing (Despret and Meuret; Despret, “Politics of Territories”). In this article, I seek to argue how the idea of collaboration developed by Tsing offers a theoretical resource for the claim made by Despret.

Judith Butler, with their extensive research as a political philosopher, adds a critical argumentation for a possible collaboration between the living and the dead, through conceptions of dispossession, vulnerability, and indeterminacy that also confront hegemonic models that conceive life, death, and mourning. Saidiya Hartman, writer and North American researcher, with her method of critical fabulation, provides us with a way through writing, research, and invention for making history with the dead, which is also making life with the dead. Christina Sharpe, professor and researcher in Afro-American studies, illustrates how caring

for the dead can also be a way of celebrating them, as proposed by the title of this article.

While I am a psychoanalyst, psychoanalysis is not the central perspective of this text, which takes an interdisciplinary perspective. The authors that I work with also do interdisciplinary research: Vinciane Despret between philosophy and science, Judith Butler between philosophy, politics, and psychoanalysis, Anna Tsing between anthropology and science, and Saidiya Hartman with literature and history.

Finally, I hope that this interdisciplinary text, which mixes personal essay and academic research, can itself function as a possible way of expressing the type of mourning that I advocate for, as a singular and political, fabulated and collaborative process, involving some endings and many continuities.

## **Mourning and the Dead: Continuities in Life**

In *Our Grateful Dead: Stories of Those Left Behind*, Despret points out that the dead are true vectors of vitality that urge us to produce, create, fabricate, and narrate (about) them. She argues that the progressive secularization of the Western world, that dominated the thought in Human Sciences since the early nineteenth century, has established a materialistic view of death, leading the dead to non-existence or to a finished and inactive memory. In this disenchanting perspective, the dead are absolutely absent, reduced to a psychic intention of the living. Western Cartesian thinking divides the living and the dead into states of opposition rather than coexistence and collaboration, and establishes a dominant and almost exclusive place for the living in life. Thus assuming life as a space excluded from death, seemingly indicating that only life matters, where the living are conceived as dominant, in control of everything that happens, and as the sole agent of the world's activity.

We can illuminate Despret's proposal for a collaboration between the living and the dead through the idea of collaboration developed by Anna Tsing in *Mushroom at the End of the World*. The anthropologist points out that collaboration means working through differences, in which we constantly contaminate each other. Critical of the self-sufficiency imposed

as a model of subjectivity in modern Western capitalism, Tsing points out that we are, and always will be, polluted by stories of encounters: “[W]e are mixed with each other even before we start a new collaboration” (Tsing 76, my translation<sup>4</sup>). That is why Tsing points out that “purity is not an option” (73), since we always need the help of others to survive and accomplish things, whether they are humans or non-humans, and, I add, living or dead.

The matsutake mushrooms that led Tsing down the path of elaborating on possible forms of collaboration are organisms that exist between life and death. By existing among the ruins, they are beings originating from these landscapes and, at the same time, capable of transforming them. The author points out the insubordinate potential of mushrooms, which enlightens us about the possibilities of unexpected frictions and collaborative forms. This idea is fundamental in reflecting on what a possible collaboration with the dead would entail, and to broaden considerations about a possible form of relationship between the mourners and the missing ones.

Judith Butler has dedicated much of their research and work to mourning. In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, they suggest that there is an inherently political dimension in this process that implicates us, due to our constitutive precariousness in bonds of dependence, and, as I add here, collaboration. Butler indicates that mourning clarifies our fundamental dependence on others, which subverts the notion of self-sufficiency that guides the matrix of the subject conceived in modernity. Death makes explicit that we do not have total control over the dead, and when we think we govern them, we are, in reality, undone by their absences. We are dispossessed of ourselves in the face of another's death. Losing the other is an experience that highlights our constitutive dispossession because it is also losing something of oneself.

The idea of dispossession as a condition explicitly stated in mourning, as argued by Butler, combines with what psychoanalysis has conceptualized from the beginning about this process, as we can see with Sigmund

<sup>4</sup> This and the other direct quotations throughout the text are my translation. The referenced works used by me were publications translated into Portuguese.

Freud in *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917). In this work, Freud notes that we do not always know how to identify and name what we lost in ourselves with the loss of the other. Loss introduces an enigma. As he points out, the subject does not grasp what was most lost with the loss of the other, so that we can ask the question: ‘Who am I now without you?’, suggesting that something about the ‘I’ is destabilized with the absence of the ‘you.’

Experiencing mourning is also living in the effect and production of a mystery. It is about trying to do something with the indeterminacy that loss causes us. This enigma that arises with the loss of the other reveals that we are not self-sufficient or determinable, but rather contaminators and contaminated by the alterities that pass through us and produce obscure and continuous effects. Therefore, mourning emerges as an experience that confronts the dominant ideals of individuality and prevailing self-sufficiency in modernity in a way that opens to us the possibility to consider it as a collaborative process.

## **Making and Unmaking Ourselves with the Dead**

In the months following my grandfather's death, my grandmother lost a lot of weight, which greatly concerned us. She, who always cooked in large quantities, even if it involved a meal for only two people, said that she no longer saw a reason to dirty so many pots. For a while, she lost the enthusiasm she had for cooking, and with that, food became an obligation and an imposition, no longer an activity and desire. On the day of his celebration, she spared no effort. She cooked for us, for herself, and for him.

Feeding the dead is a daily act for Japanese families who cultivate a *hotoke-san*, a domestic Buddhist sanctuary dedicated to the memory of and gratitude for the dead. It is a space for prayer and for the transmission of food: a small bowl of white rice is indispensable, along with other accompaniments that will feed the people in the house on that day. The first spoonful of rice is set aside for the dead and left in the *hotoke-san*. After a few hours, what was dedicated is eaten by the living, and it is believed that the rice transmitted to the dead will bring luck. A

collaboration occurs: the living feed the dead, and the dead bring them a kind of hope. This daily practice prevented my grandmother from losing more weight; the hotoke-san she had already cultivated before my grandfather died was revived with his death. Another very important and demanding dead person had to be fed there, which required her to face her resistance and return to cooking.

The date of death is a day that emphasizes the presentification of the dead. This is a special date, my grandmother says, because you must cook what the dead ask for. In other words, it is a day when the living commit themselves to listening and dedicating time to the deceased loved ones. On this day, *Batian* (grandmother) went to the market and the Japanese culinary products store. She planned each dish, some were of his everyday food during life, others not so much, and she joked whether she was assuming his desire or her own. Something there was confused, which leads me to wonder if the desire of the dead is always and only a projection of the living, or if there is a point of indeterminacy between our desire and the desire of the dead themselves. After all, as a psychoanalyst, it is inevitable to recognize that there is very little of one's "own" in one's "own desire" (Lacan).<sup>5</sup>

On the celebration day, my grandmother cooked as she had not done in a long time. She also ate with a desire we had not seen in ages. On this day, my grandmother cooked, and my grandfather fed her. Because of the living person he was—pragmatic and frugal—he would probably reproach the amount of food on that table. He might have said that she exaggerated. That this was a waste of food. That it was not necessary. That she would run out of money, because she survives on only one retirement, and life only gets more expensive. It is true that he himself participated in several celebrations for/with the dead during his

<sup>5</sup> I quote Jacques Lacan's famous phrase in Seminar 10 "Desire is the desire of the Other," referring to the idea that we are founded upon the desire of the Other; this moment establishes an enigma that marks and traverses the subject's intention for the rest of their life. It means that, for Psychoanalysis, the subject constitutes themselves from the desire of the Other, which creates a condition where one will seek to reproduce this initial position of being the object of the Other's desire, in the sense that desiring is wanting to be desired. In this regard, desire found the subject as a desiring one and also places them in a continuing relationship of dependency with the others because we desire what/who is beyond us, although there is no object that completes the desire. In this sense, desire is not something decided, which we can consciously determine, and therefore, the desire is much more "improper" than it is "proper."

life, but when it was his turn to be the honored dead, he would not do it without hesitation. In life, Ditian received no gift without first saying he did not want it, did not need it, it was too expensive, he was old, he already had enough. And dead, would it be any different? If it were not him but another dead person, would I arrive at these assumptions? I think I would certainly find other words, develop other stories. Scholars like Saidiya Hartman show us that our narrations about the dead are not merely made about them, but also with them. In this sense, I can argue that the fabulation I make here is a story that I did not conceive entirely on my own.

### **The History of the Dead, the Stories of the Dead**

Despret suggests that it is a task for the living to fabricate the existence of the dead, to offer them “more existence” (14), an extension of presence, a biographical supplement. This shared biography is not a construction corresponding to the living person that they were, and it is not solely constructed by those who are alive and narrating. It is like a collective autobiography, produced by us but without dispensing them. The dead make narrators of the living, insofar as they themselves are vectors of stories, stories that do not have a defined authorship. The dead provoke narratives that are yet to come and are processes that extend, prolong, amplify, and complicate the way we remember them. In this sense, their existences are active and continually transformed by the act of transmitting and inheriting.

This gesture of creating stories with the dead, like a collective autobiography, is employed by Saidiya Hartman in *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2021). Her research consists of reclaiming the dead who were enslaved, which involves recreating stories of these people whose lives were successive attempts at dispossession, and whose deaths were the culmination of that destruction and violence. Starting from a questioning look at the archive, particularly in terms of how the dead are portrayed there, Hartman proposes critical fabulation as a narrative method to tell (Hi)stories, both political ones, of the past marked by slavery, and the personal ones of subjects marked

by destruction and violence against their bodies, names, traits, and singularities.

Critical fabulation, Hartman points out, is not creating stories *about* the dead, but *with* the dead. Doing with the dead also means undoing the modern fantasy of the dominance of the subject over the present, the past, the 'I', and the Other. In this sense, Hartman both expands the history of the dead, giving them a continuity beyond what was defined in the archive and in official History, and presents the possibility for the living to establish a collaborative relationship with the dead to build insubordinate, contingent, and potentially transformative stories that pertain to life itself.

This alternative conception of what we are and what we are made of deprives the subject of the notion of control, self-sufficiency, and dominance presupposed by Western modernity. Doing with the dead, as proposed by Hartman, displaces what is understood as 'I' from an autonomous and decided conception, and displaces the dead from passivity or non-existence. 'Doing *with*' implies a shared authorship between the self and others, living and dead, in a collaborative relationship where subject and predicate are not previously defined and established, but interchangeable, displaced.

This idea aligns with psychoanalysis' postulation that it is not possible to understand the subject without the alterities, events, and experiences that permeate them and constitute 'their' desire. This means that a person's existence surpasses their actions, intentions, and 'lifespan.' That is, what is understood as 'I' goes beyond the confines of a body, a physical person, and a history that would begin at birth and end at the date of death. If there is only an 'I' because there is an 'other,' this means that the loss of a 'you' calls the 'I' into question. If we are substances without boundaries, we continue beyond ourselves, because we are made by others and by stories that elude us, and therefore, we are also continued beyond what we can date, determine, decide, or guide. Thus, those we lose in life, those who are inscribed as absences, will not be non-existences, to the extent that they keep making us desire them, and this desire moves us and is capable of modifying us.

Hartman, in proposing a method for reading, interpreting, and (re)creating the archive, establishes a political and critical position for researching and understanding History, emphasizing the subject's continuity beyond itself, punctuating the ability of the dead to produce stories through the desire they awaken in the living. Hartman utilizes what psychoanalysis conceives as desire, the resource through which it is possible to work and engage with the dead, and thereby restores History through stories. Desire is the engine that allows Hartman to connect with the dead she searches for in the archives, and the dead with whom she researches and fabulates stories.

In creating other life stories with the dead, Hartman also makes space to consider death as an event open to creation, continuation, and narrative. More than that, Hartman works towards ensuring that the dead receive what the violence of slavery attempted to deprive them of. Instead of declaring death as an absolute end in which the dead are mere objects of our fantasy and memory, Hartman notes that there is something the dead are capable of awakening in us, that enables us to write, investigate, and therefore, fabulate.

In this sense, Hartman makes of mourning a movement of desire, and transformation of history and the present into a joint activity with the dead. Desire drives her search for the dead she seeks justice for; it is also desire that led me to talking about my grandfather, celebrating him on the anniversary of his death, and writing there. The desire we feel for the dead explains to us how we are continuously crossed by them, how we can claim through them another History, even a small history as I do in this text.

### **Desire of the Living, Desire of the Dead**

The dead mobilize our desires in a complex and invariably enigmatic way. They open our senses, establish possibilities, imprecisions, and doubts. They destabilize language, lead us to hesitate in choosing the pronoun and verb tense that situate. They broaden our sensitivity, or at least invite us to expand it. In our relationship with our dead, it is not possible to determine who takes care of whom. The act instituted

embarrasses the positions of recipient and intermediary. We break with the orders and explanations. Despret points out that constructing narratives about the activities we perform with, for, and by the dead is to walk through the territory of the grammatical register of the conjunctions “and, and, and...”, “or still, also... ” (81). I would add ‘perhaps’ before those to which we are so habitually accustomed to the forms of ‘or’ (hierarchical oppositions) and ‘because’ (excluding causality).

Despret, Butler and Hartman are some of the authors who teach us that the dead, with their own ways of existence, exceed physical and psychic categories. As Despret points out, the deceased are neither ghosts nor just the product of the imagination of the living. The dead have a way of being in a singular and indeterminate register, so that the living can relate to this particularity if there is a disposition for this activity. This disposition involves opening the space of meaning, expanding forms of relation, and breaking with explanatory and determinative constructions that can contaminate them. Relating to the dead is opening oneself to an unknown and inventive field. The dead incite us to create narratives; they are potential manufacturers of stories and gestures; they are extraordinary in making us do so.

It is in ‘her’ desire that Hartman is compelled to do something with the dead she encounters through the archive. If, in life, so much was taken from those dead, something about the desire survived, as it is through desire that Hartman investigates ‘and’ reveals ‘and’ invents them.

### **And, and, and...**

When it comes to celebrating a death date, I can only think of this event through the conjunction ‘and.’ If by celebration we intuit a moment of happiness and euphoria, when it comes to celebrating a dead person, it is a celebration that is both sad and joyful, that involves absence and presence, reminder and construction. The occasion that sparked the idea for this text involved a combination of mourning, celebration, and desire. This writing was, in itself, not only a means but a manifestation

of desire, ‘and’ a form of mourning, ‘and’ a mode of celebration with my grandfather: ‘and, and, and’.

I could write about other deceased in my life, but I chose my grandfather for this text dedicated to celebration. The reason is that a celebration for a death that is expected, due to the old age of the deceased, is more understandable. There are other deceased persons whose celebration is more challenging, almost impossible, whether due to the ways in which they died, the longing they left behind, or even the contradictory feelings they evoke. The choice to develop on the celebration of the dead with the dead was not without purpose. Celebrating can easily lead us to think about the objects of celebration as those considered worthy, desired, and idealized. In the contemporary cultural and political context, in which death is instrumentalized for practices of exclusion, violence, and destruction, and which divides what is life and what is death as dissociated experiences, we establish a phobic position in which we cannot conceive of the dead as worthy of celebration. It is as if they were deprived of it, as if in relation to their deaths, we could only regret. The idea of celebrating them is a challenge to the norms of contemporary Western culture.

When Hartman writes *with* previously unknown dead persons she finds on the margins of the archives, she also establishes a way to celebrate them, no matter how tragic their lives and deaths may have been. So, celebrating the dead is a challenge on several fronts, because it destabilizes the very idea of what involves a celebration and shows us that celebrating can bring together the desire and the pain, the beautiful and the terrible.

Celebrating the date of a death as we did, as our ancestral Japanese descendants and many other cultures have done for centuries, involves both care and transmission of memory, as well as inscribing in the force of now, a connection between the past and the present, pain and celebration, acceptance and claim, end and continuity, life and death, after all.

## Works Cited

- Butler, Judith.** *Precarious Life: the Powers of Mourning and Violence*. [Vida Precária: os Poderes do Luto e da Violência], translated by Andreas Lieber, Belo Horizonte: Autêntica Business, 2019.
- Despret, Vinciane, and Michel Meuret.** “Cosmoecological Sheep and the Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet.” *Environmental Humanities*, 2016, pp. 24-36.
- Despret, Vinciane.** “Politics of Territories.” *Multispecies Storytelling in Intermedial Practices*, 2022, pp. 21-32.
- . *Our Grateful Dead: Stories of Those Left Behind*. [Um Brinde aos Mortos: Histórias Daqueles que Ficam], translated by Hortencia Lencastre, São Paulo: N-1 Edições, 2023.
- Freud, Sigmund.** *Mourning and Melancholia*. [Luto e Melancholia], translated by Marilene Carone, São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2011.
- Hartman, Saidiya.** *Lose Your Mother: a Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route*. [Perder a Mãe: uma Jornada pela Rota Atlântica da Escravidão], translated by José Luiz Pereira da Costa, Rio de Janeiro: Bazar do Tempo, 2021.
- Hijikata, Tatsumi, and Kunichi Uno.** *Hijikata Tatsumi: Pensar um Corpo Esgotado*, translated by Christine Greiner and Ernesto Filho, São Paulo: N-1 Edições, 2018.
- Ivy, Marilyn.** *Morning the Japanese Thing*. CSST Working Papers, The University of Michigan, 1993.
- Kamenzain, Tamara.** *In Felisberta 11*, Translated by Clarisse Lyra, 2021.

## Biography

Julia Ferry is a Brazilian psychoanalyst, holding a degree in Psychology from the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo (PUC-SP). She earned her master's degree in Social Psychology from the University of São Paulo (USP) and is currently a doctoral candidate in School Psychology

and Human Development at the University of São Paulo (USP), where she is part of the research group on Psychoanalysis and Politics. Right now, her research interests include grief, counter and post-colonial narratives of loss, memory and psychoanalysis.