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Interviewing Peter Gow – Dundee, June 24, 2017

Ana Maria R. Gomes

UFMG - Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, anagomes.fae.ufmg@gmail.com

Paulo Maia Figueiredo

UFMG - Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, pmaia47@gmail.com

Pedro Rocha de Almeida e Castro

UFMG - Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, pedrorocha13@gmail.com

Roberto R. Romero Jr.

UFMG - Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, roberomerojr@gmail.com

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Interviewing Peter Gow—Dundee, June 24, 2017

Ana Maria R. Gomes

Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais
Brazil

Paulo Maia Figueiredo

Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais
Brazil

Pedro Rocha de A. e Castro

Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais
Brazil

Roberto R. Romero Jr.

Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais
Brazil



The interview presented below took place on June 24, 2017 in Dundee, Scotland, where Ana Gomes had come to meet Peter Gow. The idea was to open an initial dialogue about Peter's trajectory as an anthropologist, trying to bring to light fieldwork experiences and events that had not been commented on and explored in previously published material. The interview was conducted together with a group of anthropologists—Paulo Maia, Pedro Rocha, and Roberto Romero—participating online from Brazil. Courtney Stafford-Walter in Dundee and Matheus Machado Vaz in the Brazilian group took part as PhD students.

1. An Indigenous People living along the Xingu river in Brazil.
2. See Gow (2009).
3. See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/09/dilwyn-jenkins>.

All of us were very interested in knowing more closely the way Peter had proceeded in order to arrive at the insights and the analyses presented in his brilliant ethnographies with the Yine/Piro people of Amazonia. His work was then, and continues to be, a central reference for many scholars, colleagues, and students. The interview was intended to be an occasion to open a direct dialogue that could inspire and guide students. His story would be an example—one of the best!—of how to become an anthropologist; or, in other words, of how we learn with and from our companions in the field, and how these situated moments can be converted into a broader dialogue that is grounded in and deeply connected to moments during fieldwork. Or, indeed, how we learn from our interlocutors wherever we meet them—as Peter showed us in talking about his answer to a question posed by Daimã, a Yudjá¹ woman he met at Tânia Lima’s house in Rio de Janeiro.

As a direction for the interview, we agreed that we were going to talk along and across three different moments of Peter’s trajectory. The first was the initial period, the rite of passage that made him into an ethnographer of South America and, on his return to Scotland, of his home country as well. The second would be about his two main books, published in 1991 and 2001, and issues related to them. The third part would be about the more recent articles he was going to publish on the notion of acculturation, where he proposes the concept of ensemble and the idea of threshold.

It should be noted that Pete first visited the field as an undergraduate student during the 1970s, when “drug culture” was at its height and Carlos Castaneda’s books on his experiences of taking plant-based hallucinogens as apprentice of a Yaqui shaman were widely read. Moreover, as trained ethnographers, young anthropologists working in Peruvian Amazonia took it for granted that ayahuasca consumption was an appropriate, and indeed desirable, fieldwork practice.

Finally, a word about the circumstances surrounding the interview. The idea of promoting a series of meetings among veterans and apprentices in anthropology—for which we had chosen Peter Gow and Christina Toren as our first invited masters—was interrupted by a sequence of personal and private events, as well as public ones. The contingent dramatic changes—as was the loss of Peter—made us replace the idea of the meetings between masters and apprentices with a series of urgent activities and projects involving the violence and aggressions towards our Indigenous interlocutors in their lands.

Even if the dialogue was arrested in its initial move, we would like to share this very intense moment of exchange, where it was possible to talk and laugh together—as Peter often did with his particular humor and generosity—to look at each other with authentic admiration and renew our choice to practice a kind of experimental togetherness that feeds us in the face of contemporary challenges.

Question: We were thinking that we would start inspired by the question that Daimã asked you at Tânia’s house. We basically want to ask how you became “the white person of the [Yine] Indigenous people,” or [Yine’s] white.²

Peter: Oh, that’s complicated. Not really complicated—it’s just by chance. I met this guy at a party in Cambridge when I was a student, and the first thing that he asked me was if I wanted to go to Peru. So I said yes, and we went to Peru! There were five of us, rather pretentiously called the “Cambridge Expedition to Peru,” because people did that sort of thing in those days. But what we were really doing was having an adventure, and we traveled all the way around Peru. Then, I had suggested that we go visit the Asháninka people in eastern Peru, who live in the foothills of the Andes. So me and my friend Michael and his then-girlfriend Gilly went to this area called the Gran Pajonal, whereas Dilwyn,³ the guy who had asked me to come,

4. An Asháninka community by the River Ene.

5. An Indigenous People in the Brazilian state of Maranhão.

and his friend Pete went to the Ene river. When we got there, we discovered that Mike had forgotten to bring the lens of his camera. So Gilly decided that we would go to find Dilwyn and Pete in this other area on the Ene river. So we set off, and we walked for days through the forest, staying with Asháninka people, because they live in scattered little groups. We spent a week in a village that had five inhabitants. Just these five people, and that's when we first took ayahuasca. And then with this guy Alessandro we walked down to the Tambo river. An incredible, incredible trip. So we got to the Tambo, this village on the Tambo. We went upriver to this place that had a landing strip, but we didn't know where we were, basically. So we went up to this old Franciscan mission called Puerto Ocopa, and we got stuck there for weeks. We didn't have enough money to hire a plane, so we had to wait, and eventually this plane turned up, so we got to the Ene river, to this place called Cutivireni,⁴ and then we went and found Dilwyn and Pete for a few weeks. Then I got hepatitis, me and Gilly got hepatitis, so I began to feel iller and iller and iller. So we went back to Britain, and I was really sick for ages.

So then I decided to do a PhD, and I got a place in the London School of Economics, with Joanna Overing, and I was preparing to do fieldwork somewhere in Brazil, but I can't remember exactly where. Maybe it was with the Guajajara.⁵ Regardless, my house burned down, so I lost the research proposal, all the books. I'd been learning Portuguese, what have you, and I had to set out quite soon, so I wondered, where will I go? So I thought, "Okay, I speak Spanish, I've been to Peru," I knew what was going on in Peru. I didn't want to work with the Asháninka people, because it was physically incredibly difficult. They live really far apart from each other, and they walk hours and hours to visit each other, and they get drunk on manioc beer and then they say, "Let's go back," so you'd be stuck, stumbling along, drunk, behind these people. I thought, no, that's too difficult. But I'd read about these other people who lived on the Urubamba river, called Piro people, now usually referred to as Yine. So, I just went there. I went to this village called Huao because I thought it had an amazing name, but I had a bit of a bad time there. Then this guy Manuel Zapata, a school teacher, took me to visit his parents-in-law—his mother-in-law, who I call Yeye Clotilde, and her husband, Don Mauricio. They're both dead now, it's a real shame, they would have been very old. But I just took to them really instantly! And Don Mauricio said, "Well, why don't you live with us, come live with us?" The people in Huao didn't really want me there, but Don Mauricio wanted me in Santa Clara. It was quite difficult for quite a while. So I basically did fieldwork in a small community called Santa Clara. So, that is how I got there. They took me on, and I became the *compadre* of a whole load of people. But I lived with Don Mauricio and Yeye Clotilde in their house.

Question: We would like to better understand the progression by which a person enters more and more into a particular situation, how you lived and experienced moving deeper and deeper into people's lives. You experienced some very crucial moments in 1982. Do you keep these in mind? What happened to you there, do you remember particular situations, particular scenes?

Peter: I remember! One of the things [that I remember] was this massive fight in the village, which was caused by a school teacher from Lima. Luckily, Yeye Clotilde's oldest daughter, Luisa, seeing this huge fight going [on], told me to come with her. She took me to her house and said that we could just sit there and ignore it, and that changed everything, because her youngest sister, Sara, who was involved in the fight, became one of my best friends.

Sara's husband was away, off somewhere doing whatever, then he came back, and people were remarking that Pablo had come back, but I had never met Pablo, Sara's husband. So I was in the forest one day, I don't know what I was doing, but I was wandering in the forest

and I met this guy, and he said, “Oh, you must be Pedro,” and I said, “Yeah,” and he said, “I’m Pablo,” and just instantly, we became the best friends. We were really, really good friends. So it was Pablo and Sara and Don Mauricio. Yeye Clotilde was a bit difficult because, for years, I thought she didn’t speak Spanish, where actually she spoke perfect Spanish, but she wouldn’t speak Spanish to me, and would only talk to me in [Yine]. Eventually, I began to understand what she was saying. I don’t speak [Yine], but I can understand it if people speak slowly enough, or if I have a rough idea of what they are talking about.

So that was how I got in, and then everything changed, it was a different world after that. Pablo was an incredible informant—which is probably the wrong word for him—because he had worked for the Summer Institute of Linguistics, and he spoke [Yine], he was a native speaker of [Yine]. He was incredibly good at understanding what I didn’t understand. He would explain things to me incredibly well. He was a young guy, he was my age, in his early twenties, so there were a lot of things that he didn’t know, but he knew who knew things. So he would take me off to talk to people. It was a bit complicated because he was Yeye Clotilde’s son-in-law, so he wasn’t allowed to speak to her, nor she to him—the mother-in-law and son-in-law, they don’t speak to each other. But Sara could talk with her mother. Sara is a really intelligent woman, but people say that she doesn’t really speak [Yine] properly. She is also deaf, so you would say something to her and she would reply to whatever she *thought* you had asked her, which often wasn’t what you had asked her at all.

When Pablo died, it was just devastating. He had, I think, rheumatic fever, but I can’t remember what it’s called. It’s an illness that you get as a young adult. He was very, very ill, then he got better, he seemed cured, but then ten, fifteen years after the first attack, it comes back and it kills you, and that’s what killed Pablo. Very sad. And that was just awful. In fact, one of the things about it is that most of my informants are dead, and when I go now—I haven’t been there for nine years—there are a few older people who I still know but the rest of them, I don’t know who they are! They know who I am, but I look at them and think, “I don’t know who you are.” So I don’t like to go there now. I’m going with my former student Juan Pablo, and I don’t know what it is going to be like. We are only going for a day, so it shouldn’t be too bad. I always think being from a first-world demographic but working in a third-world demographic is actually quite weird, because the people, especially the men, die pretty young.

Question: One of the very important things that you talk about in your book is that you realized that you had to pay much more attention to the stories people tell. How did you come to understand this, or at what point did you realize that you had to do something differently, had to enact a change in the way that you were listening to people?

Peter: I don’t know that it was a particularly conscious thing. I was brought up like that because my father’s family was from the highlands, and they were real talkers, storytellers. So I was quite used to it. But also, I quite quickly realized that [Yine] people really like people to listen to, especially the older people. You are supposed to sit there quietly listening to them, and I just took that on. I didn’t even really think about it. Further, they were really interesting as they talked about their lives, or about things they had heard of, or what have you. They would tell these incredibly interesting stories. They are really good storytellers. And then, when they get drunk, they’re also telling stories. I guess that’s how I really got into it. Also, I was interested in Claude Lévi-Strauss, so I was really interested in the very few times when people wanted to tell me myths, which wasn’t very often because they didn’t think I would be interested in that sort of stuff. I, as it were, fell into it [...] there are loads of things that I don’t know about the [Yine] people. I have inklings of things, like I’ve recently had an inkling about the relationship between sisters and brothers, and when I sat down and thought about it, I

realized that I had never even considered it before. What used to happen to me is that women would give me food, really special plates of food, very tasty things, and they would do it very secretly, and they would say, “You eat this alone.” Which is very weird, because normally you are meant to share food, and I did share it when kids were passing by or what have you, but they would explicitly say, you do not have to share this, that this is for you. Thinking back, though, I’d actually seen this where people are in their huts and there is a guy eating with his back to everybody else because he’s been given food by his sister, and this is his food for him, and there is no expectation of sharing. I’ve read Vanessa Lea talking about the Kayapó, and how the Kayapó have this same kind of relationship between brothers and sisters, which is they are the privileged givers of food to each other, and there is no expectation of sharing. I don’t know if it’s the same here, nobody’s ever told me about it, nobody’s told me “That’s what we do,” and I’m not going to ask them when I’m there for the day, because you have to wait for that sort of thing to turn up before you start asking about it. Last time I was there, there was this thing that I wanted to know about canoes, but I tried to ask people but it’s so out of the blue that they kind of look at you and go, “Well, why would you want to know about that? Isn’t that obvious? Everybody knows that.” Most of fieldwork is waiting for something to turn up that you can then talk about.

Question: Peter, you mentioned earlier that during the first trip that you took to Peru, you took ayahuasca for the first time. Did you mention that in passing, or did it have some importance for your experience?

Peter: So this was the first time that I had taken a hallucinogen. I’d been around drugs, of course, but I had never taken a hallucinogen. And it was an incredibly powerful experience. Because this guy Alessandro, the Asháninka guy, told me to look at the horizon, and this is where it gets a bit mystical. So I was looking east at the horizon, and I didn’t know why I was supposed to be doing this. Mike and Gilly were lying down, they didn’t speak Spanish so they had no idea what he was saying, but he told me, “Look at the horizon.” So I’m coming up on ayahuasca, and then I start hallucinating, and then the moon rose, the full moon rose, it came up over these mountains. Because you are near the equator, it was rising almost due east. So I wrote this long account of my first experience with ayahuasca, and when I reread it—I would never publish it because it is sort of strange—but when I read it, I thought: “My god, what was going on there?” Because when I really think about where I was, I was looking at the moon rising over the [Bajo] Urubamba river, beyond the mountains of the Urubamba river, I was actually looking at the Urubamba, and when I told people on the Urubamba about this, they say, “Well, that’s why you came here”—well, what they say is *soga* [Sp. ‘rope’], which means the vine that brought you here. Most of the local missionaries, or most of the people like me that they’ve met, don’t take ayahuasca, or they take ayahuasca in this sort of crazy way, this sort of hippie way. But they said, “No, you take ayahuasca like us.” So I took a lot of ayahuasca while I was on the [Bajo] Urubamba, because Don Mauricio was a shaman, as was his wife, so they took ayahuasca a lot. However, they never suggested that I become a shaman myself, for some reason. And it is interesting that the only two people that Don Mauricio trained as shamans, he didn’t initiate, he never initiated people. It may be that this was simply his way of making people shamans, we just don’t know. So yes, it was very important. It would be difficult for it not to be important.

Question: Peter, you mentioned Lévi-Strauss. We were discussing how you might be one of the most Lévi-Straussian British anthropologists nowadays. We wanted to ask in what sense the project of contemporary ethnology is basically a Malinowskian realization of Lévi-Strauss’s

project, as you once wrote. So what was the impact of reading Lévi-Strauss, especially *Mythologiques*, in your intellectual and personal trajectory?

Peter: Well, it was through reading *Tristes tropiques* that I discovered what anthropology was, and I thought, “Yes, that is what I want to be.” I was just reading it as a travel book about South America, and while reading it I was really impressed, but I didn’t realize it would be the beginning of an adventure. I never really read *Mythologiques* when I did fieldwork, I’d read and had with me *The raw and the cooked, Volume 1*, but I [didn’t] really read *Mythologiques* until later. It took me two and a half years to read it cover to cover, and I was reading Proust at the same time, which is actually a really good combination, because as you reach [Volume 4 of *Mythologiques*,] *The naked man*—and he says this is about music, but then once you reach *The naked man*, you can hear the music, and you think, “Wow, this is incredible.”

I always remember how Maurice Bloch once told me that Lévi-Strauss just repeats himself, he goes on and on saying the same thing, and I said, “No, he doesn’t, every page is changing, and it gets bigger and bigger.” Stephen Hugh-Jones⁶ once said to me, “There are only three anthropologists in Britain who know what Lévi-Strauss is talking about—there’s you, there’s me, and there’s Alfred Gell.” And I said, “Well, Alfred’s dead, sadly.” And he said, “Yeah, so now there’s only two of us.” And it’s true! I think it’s actually true. When I go to, say, Brazil, or France, when you talk to people, they actually know what Lévi-Strauss is talking about, and it is really incredible! When I talk to most British anthropologists, with a few exceptions, they just don’t understand Lévi-Strauss. Some of them will admit it. But I think most people don’t know how to read Lévi-Strauss. They just think, “What is he talking about?” Whereas to me, at least now, it’s kind of obvious.

I remember something Marcio Goldman said, one time I was in Rio de Janeiro giving a talk, and I said that I disagree with Lévi-Strauss on one thing, I can’t remember what it was. But Marcio said this fantastic thing. He said, “Why don’t you just try and agree with him and see where that takes you?” So I said, “Okay, I’m never going to disagree with Lévi-Strauss again, except about what he said about Rio de Janeiro,” which I really think is wrong. That’s the one thing that he got wrong. So now I just try and I think, “What is he trying to say, what is he trying to write?” Then I had this very powerful experience when I met him with Aparecida Vilaça. The pair of us, before we met him, asked, “What if he is awful?” because you have to be very careful about meeting your heroes, because they turn out to be rather terrible sometimes. And he was just incredible, absolutely amazing! And when me and Aparecida left, we couldn’t even speak to each other, we had nothing to say to each other. So we went to this cafe near the Sorbonne, and we got some coffee and were sitting there, and Aparecida said, “What did you think?” and I said, “He was wearing the most incredible socks, these incredible green socks.” And I wanted to ask him, “Where did he buy them?” But then I thought, “No, you can’t really ask this genius something like that.” I did ask him a very interesting question about education, which he gave a very interesting answer to. Lévi-Strauss was an incredible influence on me. But, as my other former student Paolo Fortis said about the stuff I’m doing at the moment, he said, “Nobody knows what you are talking about, Pete.” He calls it my Frazerian period, which I think is quite sweet. But he said that nobody knows what I am talking about, because nobody reads Lévi-Strauss anymore! And I thought about that, and I realized, actually, that’s true, and one of the very few people who I explained the project to, a botanist friend of mine who lives in Wales, I asked if he understood, and he said, “Of course I understand!” So I thought, “Oh God, maybe it’s too biological for most anthropologists, they just won’t know what I’m talking about.” Some of them will admit as much—I have a former colleague who told me, “I have no idea what you are talking about, Pete, I am not even going to try to work through what you are saying, it’s just so different from how I think.” But

7. See Gow (2010).

8. See Lima (2002).

he studies modernity in Namibia, he's a really interesting guy. So I thought I need to start thinking of ways of explaining this project. I can explain it really simply, but it's so simple that people will either think that [it] is really stupid, or that there must be something wildly more complicated about it. If you want me to talk about it, I'll talk about it. It was first published in Mato Grosso, the first attempt to show what it is.⁷ Once you see it, it's incredibly simple. Say, if you look at the Asháninka people, they make manioc beer in a particular way. Their neighbors to the east are the [Yine]. They make manioc beer apparently the same way, but actually in a slightly different way, and the two peoples use it in different ways, even though you wouldn't actually be able to tell the difference between them on the surface. But going from the Asháninka to the [Yine], just east of the [Yine] are the Amahuaca people. Without knowing anything about the Amahuaca, just by comparing the Asháninka and the [Yine] ways of dealing with beer, you can guess what Amahuaca beer is like, and it's true.

It's not true anymore, because the Amahuaca people have taken on how the [Yine] make beer, they've adopted it, but they still remember the old days when they didn't. Because—and this is very common in the Amazon—when they make these beers, if they ferment, they throw them away. They say it's disgusting. They say it's bitter, that it makes you crazy if you drink it. So why go to the bother of making manioc beer if you are just going to throw it away? But it turns out to be quite common among Amazonian people. Because for the Amahuaca, the traditional staple diet was maize and unfermented maize beer, that was all they ate.

Question: Peter, I'd like to quote Tânia Lima in this review of your book: "Gow offers an experiment, mixing Malinowski's ethnographic method with a structural method and the Lévi-Straussian theory of myth. The result of this hybrid is a study which is Lévi-Straussian but not structuralist, Malinowskian but not functionalist."⁸

Peter: I know what she means about it not being functionalist, but I wonder what she means about it not being structuralist. I think it is really structuralist. It's definitely not functionalist, because what Malinowski meant by that, really, when you get down to it, is that everything is connected to everything else at any given point. It is not a fashionable view these days. American anthropologists especially laugh at this "context of this," "context of that." But when you really look at it, people cannot live their lives—at least people who are not mentally ill—if they're not endlessly attributing meaning, meanings that make sense [of] what's going on around them. They might be completely wrong about it, but they can't not attribute coherence to the world. Even when they attribute incoherence to the world, it is a form of a coherent attribution of incoherence. So I think that's just the nature of the beast.

I suppose what Tânia means by that it is not structuralist is that it is not Lévi-Straussian, or at least *An Amazonian myth and its history* is not Lévi-Straussian, in the sense that it's not comparing myths from neighboring peoples. I think that's presumably what she would mean by that. Because what I'm trying to show there is that you see the same transformations over time.

When Artemio told me the story about the peccaries, Julián was there, and then Juan Pablo, who was then my student, ended up living in Julián's house, and he got Julián to tell the story. Julián said, "Yes, I know this story." So he tells the story, and what's incredible about it was that obviously he knew that he had heard this story from Artemio, but he completely changes the story; not completely changes it, but he turns it into an Asháninka story—Julián was Asháninka. So he Asháninka-ized this [Yine] myth. So Juan Pablo and I had written this great little paper—well, we both really liked it, because it's really incredible! Here is an actual example of diffusion. This is a [Yine] myth that diffused to Julián, unlike anything that the Asháninka would say about peccaries. I think it is how you can actually see history happening, in this very simple thing where Julián tells this story which was his *compadre* Artemio's

story, but he retells it in this very interesting way, which is very different from the [Yine] way of telling it. And it would be interesting to hear what the [Yine] people think of it. They'd probably say, "Ah, Asháninka people say anything." But we've got this case, and I can't think of another example, where we know that this guy was there! We are witness to the fact that Julián was listening to this story, and then he retold it about fifteen or twenty years later. It's a really odd version, Julián's version.

Question: In your book as well, you refer to your work as a sort of continuation in relation to Christina Toren's work and Lévi-Strauss's work.

Peter: That's a product of talking with Christina Toren over the years. Me and Christina have discussed—really, we'll discuss anything—but we've discussed anthropology, and in particular she introduced me—not very well, at least for me personally—I mean, her introduction was brilliant, but I was a bad student—to Piaget. The really powerful thing about Christina's work, which a lot of people don't notice, is that Christina's not really interested in children, children are just what's there. But what she's interested in is the process by which people constitute their ideas about the world. One of the things that she demonstrated was that if you talked to Fijian people, they would say that the chief sits above and the woman sits below. Now, if you ask small children what that means, they'll say, "Well, just go into the *yagona* house, where they're drinking *yagona* [*kava*], and you'll see that the chiefs are sitting above and the women are sitting below," which is empirically true. But if you ask older girls, say, around twelve years old, these girls will say that the chiefs sit above and the *common people* sit below. And they make drawings in which they show chiefs and their wives sitting together. Now, they cannot possibly ever have seen this. They simply never could have seen this. What they are doing is, they are constituting for themselves something which is possible, but that you never see either, which is that if a chief's elder sister appeared, she would have to sit above him. Because older siblings are always hierarchically senior to younger siblings. The Fijians deal with this by making sure that the older sisters never, never put the chief in a position where he would feel like he had to sit below his sister. But the girls, as they come to constitute it—and they are right in a very interesting way, even though empirically they've never seen this—but as they come to be adults, they come to see this. Little kids think it's about space that chiefs sit above and women sit below, but adults come to constitute it as a quality of chiefliness, that above is where chiefs sit. Even though chiefs have to sit where everyone else thinks is above, anywhere where a chief is sitting is by definition above, and anyone else is by definition below, even though it's all on a flat surface. And that made me think, wow, that is really interesting. It is sort of the structuralist idea, almost like the idea of the conservation of volume in Piaget. I actually did this the other day, where I was filling up a big pot with another pan, and to my immense amazement, I discovered that the small pan, the saucepan, had two thirds the volume of the other pan, this much bigger pan. So I thought, "Wow, this is interesting! I am fifty-eight years old, and I can't conserve volume." I mean, kids can do that, but it's how kids come to constitute it. That's all of the Piagetian stuff. But Christina has shown that this is also true in things like gift exchange, or really anything in Fijian life; kinship, what have you, it has to be constituted. Now back to Lévi-Strauss—me and Christina have discussed this, and she said that it was exactly the same as her theory. And I said, "Well, yeah, it is the same as your theory, only on a much bigger scale." What I actually think is that what Christina has shown across the years of a child's life, what I've shown over about a hundred years on the Urubamba, and what Lévi-Strauss has shown over tens of thousands of years on the entire American continent, these are just different scales of a very similar process, which I think is, for a lack of a better word, the human mind acting itself out in the real world, going about

doing what it does in the real world. I think you could do it with anything, but people don't want to do it. Let me talk about the Scotland stuff, so that I can show you that it's true here too.

9. See Stocks (1981).

10. See Goldman (2013).

11. See Gow (n.d.).

Question: Peter, you are an ethnographically bounded ethnologist, and throughout your work there is an emphasis on ethnography. We have been thinking about the relationship between theory and ethnography, and recently Marcio Goldman has been using the idea of—well, it's not his, it's Malinowski's, but he has given it a new sheen, maybe—the idea of ethnographic theory. In your work, you also mention it as a concept—I would appreciate it if you could comment on that a little bit. What is “ethnographic theory,” if it is not an opposition between ethnography and theory?

Peter: Marcio actually introduced me to it [ethnographic theory]. God, I've read Malinowski, but I never noticed that bit, but Marcio had noticed it. What an ethnographic theory is...

Let me give an example from Peru about the Cocamilla people. When the Law of Native Communities came out, they refused to take part in it. The ethnographer, Anthony Stocks, could not understand why they refused, because it would have guaranteed their land grant. They said that they were not native people. He wrote a whole book about it called *The invisible native people*.⁹ To me, it doesn't really make sense either, but when I really thought about it, the problem with a word like “native” is that, if you speak erudite Spanish or Portuguese, or English or what have you, “native” connotes being of that place, the return of the native, what have you. But in local Amazonian Peruvian Spanish, you would never say that, you would never use the word native in those terms at all, because that's not how you say it. To say that something is of that particular place, you'd say, *es de acá nomás*, it's just from here, or *es de allá nomás*, it's just from over there. It doesn't come from anywhere else. Therefore, the word native when Cocamilla people hear it doesn't connote the idea of being from that particular place. Even though the Cocamilla people would say, “We are from here!” what they hear when you say native is “wild forest indians.” Of course, they're not wild forest indians. They are not *tapuia*, as they would say in their own language. It's a dialogue of the deaf, you are talking across purposes. In Bahia in Ilhéus, when Marcio says “*a política*” (politics), he means democracy. When they hear the word “*a política*,” when they use it, they mean chicanery! You are talking across purposes, and words do not mean the same thing! It is difficult, but you have to work out exactly what people mean by what they say, rather than presume you understand because they are speaking Portuguese, or what have you.

Christina Toren talks about it in a different way. It's the same idea, but she says to render local concepts analytical, to use local concepts to analyze the ethnography itself. I think that's also what I try to do. I mean, obviously you can't, because if you wrote it in [Yine], nobody would understand it, except for [Yine] people. So you have to do a translation, and that is of course in there, in an ethnographic theory. You have to do a translation, but you try to keep as close to the original as possible. I think Marcio's book, *Como funciona a democracia (How democracy works)*,¹⁰ is a book of genius, absolutely incredible. Brilliant book.

Question: Since you mentioned your new book on *An ethnographic theory of acculturation*,¹¹ can you talk about some of the ideas that you have already written about in a few articles on the views on the idea of acculturation that have existed through the eons and decades, probably in very different fashion from its Germanic origins, as you always mention? This idea of an ethnographic theory of acculturation also resembles a recent movement in ethnological theory and in ethnography on the idea of *mestizaje*. It seems to us that from the book, *mestizaje* goes together with the idea of acculturation; this view that they are going to go from Indigenous to mestizos, and maybe one day, although never and we know that, become white. That is

something that José Antonio Kelly has been working on, this idea of *anti-mestizaje*,¹² and also on the idea of *contra-mestizaje*, as Marcio Goldman puts it.¹³ Could you maybe find those parallels, between acculturation, *mestizaje*, *anti-mestizaje*, and *contra-mestizaje*?

12. See Kelly Luciani (2016).

13. See Goldman (2015).

Peter: I was thinking about it; I think that they are actually two totally different things. What I'm trying to recuperate about acculturation is the original German sense—not that I speak German, sadly, but the original sense of what that word meant, which was actually invented



to apply to Indigenous Amazonian people. Then it was taken up by American cultural anthropologists and then used really badly. There are very few good studies of even what they said was acculturation. There's one good study about the Havasupai people of the Grand Canyon, but otherwise there's not much of any interest. But if you use it in the way that it was used originally, it's incredibly interesting. And it makes sense in terms of the way that Peruvian Amazonian people speak about the world.

Now, let's shift on to *mestizaje*. In this book, I think I can show quite clearly that what people call mestizos in Peruvian Amazonia are actually Indigenous people, and it would be very difficult for them to be anything else, due to the nature of immigration into Peruvian Amazonia from outside. Actually, very few people immigrated, and most of them were Brazilian Jews by the way, it's actually really interesting. They were originally Maghrebi, from the Maghreb, who were traders along the Amazon, then they moved into Peru. But I think the problem with the word *mestizaje* is that people use it to cover everything. "Oh, *that's mestizaje*" or "*This is mestizaje*." But what they don't do is, as it were, an ethnographic theory of it. What do local people mean by it? A word like *mestizaje* in Peruvian Amazonia, nobody uses that word. They wouldn't know what they meant by it, except maybe some missionary or maybe an anthropologist might know what it is. They wouldn't use it in that sense. These words are used by anthropologists to mean something, but it's not so clear what they mean. They say, "This is an example of *mestizaje*," and one would think, "Well, is it?"

If you read the accounts of mestizo people in Peruvian Amazonia, they don't call themselves mestizos, they call themselves *gente*, people, *normales*! They are the default position of what people are. Mestizo, in Peruvian Amazonia at least, tends to be an insult. It's a form of exclusion; Indigenous people are excluding somebody else from wherever it is they want to exclude them from. Or it's spoken by some rich guy or woman, and they would mean somebody who is probably below them in social class. But to try to turn that into a theory? I've read loads of stuff about this, and there's all this other stuff on things like *chicano*, which is fine. I have no problem with that, an anthropology of *mestizaje*, and that's great if that's what people want to talk about, but to try to turn it into a thing? I don't know.

To finish this, I have no idea what José Kelly and Marcio are doing with this concept of *anti-mestizo*, but I'd be interested to find out. I can't really comment on that without just being ignorant. I'm sure that what they are doing is really interesting, they are both very smart guys.

Question: Let's go back a little, to the argument about history, about the Indigenous and history. I'd like you to comment a little on something that appears to be there when you are talking about Scotland, on kinship and territoriality—which has a lot more to do with land than with children these days. Maybe this is a way to provoke you to speak a little bit about Marxism, which we'd like to hear about from you. In the other interview you declared, and it is written, that you were a Marxist, and Joanna Overing was upset that you were a Marxist. And then afterwards, you said that you were a Marxist now. So, history, what kind of history, which history are we speaking about, if you could comment on this issue?

Peter: The thing about Indigenous history, at least for the Urubamba, which is quite unusual for Amazonia—in fact, anywhere—is that their historical archive on the lower Urubamba effectively starts in 1542. So you've got these centuries of knowledge about these people, by Amazonian standards it's quite rich, because loads of missionaries were there for centuries, and travelers and what have you. Because the Urubamba is close to Cusco, there is a center of literary accumulation next to this area which is remote, it remains quite difficult to get to. So you've got this archival history, on the one hand, and then you have what Indigenous people say about the past on the other. And these two things are not the same thing, because the

archival stuff is what outsiders—missionaries, travelers, whatever—found interesting about what they saw. Whereas the Indigenous stuff is about another thing, it is really about kinship. It is about how we came into being from older generations, and ultimately it comes back to mythic times. But obviously, these two things are happening at the same time.

So you can put them together. But it's not clear to me why you would do that. A very good example of this is my former student Marta Krokoszynska. She has found—she's Polish—she's found this whole archive of material in Polish about a Polish colony, which was established—or at least, which they tried to establish, on the Urubamba. And they were there for a long time, and there are these incredible photographs, a really astonishing collection of photographs of the Shipibo girls' initiation ritual, really wonderful photographs. Then there's this one book with a photograph of Yeye Clotilde's father and the description of him, Maximiliano Gordón was what he was called.

But if you ask people—I was astonished by this—when people are telling you about the history of the Urubamba, they occasionally mention that there were *polacos* there, they say, at that time that the Polish people were there. I knew that one Polish guy had gone through that area and killed himself, shot himself in the mouth with a shotgun in the middle of nowhere, really an incredibly strange story. So I thought that they meant him, but they didn't mean him at all, they meant something else. What they meant was this group of people who wrote all of this stuff. And there is this incredibly interesting book which was translated into English, and suddenly another world has opened up. But [Yine] and Asháninka people don't seem to really remember this terribly well. It's like all of us, where things that were found important at one point become utterly unmemorable later on, even though with the archive you can prove that they were very important at one point. It's like the death of Princess Diana, which was incredibly traumatic at the time, whereas people now have difficulty remembering, despite all of the loads of television. I wasn't particularly upset when Diana died. But I bet you were crying. I was, for some reason.

Anyway, there's that stuff. When Marta showed me all this stuff about the Polish people, she was incredibly interested in it, because she works in Peruvian Amazonia, and all these Polish people were there. I said, "Wow, that is really interesting," because people never even mention these people, and I didn't realize that there were so many of them and they were there for so long.

But then I was thinking about it, and I remember once Don Mauricio was telling me something, and he said that it happened just after the Japanese people left. And I nodded, and he said that it was before the Costa Ricans came. I remember writing this down, and I had no idea what he was talking about. And it's entirely possible that if you go to Japan or Costa Rica, there's this huge amount of archival data about these people who were there briefly and then disappeared. There was a funny hidden colony of Spanish hippies at one point on the Urubamba, which probably now, nobody would remember. I remember because I met them, they were really odd people. They were vegetarians. They didn't last, obviously. They suffered from serious malnutrition. They had to live off of Manioc, for god's sake.

Anyway, there's all of these things which you can reconstruct from the archive, which aren't necessarily salient to the local people. I mean, here we are, sitting in Dundee, and this is a good example of this. I regularly ask normal, working-class Dundonian people where their ancestors came from. Now, anywhere else, for example myself, people can point to the ruins of where their ancestors came from. But if you ask Dundonian people, they'll say, "No we are just Dundonians." So I'll ask, "But where did you come from before you were Dundonians?" And you can get them to admit that the question is interesting, but they have no memory of it. If you go just twenty miles down the road to Perth, everyone in Perth will know exactly where they came from before they lived in Perth. In Dundee, it is not salient where you came

from, where you come from is Dundee. Whereas in Perth or in Edinburgh, it is salient where your family came from. It's like French people, they know the village where their ancestors came from. What was the next business?

Question: Why is it that people in Dundee don't have an idea of their ancestry? What do you think happened here?

Peter: Why it disappeared in Dundee, I think, is because it has a very strong working-class tradition, so they simply identify themselves as Dundonian working-class people and drop all the stuff about where they came from. Obviously, they come from the highlands, where everyone comes from in Scotland. Although the Irish people will tell you they are from Ireland, the ones in Lockheed (Lockheed is a part of Dundee). If you tell them that they are from Dundee, they'll say, "No, I'm from Lockheed," even though it is a part of Dundee. They're strongly associated with Irish Catholic migration, so they will say, "We are Irish," but most Dundonians won't. It's an amazing contrast to say you are not Dundonian, but you are Irish people from Lockheed. I've never got anybody to say anything more than that they are from Perth, that's about as far as they will go. It's interesting. Come to Dundee, it's a fascinating place.

Question: Peter, let's get back to the Marxism issue. You are a Marxist, or at least you told your supervisor that you were. I think it would be interesting if you could comment on this.

Peter: I would say that I am a Marxist. I am not very well read in Marxist literature. I've read more Engels than Karl Marx. I've never read the *Grundrisse*, or that sort of stuff. But I have read the *Critique of political economy, Capital volume 1*. And I just can't see any reason to think it's wrong. I mean, why wouldn't you be a Marxist? I understand people who I really respect, like Joanna, who isn't a Marxist because for her—she's American—Marxism is associated with a very doctrinaire tradition of Marxist thought. Similarly, somebody might say, "Oh, you are a Marxist, so you think this, this, and this." I would respond, "I said I was a Marxist, I didn't say I was a Leninist, that's a completely different thing." I once accused Terence Turner of being an Althusserian, and he hit the roof! I said, "Well, Terry, if the cap fits, wear it." I've never been an Althusserian, or anything like that. I don't think Marx explains everything, or that Marxism explains everything, but it explains an awful lot. Look around you, all of this has a history. My real criticism of Marx, and of Engels as well, would be their inevitableness—the "that is going to turn into this"—their evolutionist stuff. Marxists in England say, "Well, that's the way it is under Late-Capitalism." I always think that this "Late-Capitalism" seems to be pretty enduring for a "late" anything. It's been going on for decades now. I think that the historical inevitableness is the worst facet of Marxism. When you read stuff about India or China, you have to think, what nonsense. I really shocked a Russian friend of mine by telling him I was a Marxist. He said, "You seemed to be such a nice guy, why would you be a Marxist?" I said, "Obviously, what Marxism means to you and what it means to me are two completely different things." He lived under actually existing socialism.

Question: Can we make a return to the question of history? You said that you were interested in the local discourse about history, but can we think about the Indigenous people who come to the University and are now writing a different kind of research or history? This is what I'm experiencing at UFMG [Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais], where we have a lot of Indigenous students, and they love to write about their culture, about their history, about

their language, so these subjects are very present now. Do you have any expectations about these new histories that the Indigenous are just beginning to write?

14. See Mehinaku (2010).

15. Bruna Franchetto, anthropology and linguistic professor at the Museu Nacional, Rio de Janeiro.

Peter: That's really interesting. I don't know enough about it, to be quite honest. I've read Mutuá Mehinaku,¹⁴ and I thought that his thesis was really interesting. He's a really smart guy. Let's put it this way, there are two things. On the one hand, I can understand how, when confronted with, say, higher education, Indigenous people, for historical reasons, might want to write about their own culture, or what they understand to be their own culture, which is what Mutuá Mehinaku has done, and he has done it in a very interesting way. Bruna [Franchetto]¹⁵ wouldn't let him do it in a not very interesting way. So I can see that. What I think is the more problematic is... Magnus Course told me this really interesting thing, which is that loads of Mapuche people in Chile do Master's degrees and become high school teachers, and what not. And they have to write a thesis for the Master's degree, and all of them write about Mapuche stuff. So one idea that he had as a project for the future was to sit down and read all of these theses and see what exactly is going on. And that's the other side, it's that if you are a middle class white Chilean and you are doing a Master's thesis, you can basically write about what you would like, anything. But if you are a Mapuche, the expectation is that you write about Mapuche people. That's the dangerous bit, when it becomes a sort of ghettoization. Where it becomes—and I don't know if they do this in Brazil, but when they come back from vacation and you write an essay about what you did on your holiday, little kids used to have to do that—the underlying theme for these Indigenous people that they should write about themselves. White people, we write about whatever we feel like. Because we are white people. We don't feel obliged to write about ourselves. I'll come back to that, because I do feel obliged to write about myself.

I met this guy, let me give you a really incredible example of this. I was in the SALSA conference in Texas in San Antonio, and I met this really nice guy, and I can't remember his name, but he was White Mountain Apache, and he lived on the White Mountain Apache reservation. He was studying anthropology. So I asked him what he wanted to do, and he told me that he really wanted to go to Amazonia, but his teachers, his advisors, told him that he should go study the White Mountain Apache. And I asked him, "Why?" And he said that they told him that since he was White Mountain Apache, he should go and study them. They said that it would be easy for him to get access to them because he was from there. But he said he was interested in Amazonia, not White Mountain Apache. He said, "I am White Mountain Apache, I don't want to know anything more about them, I am one of them." And they said, "No, no, no, you shouldn't go to Amazonia to do your fieldwork." So he asked, "So who should go to Amazonia to do fieldwork?" I won't name names, but he asked this question to his advisor, who basically said, white people. She didn't say it in that way, but obviously he got that, and that was what he heard her saying. I said, "That is ridiculous."

Question: Two comments, Peter. I asked this question to our Pataxó students—we have many Pataxó people in our course—I asked them why they are always proposing to study their own group. Often, they are even studying in the same village, they don't want to study anything that they don't know. When I insisted (more than once) on this point, a young Pataxó told me that he understood my point. But he said, "We can study that later on, later we can move to another place, but now we want to write our own histories like that." I think we have to understand more; we have different positions around this. Now we have a Xakriabá student who's interested in studying the Xavante. It's the same linguistic familiar root, and they know that they lack some information, but it's somehow still the same. What does it mean for somebody to study, as an anthropologist, another group or your own group? To finally arrive at your here and now, because you are doing this now.

Peter: I agree, a Xakriabá studying the Xavante would be very good. I mean, the other thing that I was thinking while you were saying that, [is that] I think that the Pataxó response was excellent. What I'm doing at the moment, and what I've been doing for a while, actually—it started as a hobby, but then I decided to give a more serious point to it—but it's really a study of where my father comes from, which is in the highlands, just north of here. It's a valley called Glen Tilt, the valley of the Tilt river. So my ancestors lived there until 1785, when the owner, who was a Jacobin, evicted them from their little farm. And this story is mentioned in *Capital*, in a footnote in *Capital*, as being notorious. What I am trying to do now is look at social transformation in this area, the Glen Tilt area, from 1746—which was the date of the battle of Culloden, which was the end of the Jacobite uprisings and the beginning of huge transformations in the highlands—till 1965. That sounds arbitrary, but it's the date of a study, a linguistics study of this area, of a dialect of Gaelic which they spoke, which nobody speaks anymore; it's more or less completely died out, this dialect.

In this study by this Irish Linguist are my relatives. It's really interesting to see yourself being studied, as it were. It is really intriguing. So the project is about that, and I am trying to see how I could do it. I want to write a book about it, which is very pretentiously called *An anthropology for Scotland* at the moment, but obviously I'll never get that published. My target audience is my nieces and nephews, or my great niece, for that matter. It's just a way of telling them this story. This is what anthropology is, just without all the long words—ontology, that's not going to be in this book. But how exactly I'm going to set about doing it is quite difficult.

There is this central thing, which is a *taigh* in Gaelic, which means the house. I am going to use the house to focus [on], because houses are enduring things, they cross history. At the same time, they are focused on transforming social relations. The data on that stuff is actually quite good. Because that's something that people, either travelers or local Scottish people, highland people, were interested in. There's a whole load of other things, too. I can use it to talk about nature, wilderness—which is a big thing now—tartan, music, and so forth. I can cluster them all around the concept of the house, which is of course related to the Lévi-Straussian notion of the *société amazonienne*, which is exactly what these things were, they were named. They were tenancies, basically. Except the guy who actually owned everything, everyone was a tenant. There's a really interesting thing where they had a tenancy contract, but tenants who held that tenancy should be hereditary, passed down patrilineally. If you really follow their logic, I think that you begin to understand that thing, which is really most mysterious about highland Scotland, which is what a clan is. Everybody thinks they know what a clan is, but if you read the literature, nobody knows what a clan is. They are named, but the names are later English inventions, and it's not clear to me what they mean. What I am trying to work out now is who married who in the highlands. There is loads of history written about that stuff, but no anthropologist has ever looked at it. So they say, "Oh, they married their cousins." And you think, "*Wow, that is really interesting*" [sarcastic inflection]. But that's really about as far as they go. So I'm going to have to hunt down some genealogies to figure this out. There's apparently one, the Macpherson genealogy, [which] says who was marrying who. What they really didn't like was when they married lowland women, women from around here. They really didn't like that. Because they didn't speak Gaelic. Nobody could understand what they were talking about.

Question: It just occurred to me, hearing Ana talk about these Pataxó students, that they had to first study themselves, and now your current project studies Scotland and Scottish history. It made me think about what the difference would be in your case. Could you have done this work without having first been to Amazonia? I don't know if that makes sense. So the Pataxó had to study themselves before they could study something else. Would you have studied yourself without being able to see Scotland through Amazonian eyes?

Peter: The short answer is, no. I am not saying that nobody else could do it, but... So there's this guy called Paul Basu who wrote a really interesting study on memory, on popular memory, of Highland Clearances in an area that's called Strathnaver, which is where my great uncle lived. And I read it, and it is really interesting, but what he has a problem with, what he struggles with, is that apparently nobody is very interested. Everybody there knew what he was talking about, they had heard of the Highland Clearances—and these people were cleared really violently—but they are not actually that interested. And when I was reading it, I thought, “Well, that doesn't surprise me at all!” The very concept of Highland Clearance really isn't a highland idea, oddly enough. What it is, it is really a Canadian idea, Canadians of highland Scottish origin, or Australians, or whoever. They are very interested in the issue of Highland Clearance. Whereas people in Scotland just aren't, because it's not their lived world! It happened a long time ago—you can still see the ruins everywhere, but it's just not something that they find particularly interesting. So without having done fieldwork in the Urubamba, if I had started out doing this stuff in Scotland, I would have spent years misunderstanding things, trying to get people to talk about things that people just really aren't interested in, and I would have ignored things that they might be really interested in. I would have thought that they were either boring or wrong. So with this, I've made the conscious decision that I'm not going to be doing any real, proper ethnography. The most ethnography that I am going to do is that I am going to ask my sister and one of my brothers and my cousin Jean for bits of information about things that I've come to be interested in. While I have my version in my memory, I would like to check with them to see whether their versions tally with mine. I'm not going to go into that area and start asking people questions. Because it's really historical work. I am going to use what I know about doing ethnography to analyze this stuff. Now, this place is—to give you an idea of why I wouldn't want to do ethnography—it is mainly retirement homes, of English people who've bought the houses. Now, it is a really beautiful place, the houses are really beautiful, but it's mainly retirees, and why would I want to study retirees, or at least retirees from England? They've physically lived there, but I don't know what their connection to the place is.

Question: Your work in general has great importance for the field of aesthetics. We would like to speak about this. We know that when you were a professor in an art history department [at the University of East Anglia], you participated in a debate on the question of whether aesthetics is a “cross-cultural” category.¹⁶ On the other hand, this week here in São Paulo, we were all in a major seminar, at the great São Paulo Museum of Art (MASP), about Indigenous histories. There, they have scheduled, until 2020, a series of expositions in the museum about Indigenous histories. What do you think of this approach to Indigenous Peoples in the field of art, especially regarding contemporary Indigenous artists? There are Indigenous artists who work within art circles. For example, yesterday I saw a piece on Shipibo Conibo artists in Lima making murals, etc. In the end, how should one approach aesthetics, anthropology studies of Indigenous art, with a view to a new generation of Indigenous people in the field of art?

Peter: Well, I don't really know how to answer that, but it doesn't really surprise me. I can't really think of any examples, and I certainly don't have any examples from my own fieldwork. I know that Juan Pablo has an Asháninka friend who paints, who works in acrylics and is a sort of traditional western-style painter, and he's actually a very good painter. He paints ayahuasca visions, for which there is a market. So I really don't know.

I have worked in an art history department, but I haven't really worked with anything related to art, or Indigenous art specifically, for a long time. I have just finished a paper on European history paintings—for my sins, what do I know about that?—but it's really about

Napoleon, and it's connected to the Scottish stuff, but I haven't really worked on that.¹⁷ I know an anthropologist who works in roughly the same area, who wrote this really interesting PhD about cars. And I asked her, "Why cars?" And she said, "What I really wanted to study was their art, but they would not let me do it." They let her see it, because they wanted to show her that they were still doing the dreaming stuff, but it was absolutely forbidden to reproduce it at all. So what you're actually seeing is what used to be called tourist art—which is actually a quite pejorative term—but there are a lot of really intriguing things going on there. And I imagine that in the Upper Rio Negro, there are a lot of things which are happening which Indigenous people do not want other people to see; it's not for outside consumption.

It's kind of like when Elizabeth Ewart¹⁸ and I went to the Hopi reservation. They had this extraordinary ritual, absolutely gobsmacking, but there were only three tourists there because everybody says that they don't do that stuff anymore. We'd gone there, and all the Hopi were telling us that we had to go see the ritual, and we thought it was going to be some sort of cheesy ritual, but it was an amazing ritual. Elizabeth said, "My god, these people look like they are the Kayapó!" There were incredible macaw-feather headdresses and it was unbelievable. But, because they don't like to record anything, or photograph anything or draw anything, people assume that they just don't do it anymore, because you don't see it on television! You see it on YouTube, surprisingly enough, they've started to show them on YouTube. I think that's because they've realized—they don't show any of the sacred stuff, they would never show that—but they show what they call social dancing. If you go to YouTube and type in "Hopi buffalo dance," you'll see some really interesting little YouTube things, with some really interesting production values. The very prestigious village Walpi—wow, did they get a real camera man to do their buffalo dance recording. In the less prestigious villages, there is a lot of camera shaking, albeit much more animated.

Question: Peter, last question: in one of your latest articles, there is a subtitle that interested us all here: "Transformational relations between neighbouring societies."¹⁹ The idea of how to compare societies that are in contact and what is going on with them. We would like to hear a little bit from you about this new phase in your work that you are going into now. So can you comment on this cluster of ideas that you have been working on over these past ten years?

Peter: This really comes from Lévi-Strauss. Once you get to the last chapter of *Mythologiques*, which is not the finale, but just the last chapter, then he suddenly comes up with this notion of the *ensemble*. To publish the paper in *Tellus* in Mato Grosso do Sul, I had to force Bia Perrone²⁰ to translate that, but, because I said, "Look, I am not translating that into Portuguese," it had to be her. And she was a little annoyed about it, but she agreed to do it. She was doing it paragraph by paragraph, and I was making her jump forward, but she said that she would do it, and I consulted Eduardo [Viveiros de Castro]²¹ and loads of other people, and what we came up with is *conjunto*. That is how it is translated into Spanish and Portuguese—*conjunto*. So I started to get really interested in this kind of stuff. Because of things like the example with the manioc beer, you can tell Indigenous people are interested in this stuff as well. They will sit and talk about things that you might think that Indigenous people would be horrified by, but they are not. There are other things that you would think that they wouldn't mind that they are horrified by. But they are intrigued by these things. I once heard this guy telling a myth. It is actually a myth about a Spanish *conquistador* called Lope De Aguirre, and he was telling it to a group of [Yine] people and Asháninka people who just happened to be there. He was a mestizo guy. So this myth that he told, the [Yine] tell this myth, but they tell it as an expedition to get salt. When the Asháninka people tell it, [they tell it] as an origin story about the [Yine] people. When I ask people who have heard this story if it was like their story, they

17. See Gow (2018).

18. Elizabeth Ewart, anthropology professor at the University of Oxford.

19. See Gow (2014).

20. Beatriz Perrone-Moisés, anthropology professor at the Universidade de São Paulo.

21. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, anthropology professor at the Museu Nacional, Rio de Janeiro.

said, “No, it’s his story”—he’s from a place called Juanjui.²² I thought, “How is it possible that they can hear these things and say that they are totally different, yet they hear other things and they say that it is exactly the same, even if they are completely different? What are their notions of sameness and difference?” There is another thing from *Anthropology of this century*,²³ where I give the two examples of the myth, where Gerald Weiss thinks that the myth is borrowed, where if you actually look at it, it is completely different from other versions. Then, when you get this other thing with kinship, there are three different kinship systems, which are incredibly different to each other, and I cannot get people to comment on the differences. It can’t be that they don’t notice, but they will not discuss it. They will gladly sit down and talk about two birds which are rather similar and point out the differences between them, but there are certain forms of cultural variation they don’t talk about. They, of course, do all of this perspectival stuff, where they will say things like, “Maize is to the Amahuaca people as plantains are to us, maize is the plantain of the Amahuaca people.” They’ll ask me what is the plantain of the Scottish people, and I never knew what they were talking about, until one day I answered, “Potatoes,” and they went, “Oh, alright.” Because as a type of human, we have to have our own type of plantain, and it’s potatoes in the Scottish case. I’ve tried to explain this to people, and I’ve tried to explain it to myself, and sometimes I get it, and then sometimes it just evaporates.

The only other person who really gets it is Stephen Hugh-Jones, because he is doing the same thing off of the upper Rio Negro, doing what he calls “the ethnography of a region.” He says that it isn’t a comparison, but it is actually an ethnographic monograph of an entire region. I was down in Cambridge last year, and we ended up talking about it, and it was incredibly interesting. If you want to know what it is about, read the *Tellus* article, it’s called “Um cline mítico na América do Sul Ocidental: explorando um conjunto levistraussiano.”²⁴ You can get it online.

Question: Can I ask a little question on comparison? Sometimes, we take comparison to be a step after the ethnography—after you’ve collected the data, you do a comparison. That is often what distinguishes anthropology for some people, what differentiates it from ethnography strictly speaking. I was thinking that this Lévi-Straussian idea of comparison might be a way of thinking about ethnography as increasingly comparative. Do you think we can think of it in that way?

Peter: I don’t know how ethnography can be anything but comparative. [At] the least, you are comparing yourself to what you are seeing. Why are they doing it that way? So I think it is intrinsically comparative. What I think the problem is [is] about traditional forms of comparison, at least the structural-functionalist ones, where they seem to have been in search of something underneath, something profound. Stephen Hugh-Jones gave me the example of Audrey Richards of the four societies that she compares,²⁵ and Edmund Leach quite reasonably said that’s just the product of comparing things;²⁶ you are bound to find nothing really there, which was a bit rude. I can comment on this. One thing which worries me about, or at least that I think about—and this is especially true in America, not so much true in Britain—is that fieldwork has become a rite of passage. I was reading this thing recently, about how fieldwork is just a rite of passage before you get onto your career. I can’t imagine wanting to be that way, but I have met loads of people who are like this. I can’t imagine wanting to be an anthropologist who thought that fieldwork was awful or boring. To me, that is the good bit. Teaching and all of the rest of it is more of just a “head-fuck,” as they say in America. But I meet people who say that they only did their fieldwork so that they could have a career in anthropology, in academic anthropology. But that is crazy, I never chose this career! It became

22. The capital of the northern Peruvian province of Mariscal Cáceres.

23. See Gow (2014).

24. See Gow (2010).

25. See Richards (1950).

26. See Leach (1961).

my “*ganha pão*” [Portuguese: livelihood], as they say, because I never chose it. But people who said that they always wanted to be an academic anthropologist? Why? If I could think of another way of making money... I mean, that is why I retired, because I suddenly realized that there was a way of making money without teaching rich kids about stuff that they aren't interested in, or things that I care about that they don't care about, which I find really painful. I would say, “Oh, the [Yine] said this,” or “Pablo said this, but he didn't tell me this,” so I could tell it to a hall of rich assholes, so that they could get a degree in whatever.

Eduardo once said a really good thing when he was talking about Marcela Coelho de Souza's²⁷ thesis defense; he said, and I've never heard it said this well: “If it is illegitimate for Marcela to do this, what is the point of doing ethnography in the first place? If somebody can't go and compare them all, if that isn't a legitimate project in its own right, then why would we do any of this in the first place?” I thought that was really interesting. Jean Lave was telling me about how the Harvard Central Brazil Project had fallen apart, and I said that it didn't fall apart because Marcela completed it. But she completed it as a Brazilian woman, so no one is going to take it very seriously. And it is in Portuguese! It is an incredible piece, you learn more about these people than from any other piece. It's called, *O traço e o círculo*,²⁸ which should be published. So that is what I think about comparison. One of the problems with the *ensemble* stuff is that I don't think that you could do it as a doctoral project. You actually have to do that sort of monographic ethnography. Unless you are really, really good and really, really lucky, then you might be able to do it. I don't want people to think that this is multi-sited research, because it definitely isn't, but it's just stuff that comes up as you observe things. I've got to publish this thing at some point. Renato Sztutman²⁹ told me to do it years ago, and I did but never gave it to him, which is rather stupid. In southwestern Amazonia, there is a [Yine]-speaking group of people called the Kuniba people. And they lived on the Juruá river. Then, in 1912, they were massacred, and the survivors, they were taken to Manaus, and then they were taken up the Rio Branco, where the survivors got involved in contact with other people. One of them, a woman named Carolina, stayed in Manaus, and she told [Curt] Nimuendajú the origin myth of the moon. This is where it gets really interesting. For the Kanamari, who were neighbors and friends of the Kuniba, or for the Kaxinawá, we know what their version of the origin story of the moon was at that point, around 1912, and it was very different from the Kuniba version. Then, over the course of the twentieth century, the Kuniba version has spread to every other Indigenous People in the area. How? That is my question. For a while, I thought that this was in defiance of the second law of thermodynamics. A community disappears, but their mythical origin story of the moon is picked up by all of the neighbors. How could that possibly happen, what kind of causality is at play here? But you can see it, and for the Kaxinawá you can see it happening in real time. And then it stabilized. Kaxinawá origin myths were always shifting until about the 1960's, and then they stabilized. It's this myth about this guy having sex with his sister, and she paints his face. But the Kaxinawá did not tell that myth before then, and we know that for a fact because of [XIX to XX century Brazilian historian] Capistrano de Abreu. That's my sort of real *ensemble* that I am looking at. How on earth did that happen? I can think of an explanation that isn't in defiance of the second law of thermodynamics, but it's an interesting one, which is that the neighbors probably knew that myth anyway, but they knew it as a Kuniba myth, not as their own, and it was only later that they started to adopt it as their own story. So you've got things like that.

There's another example of this Kaxinawá who says, “This is what my father told me,” this older guy, and you know he couldn't have heard it from his father, because they didn't tell that myth at all! We know they didn't tell that myth. We have actual data on it. And that is where it gets really interesting.

To go to the Europe thing, I think these patterns are everywhere, but it's much harder for us to see. There is a line across Britain, a kind of slanty line, and north and west of this line,

27. Marcela Coelho de Souza, anthropology professor at the Universidade de Brasília.

28. See Coelho de Souza (2002).

29. Renato Sztutman, anthropology professor at the Universidade de São Paulo.

30. Steve Rubenstein, anthropology professor at the University of Liverpool, passed away in 2012.

31. See Gow (n.d.). The book was never published.

if you ask people about Halloween, they will say, “Oh, you mean ‘guising,’” or whatever term they use. If you go south and east of this line, and you ask about Halloween, they’ll say that it’s a disgusting American thing that was imported here from the “States,” and that it is awful. This phenomen[on] is totally consistent. One side or the other side. The line coordinates with nothing else; not Scotland/England, not Catholic/Protestant, nothing, it is just this line. And it is really defined. When I tell people about it, whenever you mention it, you know exactly where everyone in the room comes from, because some will say, “No, that’s an awful American thing,” and others will say, “Oh, that’s quite enjoyable.” And there must be some explanation!

Here’s another example: in Dundee, we’ve got this bridge, the bridge to Fife is right here. If you cross the bridge, I can’t understand what the people in Fife are saying when they are talking in Scots. You keep going further south and you get to Edinburgh, which is where I am from, and I understand what they are saying, because for some reason, people in Dundee and Edinburgh speak the same dialect. Go a bit further north to Aberdeen, or something—forget it, I can’t understand what they are saying. So these things must be everywhere. Maybe not so much in Brazil or the United States of America, where you’ve got these settler societies. That would erase them, I think, although maybe not. I mean, people in Rio de Janeiro are completely different than people from São Paulo.

Question: So why not the indigenization of modernity?

Peter: I think it’s just there! I think it’s there, because it is very hard for people like us to see. I had a really great conversation with the late, great Steve Rubenstein³⁰ about this. An example of it would be how people like me walk around the world, thinking that we are living in a modern society. But then, when you travel, you discover that what other people think is modernity is different than what I think modernity is. I was shocked when I went to a nice place in America and realized how old everything is, because they came into “modernity” way before everybody else. So they have these extremely strange air conditioning things. Things are strangely old-fashioned in the United States, but they think of that as modernity, and then they come to Britain and they think, “Wow, this is really old-fashioned,” which in a sense is true. So I think that modernity is intrinsically Indigenized. What else could it be? Can you imagine somebody living their whole life in modernity? I can’t imagine it, it would be monstrous. The only people who I know who have even attempted such a thing are people like architects, because they are so committed to modernity, and they feel that they have to bring it into their lives. Which is a little pointless. So this book, *Audacious innovations in Peruvian Amazonia*,³¹ is really about Indigenous modernity. There’s a chapter about city life, and from what little we know about city life in Peruvian Amazonia—and it’s very little, actually; even though you think you know this part of the world, there are very few ethnographies that have been done. If you look at it, it makes complete sense in terms of mixed blood. It is just simply a transformation of mixed blood. Money becomes more important than food, food becomes more precarious and money becomes more important, and that is a very minor adjustment. In conclusion—and I am very proud of it—I point out that the concept of money is demonstrably older in Peruvian Amazonia than the concept of food. What they would call “food” is plantains, and plantains are post-Columbian. Money, the word for money in [Yine] is [inaudible], and we know that it is way pre-Columbian, so they had a concept of money before they had a concept of food. I mean, obviously that’s just me, it’s a sort of card trick that I am doing. It is interesting to think about.

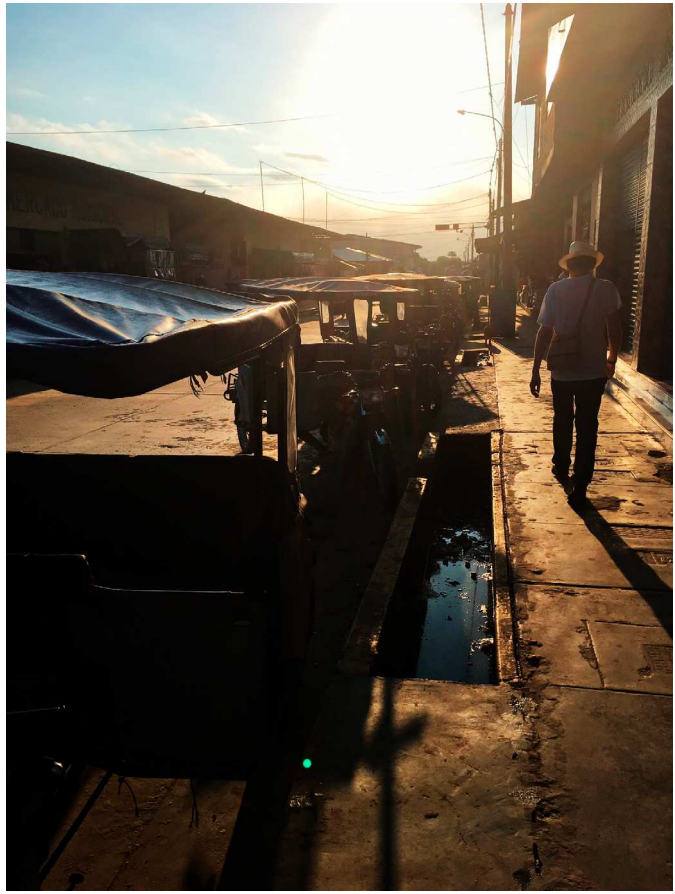
Then you’ve got all of these things that archaeologists are finding, these huge cities. When I went to the Panará, the Panará were recent arrivals in that area, but the entire length of the airstrip was covered in broken pottery. And I asked Elizabeth to ask the Panará about it, and

they said that their ancestors had done it, and then they thought about it and said, “No, there were other people who were here before.” It must have been a massive, massive community. These things that Michael Heckenberger is finding in Kuikuro, and what Eduardo Neves is finding on the Rio Negro. There is obviously some mysterious stuff in Amazonia, really mysterious stuff.

Question: Do you have time for another question? It is related to Ana’s question. In your article about the “double twist,” you mention that, in European folklore and in other ancient mythologies, there are different forces at play. In Europe, there are complex mechanisms of homogenization. But in America and here in South America, we have the myth as a complex mechanism of heterogenization. What I understand you are saying is that where you apply the canonical form and the transformation of transformations that happen in the thresholds works only for this kind of *ensemble*, like the one we have here with the Asháninka and the [Yine]. What I want to ask is, thinking about so-called globalizations, where Indigenous people lose their entire culture, how do those kinds of transformations and thresholds occur in this sort of *ensemble*, dealing with these different mechanisms, one with mechanisms of homogenization and the other with mechanisms of heterogenization?

Peter: This is a really big issue. To use the European example, the reason I thought that was interesting was because Boas had used it to think about the age of these things. He said that the homogeneity was due to age and heterogeneity due to novelty. There is, of course, no way that works, and you can think of much better explanations of that. Particularly if you look at the really fascinating stuff that Lévi-Strauss has commented on Tsimshian mythology from northern British Columbia, where each household, essentially a clan, had their own version of every myth. So people sitting in one [household] and people sitting next door have completely different versions of the same myth, like the myth of Asdiwal, totally different versions. But it’s not just that they are a little different, they are intentionally different. There’s this great film, David Attenborough, actually, asking this Kwakiutl woman about Boas. And she says that he knew nothing about them, that everything he said about them is untrue. So he asked why that was, and she said that “He only talked to those people over there, in that hut, and they don’t know anything, he should have come and talked to my family, we really know this stuff.” So they are sitting there, differentiating themselves constantly. Whereas Europeans—well, I suppose at the moment, we are trying to differentiate ourselves from the Europeans again in this really stupid way—but Europeans will bring up things like “Little Red Riding Hood” or “Goldilocks.” Now, if you actually look at these stories, which people say are told the same all throughout Europe, they are actually not, they are told in slightly different forms. So the oldest known version of Goldilocks is from Scotland, and it’s not about bears at all, it’s about a fox, an old woman and a fox. So that stuff is going on, but Europeans came to see themselves as similar in ways which they are not. They are not in any way as similar to each other as they think that they are. You can see this if you look at kinship terminology. I used to give the first few lectures of my European Kinship Terminology course, and then at the end there would always be this little troop of Polish people who [would] come up and say that what I said wasn’t true in Polish. Polish has a distinct word for a mother’s brother, which none of the other continental languages have. The Swedish and the Norwegians do as well. And there are historical reasons for that, which is really interesting.

So we walk around in the world with people like us thinking that we are much more alike with each other than we actually are, until you start talking to somebody and you realize that they have a version of reality that is just utterly different. You don’t have to go to the Upper Rio Negro to do that, it is right next door to you; you just haven’t bothered to ask, you just assume that they are the same. This is what Christina’s work is about.



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Images at the beginning: photograms from the video-recording produced in June 2017 by Ana Gomes.

Images with scenes in the field (1979) by Gilly Watts and Mike Bowles, kindly provided by Cecilia McCallum.

Final images: Peter with Yine students and Peter in Atalaya (2017) by Juan Pablo Sarmiento Barletti.

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