

Introduction

Strathern's Redescription of Anthropology

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In 2007 a seminar was held at the Centre for Research in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences to discuss Marilyn Strathern's Huxley Memorial Lecture 'A Community of Critics' (2006), with the author there to answer questions. At one point, it was asked whether or not she was arguing that individual academic disciplines generate better critical debate than interdisciplinary work.¹ Strathern smiled, raised her eyebrows slightly and pulled subtly at the audience with her hands. '*I am trying to draw people into the conversation*', she said. Although the remark may have seemed offhand or even evasive, Strathern was in fact directing the audience to the centre of her text and her anthropology more generally: 'Critics find themselves *drawn* – precisely by their own interest – into other people's agendas . . . To argue with an idea is to be captured by it. In this kind of engagement, one can be captured more than once. This is where I see hope for interdisciplinary endeavour' (2006, 203 emphasis added). Thus Strathern was not so much discounting the value of interdisciplinarity as noting that the terms of any field or debate are learned through repeat encounters. What cultivates creative scholarly criticism, she states, whether within or between disciplines, is to be able to engage and re-engage ideas as well as 'to re-multiply, re-divide, the outcomes of any one particular argument' (Strathern 2006, 199).

It is fitting to begin this volume with an image of scholars being drawn in, re-engaged, remultiplied and redivided. Certainly *Redescribing Relations* is a product of all of the contributors' 'critical' re-engagements with Strathern's work, which no doubt have remultiplied and redivided our sense of what

anthropology can do. Here, I add my reading of the essays that follow to my engagement with Strathern's work. I have come to see that if Strathern considers 'a discipline as no more or no less than the effort to describe, [and if] the genius of anthropology has always been its descriptive engagement with the fact of description, with how people generate accounts of themselves' (2005b, xii), then Strathern offers her own unique version of anthropology. This anthropology is built precisely around a principle akin to re-engagement and incorporates Strathern's understanding of critical conversation. It is accurate to call this principle 'redescription' – which I first tentatively noted in earlier work (Lebner and Deiringer 2008/9, 1, 2) – and Strathern's mode of redescription must be further explored to elucidate Strathern's overall project as well as the collective contribution of the essays in this volume.

Redescribing Relations draws some of Strathern's most committed readers into conversation in her honour – especially about ethnographic themes that her work has rarely engaged. The volume was conceived as a way for us all to express gratitude for the inspiration that she has variously brought to us through her writing, teaching and intellectual and personal generosity. The intent was also to deepen understandings of her work.² Indeed, Strathern's scholarship attracts the interest of an increasing number of scholars across the humanities and social sciences and yet she is regularly misunderstood, which inhibits or skews modes of engagement with her work. For example, she is often deemed one of anthropology's pre-eminent 'theorists'. Similarly, many scholars have reiterated how difficult it is to identify Strathern with one key issue or theme. This may all accord with a certain reading of her work; it is certainly the case that she has written about an astounding number of issues across the domains of kinship, gender, science, law, economy and bureaucracy. Yet she would also merely insist, as she has in a recent interview, that her project is concerned less with generating theory or concepts than with 'produc[ing] a good description' (Borič and Strathern 2010) – that her commitment is to getting the ethnography 'right' (see also Edwards and Petrović-Stöger 2011; Allard 2014; Street and Copeman 2014). In other words, Strathern's project couples a rejection of 'theory' with a singular aim – a singular aim that is of course a permanent task, as no description is ever perfect or final. And this is the most basic reason why 'redescription', in a word, captures her approach to anthropology.

Yet redescription in Strathern's work entails more than revisiting her own and others' arguments in order to re-form them. The very terms and forms of argumentation that she employs, how she writes by juxtaposing vignettes rather than enforcing terms of engagement, are expressions of her redescriptive aims, although this is rarely explored despite much discus-

sion of her challenging writing. Redescription is also much more critical, even political, than is superficially implied by considering it the ‘consistent re-formation of accounts’. Of course, it is critical in part because it reflects Strathern’s redefinition of criticism, which was cited at the beginning. But it is also important to know that subtending this notion of criticism is a persistent attention to analytical language and how to shift it.

As Strathern is keenly aware, conventional concepts have played pernicious roles in state discourse, whether intended or not (Strathern 1996a; also Greenhouse, this volume) – and this is Strathern’s political concern for anthropology. While it is true that she writes little about ‘politics’ as such, what critics miss when they see this as evidence that her work is apolitical (e.g. Josephides 1991) is that Strathern’s elision is due not to a lack, but rather to deep reflection on politics – and anthropological politics in particular. As I discuss later in this introduction, the contributors to this volume are distinctly aware of Strathern’s politics and their ethnographies are written with her politics in mind.

Yet before we can fully grasp the politics of Strathern’s redescription, or how the contributions mobilize aspects of it, this introductory essay will elucidate a series of interconnected moves, albeit slowly, in turn. To start, it must be clear that rather than charting the repeated use of a ‘concept’, we must first grasp Strathern’s redescription as *a series of relations*. This is not only because Strathern employs the term and its iterations (for example ‘re-describing’), sparingly in her work.³ More significantly, Strathern’s anthropology does not *prioritize* the creation of ‘concepts’ to begin with.

‘The invention of concepts’ has long been identified with the work of philosophy (see especially Deleuze and Guattari 1994, which has since inspired a series of provocative anthropological reflections). Yet because Strathern is committed to articulating the distinctive contribution of anthropology and ethnography in particular, she remains wary, as we will see, of using common analytical categories – like ‘society’, ‘individual’, conventional ‘comparison’ and ‘theory’ more generally. In contrast, she never pushes very directly against the notion of the ‘concept’ – a difficult thing to do given the constraints of our scholarly languages – yet the significance of the series of ‘relations’ that give impetus to her analyses cannot be overlooked.

Thus while Strathern defines ‘relations’ as the conceptual and interpersonal connections/distinctions that sustain social life (Strathern 2005a, 9–14), it is important to stress that for Strathern every word matters: even if concepts can be relational, focusing anthropology on creating and taking care of concepts is a very different proposition than ‘us[ing] relations to uncover relations’ (ibid, vii). The latter, another of her definitions of anthropology, should be read as a response to the call for anthropologists to create

concepts to begin with (the relation helps redescribe the concept). It is also an initial clue, explored more below, to why Strathern's work should not be assimilated to the ontological turn, even if she is sympathetic to the creativity of its proponents and to their concern with honouring difference in their descriptions.

Focusing on redescription in what follows, then, will help make visible how relations animate Strathern's anthropology. Although elaborated throughout her mature work, redescription was initially articulated in Strathern's (1988) *The Gender of the Gift* (henceforth GOG), a book that 'unwrites' her first book *Women in Between* (Viveiros de Castro, Strathern and Fausto, this volume; Strathern 1972). In a key subsection of the introduction to GOG titled 'Negativities: Redescribing Melanesian Society' (GOG, 11), she outlines the distinctive core of her contribution, going beyond her earlier critical mode of 'setting up negativities' (ibid.). Her negative critical mode precisely focused on how different concepts do not apply to the ethnography of Hagen, the primary site of her fieldwork in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea (see for example her classic early critiques of nature and culture, Strathern 1980; or of law and social control, Strathern 1985). Instead GOG engages the broader issue of scholarly language itself: 'Our own metaphors reflect a deeply rooted metaphysics with manifestations that surface in all kinds of analyses. The question is how to displace them most effectively' (GOG, 12). Beginning with the displacement of key concepts – in particular the displacement of society and individual – other analytical relations are elaborated in GOG and throughout her later work: from deploying analogy, to uncovering relations that defy scale. These relations, which can be so called because they rely on other terms to operate, are what constitute Strathern's redescription (of course itself a conceptual 're'lation), which enables a new mode of anthropological critique and politics.

Displacement, analogy, relations, politics – in what follows I explore how each of these relations contribute to the redescription(s) at the heart of Strathern's anthropology. By the end I hope it is clear how *displacement, analogy, relations* and *politics* are each implicated in, related to, the other. This is not to enforce the idea that one cannot engage aspects of Strathern's work, for in a sense this is what Strathern invites, as we will see. Nevertheless, my choice to focus on a certain integration in Strathern's thinking comes, on the one hand, from a sense that it is the best way to allow new readers a way 'in' – understanding Strathern's redescription can, I hope, provide insight into any of her arguments. On the other, while my primary aim is certainly not to 'answer' or 'correct' critics (I cite but few here, for clarity), my sense is that engagements with her work are often elaborated without taking into account her wider project, which is to effectively redescribe ethnographic writing, as well as

the anthropologist as author – even as person – with and through the relations that compose her. She thus creates a new ethnographic genre of sorts, even though she does not envisage others necessarily reproducing it, given their own relational entailments. If Strathern does not have a ‘programme’ to reproduce, then, the first aim of this introduction is to show that there is nevertheless ‘consistency’ to her work (Borič and Strathern 2010, 281)⁴: from GOG onwards Strathern develops a remarkably coherent project that has answers to most of the questions we might ask of it, including political questions. Whether one is satisfied with the answers is something that others may ask again later – however, the first task is to properly understand.

The second aim of these pages is to frame this volume’s hope: to draw scholars, anthropologists and otherwise, into new conversations on a wide variety of themes. To be sure, the contributors to this volume deftly show how Strathern’s anthropology can inspire ethnographic reflection beyond her usual forms and terrains. As I discuss in the final section of this introduction, each of the contributors deploy elements of Strathern’s redescription – they variously use relations to redescribe relations while reflecting on the politics of knowledge – and produce original contributions to their ethnographic fields as a result: from the state (Greenhouse), corporate design (Corsin Jiménez) and indigenous worlds in the Americas (Kirsch and Viveiros de Castro and Goldman) to conflict resolution (Navaro) and audit (Jensen and Winthereik) in the Mediterranean and Northern Europe, respectively. Thus as a whole, this volume illustrates how Strathern’s project invites any scholar to redescribe relations, which can offer them not only new understandings but the critical, even ‘political’ perspectives that they might seek.

I: DISPLACEMENT

The displacement of concepts is where redescription begins. For Strathern, it must start there because some Euro-American concepts can be so overpowering they mar description. Anthropologists must therefore displace these concepts to ‘create spaces that . . . exogenous analysis lack[s]’ (GOG, 11). Yet the act of displacement entails a series of other analytical moves, which emerge in part from the concept(s) being displaced. This is especially the case with regards to the main set of terms that Strathern displaces in GOG and all of her subsequent work: society and its natural companion, the individual.

The displacement of society and individual is important to pause upon because although there are other analytics that she displaces, and I mention more below, it is rarely noted just how central this displacement is to Strathern’s anthropology. Indeed, it is often assumed that displacing

society/individual is something that she pursued only in GOG. As a result, most discussions of her work do not acknowledge that the analytical creativity of her whole oeuvre starts with it; it undergirds her critiques, her choice to deploy analogy rather than (conventional) comparison (see below) – it subtends her search to redescribe relations generally. *The importance of the displacement of society and individual for all of her post-GOG scholarship cannot be stressed enough.*

As Strathern explains, displacing society and the individual is necessary, though not because they are poor translations of native concepts. In fact, Strathern maintains that translation is a ‘fancy’ (GOG, 29); one can never render others fully legible, as they ‘are’, in anthropological language. Anthropologists can only ever get closer to better descriptions by consistent vigilance after first addressing this perceived opposition between society and the individual, which is a particularly tenacious assumption: ‘Society is seen to be what connects individuals to one another, the relationships between them. We thus conceive society as an ordering and classifying, and in this sense a unifying force’ (GOG, 12). Inevitably, this force is seen as gathering and shaping unique individuals who can then modify this relation, although crucially, individuals are always ‘imagined as conceptually distinct from the relations that bring them together’ (GOG, 13). It is this persistent notion of society and the individual, of a whole composed of and encompassing its individualized parts, which Strathern will pick out in order to arrive at her first description of what she calls ‘Melanesian sociality’. ‘Melanesia’, it should be said, is less a location than an ethnographic synthesis and thought experiment that explores the possibility of difference within the confines of Euro-American analytics (note that all of my future references to Melanesia are really to ‘Melanesia’; see also Gell 1999).

Meanwhile ‘sociality’, or ‘the creating and maintaining of relationships’ (GOG, 13) allows for the exploration of Melanesia away from the shadows of what we might call ‘society thinking’, which is more persistent and ultimately less understood than the oft-discussed ‘commodity thinking’ – the assumption that individual persons are different from, and less alienable than, ‘things’. Yet crucially, society thinking encompasses, even produces, commodity thinking, even if this is rarely acknowledged.⁵

Of course displacing society and the individual means no less than displacing the organizing concepts of modern anthropology. To start, ‘society’ was dominant in British social anthropology from its functionalist inception. It is true that classic social anthropology often enjoined practitioners not to ‘reify’ society; it also favoured the ‘person’ over the individual to emphasize ‘how [the person] was already an element of a social relationship, already . . . a function of relating,’ a *relatum* (Strathern 2005a, 41).⁶

It should be said that this precedence of relations is also why personhood is a vital concept for Strathern, and it is what makes her more indebted to classic social anthropology than to structuralism (see Viveiros de Castro and Fausto and Strathern, this volume; Allard 2014).⁷ And yet, classic social anthropologists were still wedded to society: they were concerned with describing kinship ‘systems[,] which made up a “complex unity” or more generally . . . *structure[s]*, which constituted ‘an arrangement of persons in institutionally controlled or defined relationships’ (Radcliffe-Brown, cited in Strathern 2005a, 41). Indeed, although there was a certain reflexivity among social anthropologists about the problems that society and the individual created for ethnography, through ‘systems’ and ‘structures’ they were reinstalled nevertheless.

Strathern displaces society in view of its presence in subsequent models as well, which were perceived in their time as ways of transforming or modernizing (social) anthropology. In GOG, for example, Strathern engages feminism and by association the Marxist tradition it often draws upon. Marxism has long informed critical traditions because it unites the adjudicatory with the analytical: it theorizes the production of inequality while it exposes the class strategies that lead to domination and exploitation. Although feminism (or certain feminist ‘lines’) can be critical of Marxism for its androcentrism, it ultimately shares with Marxism an interest in depicting and fighting forms of inequality (albeit with specific reference to gender). Although undoubtedly sympathetic – Strathern is a feminist and was one of the first anthropologists to write specifically about women (Strathern 1972) – she is concerned about what these critical analytics might do to ethnography. Indeed, even if engaging with relationships, ‘inequality’ still conjures an overarching societal frame and its division by groups such as classes and genders, which are comprised in turn by ‘individual’ agents. ‘Inequality’ also ultimately renders our view of difference as always being ultimately hierarchical, *scaled* (Strathern 1987a, 1987b, 287).

Yet before Strathern likely knew that she would critique society, and ‘inequality’ as a conceptual product of it, she wrote this of feminist concerns: ‘Notions such as male bias or the woman’s point of view can be tremendously productive, and certainly alter the way we ‘see’ . . . Yet the sounds of our own industry should not deafen us to the point of forgetting that others are creative too’ (Strathern 1981, 684). This is among the most pointed and direct critiques that Strathern has made of another anthropologist, or school of thought, in print.⁸ Nevertheless, it marked the beginning of a continued awkwardness with feminism and other scholarly trends that bring Euro-American interests directly to bear on ethnography (Strathern 1987c). While her critical mode changed as she developed her redescriptive

approach through the 1980s, her concern with making space for others' creativity has guided her efforts ever since.

Perhaps it is this prioritizing of ethnography that has led to a misrecognition of Strathern's politics among critics, even though her displacement of society had critical valence in light of the (ongoing) neoliberal revolution, epitomized by Thatcher's infamous 1987 phrase 'There is no such thing as society' (cited in Strathern 1996a, 53). I elaborate on this at greater length only in section IV because Strathern's 'politics', or critical interests for anthropology vis-à-vis power, is fully integrated with her redescriptive practice. Therefore, we must first attend to the analytical moves that comprise redescription itself.

Thus far, I have focused on the first of these moves, displacement, less to codify it as a concept in Strathern's repertoire than to shed light on one of her primary practices: first, the permanent removal of society/individual as concepts in her work⁹ and, second, her more general tendency to avoid overdetermining Euro-American concepts, which are often connected to society in the first place. Indeed, since GOG, she has kept watch on how society haunts subsequent anthropological models and themes. To cite only a few examples, *Partial Connections* ([1991] 2004, henceforth PC), which I discuss more below, shows how a host of late 1980s attempts to retheorize the discipline once again reinstated society thinking – from the 'crisis in representation' and neo-Marxist globalization theories to comparative anthropology. That is, they reinstate society by *mobilizing images of a scale or an abstraction that transcends concrete individual instances* (e.g. the global/local or theory/datum), or they *describe how a whole becomes fragmented into parts* (e.g. the postmodern predicament).

Then, in *After Nature* (1992a, henceforth AN), which discusses English kinship before and after new reproductive technologies, Strathern shows that social constructionism similarly reinstates society insofar as societal/collective/discursive forces and individual ones are seen to 'construct' one another. As an approach, constructionism thus remains as 'pluralist' and 'merographic' – and therefore as 'modern' – as those knowledge practices it claims to have left behind (and, therefore, as Corsín Jiménez [2015, 184] might agree, it developed its own mode of redescription).¹⁰ Strathern later engages Science and Technology Studies (STS) and even Derrida in *Property, Substance and Effect* (ch. 1: I & II, Strathern 1999a, 1999b) to show how they smuggle society back in via the concept of infinity (STS' 'infinite networks' and Derrida's 'grammatological understanding of recurring equations' 1999b, 237).¹¹

Strathern's (2000a) discussion of 'audit cultures' then suggests that her concern with society thinking is why she has never written much about

‘ethics’ (or ‘morality’): “ethics, audit, policy – are the places to be looking these days if one is looking for society” (Strathern 2000b: 282; of course, under Durkheim’s extended period of influence in anthropology, the place to look for society was ‘morality’ and vice versa). In other words, ‘ethics’ or ‘morality’ tend to conjure relations as being ‘outside’ and ‘between’ individuals and a transcendent collective – whether society, state, moral code etc. As such, for Strathern, ‘ethics’ and ‘morality’ are better approached as ethnographic objects (which are especially vibrant in Euro-America, as she shows in *Audit Cultures*), than deployed as cross-cultural analytical/comparative concepts. And yet, it is arguable that her work to extend society by focusing on relations extends the *study* of ethics and the anthropological *enactment* of ethics as well (Strathern 2012b; see also my discussion of Strathern’s politics as guide, section IV).

Finally, as I have argued at more length elsewhere (Lebner 2017), for Strathern society thinking haunts recent discussions of ontology, insofar as the (individual and potentially individualizing) concept of ontology (and therefore the transcendent observer) is ultimately privileged over relations. Yet this remains her ‘unconscious’ critique of anthropological uses of ontology, while she foregrounds other concerns about the concept in her writing that I focus on here (see section III, especially note 15).

In sum, Strathern sheds consistent light on how ‘society’ is not only a term but a way of thinking that pervades our analytical approaches and clouds our ethnography with a Euro-American mathematic or idea of scale. (Put the other way around, it is rarely noted that Strathern’s whole interest in, and *subversion* of, the idea of scale is due to how it haunts Euro-American analyses via society thinking: the hierarchy and encompassment evoked by the [bigger] society and [smaller] individuals). And this brings us to the problem of comparison.

II. COMPARISON, (AS) ANALOGY

Comparison is often considered a stable concept at the heart of Strathern’s anthropology – even a central analytic – yet this is not quite the case. Indeed, few have explored how PC focuses precisely on the task of ‘g[etting] rid of the problem of “comparison”’ (PC, xxviii). Similarly, it is rarely noted that GOG already starts addressing this problem, whose central redescriptive aims are worth citing here as a guide:

I displace what ‘we’ think society is by a set of different constructs, promoted in opposition in order to suggest an analogy with ‘their’ view. At the same time,

that very analogy grasped as a comparison, treating both sets of ideas as formulae for social action, then extends for us the original meaning of the concept. (GOG, 17)

Although this phrase encapsulates all of the analytical moves Strathern will make in order to arrive at her redescription of Melanesian society, it is also a general statement about how her displacement produces new conceptual relations – in particular analogy, which she *contrasts* with comparison. Strathern concedes that her analogy will be ‘grasped’ as comparison, yet she is clearly *distancing* herself from the latter and even arguably ‘the concept’ more generally – a term of course conventionally conceived to facilitate comparative study, and even the universalizing enterprise of (most) philosophy. The above suggests that with analogy, part of a different set of ‘constructs’, the meaning of society will not only be extended but so will comparison (and the ‘concept’ as well).

PC, a book centred on Strathern’s approach to writing, is where she focuses on how the concept of comparison, conventionally conceived, is a product of the society thinking that she is trying to avoid. And certainly, critiquing comparison challenges anthropology as much as displacing society does – after all, comparison has been central to anthropology since the nineteenth century. Of course comparative practices have changed. Armchair evolutionists like Morgan, Tylor and Frazer took specific societal features ‘out of context’ to compare them (Strathern 1987d, 265). Then, early twentieth-century fieldworkers studied the structures of distinct societies with the hope that future comparisons could reveal universal social laws. Numerous subsequent projects retooled this aim towards the mid-twentieth century: neoevolutionist, structuralist and holocultural (represented by the Human Relations Area File; Gingrich and Fox 2002). Even beyond these more explicit comparative projects, and even when there was a sense that the comparative method was ‘impossible’, it was still often considered the ‘only method in anthropology’, as Evans-Pritchard once told Needham (1975, 365).¹² This abiding faith in comparison through the 1980s may be why Melanesianists among others continued to pursue comparison despite numerous problems¹³: what are the appropriate units of analysis for comparison? How are boundaries drawn? Strathern shows that the predominant solutions all rely on a familiar mathematic: ‘individual instances’ (societies, traits) are counted and evaluated by an ‘entity’ able to abstract and uncover, or produce a ‘theory’ about, the meaning of their similarity and difference. In other words, regardless of solutions given to punctual problems, conventional comparison – and indeed the concept of ‘theory’ itself versus ‘data’ – always reproduces ‘society’.

Society: comparison :: sociality: analogy

Hence Strathern's interest in analogy. Yet in order to understand Strathern's analogical mode, it is necessary to first explore how Strathern replaces society with 'sociality'. Strathern generally does not seek to create neologisms to mark concepts, except sometimes when speaking about Euro-America (her coining of 'merographic relations' is a case in point).¹⁴ Thus sociality, like many of Strathern's terms, is a colloquialism repurposed for redescription: if society is conventionally seen as a singular entity and 'context' for interaction, 'sociality' conveys how in Melanesia, a 'relational matrix' (Strathern 1996a, 53) generates and sustains persons in their everyday lives. More specifically, sociality in Melanesia *composes* persons; persons are singular entities, sometimes 'individually' conceived, but ultimately 'dividual' in the sense that they are 'the plural and composite site of the relationships that produced them' (ibid).

Significantly, this dividual is androgynous and constantly moves from one gendered state to another depending on the social circumstances – its internal differentiation is suppressed or 'cut' and the male or female aspect is drawn out in given interactions/exchanges (thus the gift is gendered in specific interactions too, as Melanesians do not distinguish between subject and object). The point is, the person isn't only 'one'; it is divided – and multiple relations are 'fractions of one' (Strathern 2011a, 93). It is for this reason that 'men' are not seen as 'controlling' 'women', even though gender imagery organizes much of Melanesian life. Similarly, although relations produce the person, this does not imply that the collectivity 'makes' persons into social beings; that would be to reinstall the hierarchical, vertical 'scale' of a transcendent society shaping the individual. Instead, Strathern endeavours to show how Melanesian persons are seen *analogously*: each person is equivalent – *on the same scale*; each contains the gendered relations/exchanges that made them; each must have certain relations suppressed or cut in order to make others appear; each is a *not-quite-replication* (PC, xx) of the other. In short, the displacement of society and the discovery of Melanesian sociality reveal the fact that analogy, rather than comparison, better approximates the Melanesian mode of apprehending others.

Writing anthropology, ignoring scale

What Strathern then does with the discovery of analogical reason is striking: she applies it to her writing on both Melanesian and Euro-American material. This is more radical than it sounds: Strathern again reconceives – and

redescribes – the anthropological endeavour, much like the early twentieth-century anthropologists who invented a new genre, the monograph, when they changed their conceptions of society and comparison (Strathern 1987d). The difference here is that unlike early anthropologists, who were invoking a certain model of science premised in part on subjects/anthropologists describing their objects/individual societies, Strathern develops her own genre (although she has never put it this way). We might call this genre analogical ethnography, which is modelled on her apprehension of Melanesian knowledge practices.

Strathern elaborates these ideas in PC in dialogue with debates of the time. Most notably, contributors to *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986; though also see Fabian 1983) had begun interrogating the modernist conventions of ethnographic authorship in dialogue with Foucault. They felt ethnography was facing a ‘crisis in representation’: it was no longer tenable for anthropologists to ignore power relations and to retain the authority to ‘represent’ the truths of timeless others, the objects of ethnography. Instead, they called for a postmodern ethnography, one conceived as fiction and written more experimentally against presumptions to objectivity, truth and the ahistorical distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’. While for Strathern many of these arguments were ‘after the event’ (Strathern 1987d) – feminists had already been writing experimentally for a while – their desire to reconceive the anthropologist and *therefore* anthropological writing had distinct resonance with Strathern’s redescriptive intent.

Nevertheless, their suggestions to replace the anthropological fieldworker with figures such as ‘the traveller’ and the ‘cosmopolitan’ in their own ways reinstalled ‘society’ and ‘the individual’ and therefore ‘comparison’ (PC, 7–16). Strathern’s response was to offer the image of the cyborg instead, which captures how the anthropologist is transformed by the analogical practice of (the relations with) her Melanesian interlocutors. We should also note that in Strathern’s rendering, the cyborg is a much more complete response than postmodern ethnography to Foucault’s (1989) critique of ‘anthropology’ (anthropology broadly was conceived by Foucault as the discourses geared to retain the sovereignty of the human subject – ‘Man’).

The cyborg was first made popular by Donna Haraway in a manifesto that is critical of a feminist politics searching for ‘natural’, essentialist identities and argues for a ‘partial’ rather than a ‘universal’ perspective (Haraway [1985] 1991, see also 1988). Resonating with these aims, if not the language, Strathern deploys the cyborg to help redescribe the anthropological endeavour (‘“Partial connections”’, after all, says no ‘more or less than, for example, the phrase ‘writing anthropology’ does’; PC, xxix). While not a Melanesian image, Strathern sees the cyborg as uniquely able to perform

social/analytical work (almost) like a Melanesian person might: the cyborg does not ‘observe *any scale*, it is neither singular nor plural, neither one nor many, a circuit of connections that joins parts that *cannot be compared* insofar as they are not isomorphic with one another’ (PC, 54, my emphasis).

The cyborg is thus more than an ‘individual’ person – more than the anthropologist – because it is the anthropologist extended by its circuit of connections, which in Strathern’s case includes Euro-American and Melanesian knowledge practices, as well as the technology of writing anthropology. Otherwise put, Strathern’s writing does not entail the anthropologist writing *about* others, as the cyborg does not reinstall the view from individuals (or society). Rather, all other positions and capacities converge in the circuit to make ‘connections without assumptions of comparability’ (PC, 38).

While this implies that the cyborg retains relations with both benign and potentially pernicious forces (see especially Navaro, this volume) attention to this cyborgian operation also elucidates why Strathern retains a peculiar positionality in the text, which has been previously remarked upon as resting between a first-person and third-person description, whose ‘individual’ perspective is absent (see Viveiros de Castro and Goldman 2008/9 and this volume). In short, the networked cyborg replaces the individual author with the many relations it entails. And thus, ‘Strathern’ attempts to make other modes of personhood, agency and creativity visible thereby.

Strathern also offers a visual analogy to help readers see how the cyborg writes: the image of cantor’s dust, a fractal image whose complexity (internal relations) is self-similar at every scale (i.e. the opposite of society).

On page 2 of the ‘contents’ section, Strathern presents the below fractal (see figure 1) as a ‘synopsis’ of the book. Of course, the chapters of PC itself are comprised by levels of paired sections, and the nonlinear argument emerges therefrom. Yet like the cyborg, the image also recalls Strathern’s description of Melanesian sociality and personhood, whereby persons are recognized as analogous insofar as they are composed of pairs upon pairs of relations – each containing an equally complex ‘sociality’. And yet, recall that one must make cuts in order to make specific sets of relations/persons visible or known. These cuts and self-similar relations are reflected in the below image, and Strathern thus communicates how her knowledge is produced: *by drawing analogies between sets of relations*. In distinct contrast to the linear-vertical form of argument that society thinking imposes on writing, the cyborg/fractal – only ever a *not-quite-replication* of the Melanesian person – makes it possible to think and write a different kind of anthropology.

Within and beyond PC, Strathern follows this model of writing: placing Melanesian vignettes (stories of relations) alongside Euro-American ones.

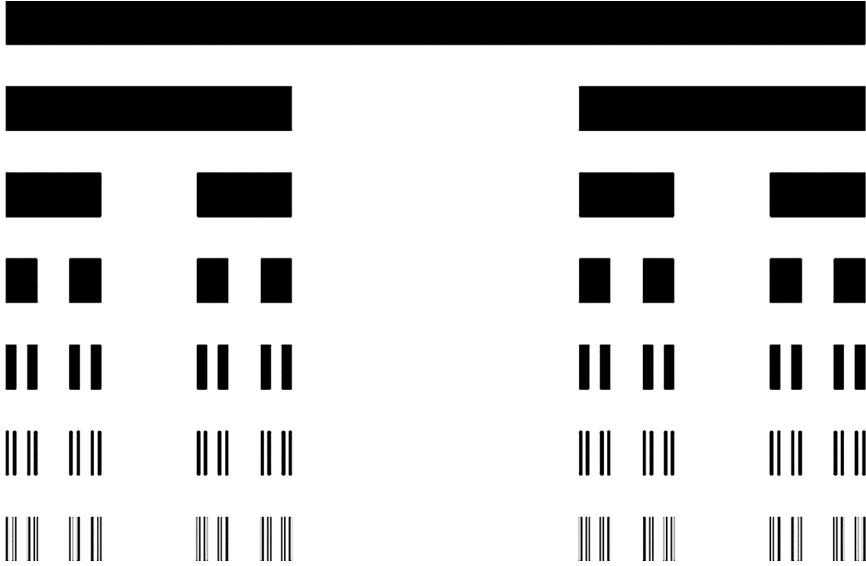


Figure 1. Cantor's Dust

The aim is not to compare, whether to evaluate their 'sameness' or 'difference' or to establish 'symmetry' (see Viveiros de Castro and Goldman, this volume, on the difference between Latourian symmetry and Strathern). Rather the goal is to elucidate one through the other, without aiming to 'abstract', produce a hierarchical or scaled view. We might think of Strathern as offering the experience of her ethnographic understanding to her readers, as opposed to merely knowledge or theory about it. That is, she demonstrates via form as well as content what it is like trying to see, write and understand the world as Melanesians might, with all the short-circuiting that is evidently entailed in making such connections.

Now, the cyborg and cantor's dust do not reappear in Strathern's later work, which is perhaps why there has been little elaboration in secondary literature on its role in her approach to writing and 'comparison' (Holbraad and Pedersen 2009; Hirsch 2014). This does not mean that the cyborg and fractal are not relevant to understanding her current practice; as she implies herself, different conversations will conceal the origins of certain thoughts (PC, 54). It is also an example of how not all of her analytic tools or insights remain prominent or evident. For example, despite her critique of comparison, she still does use the term on occasion in less critical ways (Strathern 1996b, 2003a, 2014b).

Yet this does not mean that she has abandoned her attempt to extend comparison. On the one hand, sometimes comparison is an appropriate term

to use, especially when she is discussing or challenging ‘theories’ that abstract from their materials to greater or lesser extents (e.g. actor network theory and the idea of limitlessness [Strathern 1996b] or even anthropologists’ descriptions of relations that do not escape conventional Euro-American modes [Strathern 2014b, 44]). On the other hand, it would seem that enough critical and descriptive work has now been done on her part to show the power of analogy – that ‘comparison’ has been successfully extended and is no longer a ‘problem’. Indeed, as she says in her interview in this volume:

Deconstruction, if it works well, is mobile; that is, it doesn’t stay put. It’s a temporal process, you open things up and then they close again, and you open them up, and they close again, so on and so forth. So I’m not at all embarrassed about having disposed of the concept in one context and using it in another.

And of course, she continues to draw people into her work by inviting them to reflect on the problems of description rather than discounting their interest in comparison. In her forward to an edited volume that cites her briefly as a key theorist of comparison, she playfully writes, ‘Comparison is [anthropology’s] game in at once the most serious and the most playful sense – not to be given away, but played. And with whom does one play but with this or that side?’ While she doesn’t elaborate there what the game is, she is clear about how to play it: ‘begin with the problems’ (Strathern 2002, xvii). In taking the problems of comparison very seriously, Strathern has come to see that the best way to extend comparison and anthropology itself is via analogy – a relation less haunted than comparison by the metaphysics of society. Indeed, with analogy she has learned that the only universally ‘comparable’ units are relations.

III. RELATIONS

If displacing society and extending comparison is what provides the basic conditions for redescription, what enacts it is the analogical study of relations or, simply put, studying the relations between relations. Yet for Strathern, relations – the conceptual and interpersonal connections and distinctions that sustain social life – are not only what anthropologists must describe. Rather, relations sustain anthropology as well. In other words relations, whose first principle is that they are free from the constraints of scale (Strathern 2005a, 63) operate everywhere; they are both ‘anthropology’s relation’ or tool, as well as ‘a tool, *tout court* for social living’ (ibid., 7). If this sounds like a universalism, it nearly is. Relations are likely the only

universal that Strathern would acknowledge, even if the relation has its own cultural contingency that was born from the social and intellectual ferment that was the scientific revolution, as we will see. An outline of Strathern's relational view in what follows will complete my discussion of the 'academic' side of Strathern's redescription. Then we can turn to her politics.

It is worth noting that Strathern's first explicit exposition of *The Relation* (1995) defied earlier criticism of her relational view of anthropology. Some years before, it had been argued that conceiving the relation as the grounding assumption of anthropology was too totalizing; it made it impossible to see beyond (Weiner 1993, 2001). Similarly inspired critiques emerged later, not all explicitly promoting (like Weiner did) the study of 'being' or 'ontology' as an alternative to relations. She mentions these briefly in the preface to *Kinship, Law and the Unexpected* (2005a; KLU), simply noting her agreement with many aspects of these critiques. She proclaims nevertheless:

I can best serve the new radicalism by my own conservatism, and thus conserve what will then become an original position rather than consume new ones! So I endeavour to remain true to a point of view not because I defend it but because there is some mileage to be gained from specifying – precisely at this juncture – what is so interesting about it that it could become important to leave behind. (KLU, x)

Although Strathern here characteristically defers direct criticism, one can still read KLU, and her work on the relation before and since, as offering robust responses to questions about the centrality of relations in anthropological analysis. Indeed, she demonstrates that while anthropologists might wish to move beyond relations, it is likely still beyond anthropology to do so.

The legacy we have inherited from the scientific revolution, which was entwined with a social revolution, is why we are stuck with relations, as it were (at least for now). Strathern (1995, 2005a, 2014c) shows how the concept of the relation migrated from the scientific field into the sphere of kinship, undergoing a transformation therein, hence consolidating the connection between knowledge production and social relations. Prior to the seventeenth century the 'relation' as a term was used to refer to the field of logical relations. However as the scientific revolution got underway, which included new forms of association – embodied in burgeoning 'societies' (scientific and otherwise), 'relations' came to describe persons within the sphere of kinship and even beyond. *Why* it did so is more difficult to ascertain, but the very fact of it – and our continued use of 'relations' to refer to both conceptual and interpersonal activity – calls attention to the specific era in which anthropologists still participate. Ultimately, in pointing to the origins of anthropology's relational view, Strathern tells us that anthropology is

still unable to escape the fact that conceptual and interpersonal relations are part of the production of knowledge itself. We can only *know anything* through this relational view.

This is not to say that science and anthropology rely on the same relations for their knowledge. Rather, Strathern contrasts ‘anthropology’s relation’ to ‘science’s relation’. The latter deploys a different duplex, dividing knowledge into ‘invented’ and ‘discovered’ relations. Differences notwithstanding, anthropology’s relationality developed under implicit and explicit influences of science. Implicitly, anthropology and the social sciences generally excelled at the ‘discovery’ aspect of science – an uncovering of relations already there, rather than the ‘invention’ of new relations (KLU, 39).

In contrast, an explicit influence of science on anthropology was the very idea that one could understand society through certain protocols and methods. One of these proposed methods was statistics, whereby data were quantitatively collected in order to seek correlations. Under this regime, data are ‘understood as individual elements in the same way as persons may be thought of as individuals and society defined as the connections between them’ (KLU, 38). Strathern notes how this imparted to anthropology many of the analytical problems associated with society thinking discussed above (see sections I & II). Indeed the view from science, what Haraway called the God trick (1988), can also be called the view from society.

Despite the vital role of science in the development of anthropology, Strathern is not arguing that the ‘duplex’ nature of anthropology’s relation (its mobilization of conceptual and interpersonal relations) was created solely by the scientific revolution. Rather, the reliance on both conceptual and interpersonal relations is something she thinks one finds amongst people everywhere. However, where anthropology is concerned, the cultural and historical connection of anthropology’s relation to the production of knowledge takes on particular significance. Its Euro-American provenance does not mean that it lacks general utility though; certainly, Strathern has shown us that our inevitably contingent analytics can still help us see ‘others’ and ‘ourselves’ better, as well as mitigate the differences between them – if we are diligent. Rather, it is the relation’s relation to knowledge that indicates its usefulness for anthropology: in the disciplinary willingness to think relationally, to move between the conceptual and the interpersonal in producing knowledge about social life, ‘anthropology arrives at a certain truth about sociality that could not be captured in any other way’ (KLU, 8). In other words, without a relational view to produce our descriptions, we would not have as much knowledge of social life, quite literally. In fact, we might also say that without the relation to help us gain new perspectives, we would not be able to continually learn and to redescribe what we think we know.

It is important to note, finally, that Strathern's view of the relation should be distinguished from the current ontological turn, which at the time of my writing is often conflated (though the resonance of recent discussions with Weiner's earlier critique seems to be buried). This is not to say that Strathern does not recognize that certain practices are *ontological* (some ritual practice among Melanesians, for example, or the law), insofar as they constitute the phenomena in question rather than 'represent' it (as an *epistemological* practice might). Neither is it to say that she feels no affinity to the discussions being carried out by the scholars most affiliated with this turn – she does: they are similarly wary of how Euro-American descriptions might obscure the 'worlds' of the people they write about and this is ultimately why she comments on them.¹⁵ Nonetheless, she affirms that anthropology's relation is an epistemological artefact. She also suggests that seeking another way to ground the anthropological endeavour amounts to ignoring the inevitable:

For all that [the relation] allows one to ask about nonepistemic relations its limitation is (obviously) the form that it takes, [the relation, a duplex comprised by the conceptual and interpersonal]. For although [the relation] is good at elucidating the other side of things, especially in the case of societies outside the orbit of those developed by the Enlightenment and the scientific revolution, things indeed remain 'other', that is, *seen always in relation to the vantage point of the moment*. This is the trick of the Euro-American 'one world', and a final surprise that should be no surprise. What happens to the [relation as] duplex when anthropologists find they can count worlds in different ways is, precisely, nothing. In short, the relation will not disappear. (KLU, 91, my emphasis)

We should recall that part of the ontological turn entails the critique of epistemology as a Euro-American theory of knowledge, which tells us that there is 'one world' and many cultures (or construals) of the world. The suggestion is that if we displace epistemology we might find 'many worlds' or ontologies (in the case of the Amazonian worlds that Viveiros de Castro 1998 describes, there is one culture and many natures, for example). What Strathern is here referring to when she discusses the 'final surprise that should be no surprise' is that even when we find worlds outside the 'orbit of those developed by the Enlightenment', in the end these are always seen *in relation* to another world. In other words, even when we find different worlds, we cannot escape the *relation* between them and hence *epistemology*.

Strathern continues to consolidate this point in her recent writings. For example, despite attempts to develop an anthropology even 'beyond the human' (sometimes considered an attempt to move beyond relations, which are perceived as merely social), Strathern notes that relations continue to

enable thinking everywhere. Indeed, in response to Haraway's (2003) call for a focus on human-animal relations, for example, Strathern playfully refocuses on the relation itself: she calls it our 'companion concept' (2014c, 8), ceding less to its conceptness than marking its consistent non/human relational work: relations certainly dog us, wherever and whatever we are.

Moreover, Strathern is increasingly clear about the consequences of focusing on the differences between worlds rather than attending to relations. She notes that if anthropologists do not acknowledge the importance of relations to being itself, we might lose the capacity to see transformation – including how relations can transform those who live ontological modes of being into the very 'others' who espouse epistemological modes of knowing – whether we would wish for it or not (e.g. KLU, 145–46; Strathern 2014a). She has thus come to call other anthropologists' acknowledgment of the social consequences of relations 'interventions' (2014a, 35) and she is conscious of her own need for intervention on this matter, an intervention in favour of ethnography as Corsin Jiménez might say (this volume). (Perhaps, moreover, she rewrites Foucault's own discussion of the 'procedures of intervention' that create the conditions for concept formation, while positing the relation as an always-already intervention before and beyond the 'concept').¹⁶

With her concern with intervention in mind, her invitation to those developing the concept of ontology comes into critical relief: 'Can one imagine a universe of scholars where this (caring for concepts) is not a primordial duty? . . . perhaps the locus of truth is found elsewhere than in concepts. That would put moral concern elsewhere too' (Strathern 2012, 403). Of course for these real or imagined elsewheres, Strathern is not denying the existence of concerns for how arguments are elaborated or how terms are used – what might be commonly called conceptual work. Nevertheless, she invites anthropologists to think about encounters and the relations that ensue – in particular how they relate to these other modes of description and how anthropologists might allow them to transform their own, rather than to begin from, and remain tied to, an individual concept. In other words, relations are not only 'thought'; they are enacted and ongoing and they have living and even moral valence – they are implicated in how persons are variously governed by 'themselves' and 'others'. In other words, relations, beyond concepts themselves, have implications for anthropology's 'politics'.

IV. IN SUM: THE POLITICS OF STRATHERN'S REDESCRIPTION

Strathern is not known for her overt debates of politics, anthropological or otherwise. One reason for this should be easily intuited by now: 'politics',

like society, is a weighty Euro-American concept that casts a long shadow. While many have variously critiqued the concepts of society, state and ‘totalities’ of all kinds, most have not abandoned ‘politics’. In many ways, attention to politics remains the measure of a properly critical anthropology – and critical scholarship more generally. Yet Strathern might say that politics is all too readily written into our ethnographies, and if not handled carefully, politics might obscure rather than elucidate the relations that obtain therein. Indeed, the insistence on ‘politics’ may be reinscribing the very (‘unequal’) conditions of ‘society’ that ‘politics’ might be seeking to undo: after all, ‘politics’ is considered one of society’s integral domains.

And yet, this does not mean that Strathern’s anthropology does not have what could be grasped as a politics – and her work can certainly help elucidate it. First, Strathern’s commitment to redescription is geared to extend not only the way we look at say, society, comparison and theory, but what counts as anthropological criticism and therefore politics as well. Second and most important, all of her work since GOG contests understandings that are implicated in modes of governance and policy, a sphere of the political that is shaped by our concepts after all. She also shows how anthropologists can enact a politics: through a long-term strategy of regular (ethnographic) redescription, which can prove just how variously relations sustain human life. This strategy includes disentangling anthropological practice from state discourse (see especially Greenhouse, this volume) and writing differently, beginning by attending to how anthropological and other knowledge is conditioned by specific relational arrangements. Significantly, as I discuss in the next section, the contributors to this volume all uniquely develop Strathern’s insight into how the production of knowledge and the writing of anthropology is ultimately political.

Yet I begin with Strathern’s refiguration of criticism, as it is the anthropological gateway to academic politics. If above I discussed her critical exegesis of ‘society/individual’ within predominant anthropological approaches, I should now add that this constitutes a critique of anthropological criticism as well – especially with regards to its common form and objects.

First, the conventional forms of anthropological criticism reflect the metaphysic of society: as with comparison, one plots data against an overarching theory in order to show the theory’s truth or falsity. Strathern’s redescription – her displacement of concepts and pursuit of analogical relations – obtains a more horizontal form of argument, which does not then abstract a transcendent theoretical truth *per se*; it is always embedded in her analogical narrative, which moves *through* her own and others’ ethnographies. As discussed at the outset ‘criticism in research is to re-multiply, re-divide, the outcomes of any one particular argument’ (Strathern 2006, 199).

Second, her approach to criticism laterally interrogates how ‘critical anthropology’ is recognized by its objects in the first place. Let me emphasize that her aim is not to diminish common critical forms and political concerns. Not only is she sympathetic to them, but directly discounting other views would be contrary to her very definition of criticism above. Yet her approach to criticism contrasts quite a lot with, and is often seen as much less political than, a ‘critical anthropology’ that draws inspiration from the core of Marxist and Foucaultian traditions (different though they might otherwise be): to expose the use and abuse of power over time. In other words, it is assumed that critical anthropology should take the histories of political and economic exclusions, disciplines, struggles and violence as their object.

Strathern opens up what we might mean by critical anthropology: rather than training our descriptions directly on punctual struggles over power, her arguments convey a long-term political strategy for a discipline that occupies a particular place within the ‘sciences’. If each science has a job to inform on the issues in which it has expertise, anthropology’s role is to produce knowledge about relations. And anthropology is well poised to expose how relations can operate differently than power holders allow.

Strathern has offered critical insight into relations across an extraordinary range of themes. Yet to understand the political aspect of her interest in relations, it is helpful to start at the beginning again. Recall first that her redescription of Melanesian ‘society’ was written against the backdrop of the Thatcher (and Reagan) neoliberal transformation. The latter is of course captured by Thatcher’s notorious declaration that I can now cite in full, ‘There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families’ (cited in Strathern 1996a, 53). For Thatcher, doing away with the ‘abstract’ notion of society concretized the ‘individual’ and thus individualism – the sense that persons are autonomous, possessive, rational maximizers. Politically, this legitimated moves *against* social programs: ‘You see what has happened. In one fell swoop Thatcherism could gather up all kinds of collectivities and organizations with a social presence and dump them. They no longer derive legitimacy from their *social* nature because society no longer exists’ (ibid., 54, original italics). Ultimately, Strathern notes, ‘Where the individual is produced “in opposition to” society, the move conceals social formations and power relations’ (Strathern 1996a, 54). It cannot be forgotten that the conservative revolution is still in full swing. Nor should we neglect the fact, as she points out in a discussion of *After Nature* in her interview in this volume, that by ‘looking at English kinship, one can find ideas and issues that in fact support these Thatcherite ideas’. Therefore, Strathern’s call for an anthropology that does not take ‘society’ and the ‘individual’ as given and that foregrounds

the importance of relations is not only promoting academic accuracy, it is also projecting a long-term political vision for the discipline as well. That is, the hope is to shift pluralistic society thinking, which is already changing, becoming 'postplural', though not only because of how (reproductive and genetic) technological transformations meet neoliberal effects (as Green, this volume, usefully reminds us).

Pluralism is also changing because it has been 'made explicit' as 'pluralist' by Strathern herself (AN, 7) and displaced as a mode of description. Yet clearly for Strathern, going beyond pluralism will take more 'contriving' (ibid., 4) – more writing and writing out still – and not only by her. How we will all redescribe things matters.

I have emphasized that Strathern's aim has been to arrive at better descriptions of not only Melanesia but Euro-America as well – and not simply as radically opposed social formations as some critics have claimed. To be sure, her redescription of Euro-America through Melanesian-cum-cyborgian anthropology allows her to see continuities through differences and to see how concepts pose political and legal challenges. In a discussion of the innovations of reproductive technologies, for example, she makes explicit the continuities amidst difference and change: 'Biotechnology has introduced into the domain of body management the kinds of separations, cuts and combinations that have always characterized relations between persons' (KLU, 30). If these 'cuts' recall Melanesian forms of relating, what makes Euro-Americans different comes down to language, 'the fact remains that Euro-Americans do not always talk about relations very clearly . . . [And] one reason for the shortage of relational idioms is the overdetermination of other idioms' (KLU, 30–31). This overdetermination of idioms makes it difficult to think or speak about, for example, the fact that mother and foetus are both separate and parts of one another at the same time. As a way to determine the priority of rights, debates continue apace on whether the foetus is independent of the mother or not. Strathern points out that mother and foetus must be separable in order for any relationship to obtain between them, but that does not mean that they are not still part of one another. Nevertheless, this understanding seems elusive; debates continue. *A relationship will never be a legal subject (as the individual is) in Euro-American law.* Strathern's broader point, however, is that amidst the universality of sociality, the different arrangements of social and conceptual relations have different effects. And some of these effects conspire, intentionally or not, to shape politics and knowledge.

Thus Strathern suggests that anthropologists should be alert not only to the past articulations of relations but also to their current rearrangements. Present forms of expression, even when they seem innocuous, can set dan-

gerous programs in train. Strathern's discussion of audit is a case in point (Strathern 2000b). While audit seems to represent values that academics would champion, such as accountability and openness, when applied in the setting of higher education, for example, it is affecting *how* and perhaps ultimately *what* we know. The current proliferation of rituals of verification of 'good practice' and 'economic efficiency' are beginning to threaten the very open-ended enquiry that they claim to promote. And this has particular implications for anthropology and especially ethnography, which collects 'data' without knowing all of their immediate applications.

How can anthropologists respond to this threat to open-ended inquiry? (For respond they must, otherwise the 'response' will be imagined for them). Strathern suggests a 'political' stance, one which takes a position vis-à-vis policy (Strathern 2000b, 289–91): anthropologists must not only recognize the terms through which governmental rationalities promote themselves but be able to elaborate on the specific importance of ethnography as well. And yet, Strathern cautions, doing more or better ethnography of *policy* is not the answer per se. Rather, anthropologists should take care to distinguish themselves from the bureaucratic language that seeks to encompass them – bureaucracy, after all, has a peculiar capacity to absorb new, outside knowledge and turn it towards its own ends. Yet Bruun Jensen and Winthereik (this volume) show us that this seemingly pernicious absorption also offers some hope: as audit turns 'outside knowledge' into the 'inside,' it begins to implode, collapse under its own weight.

If Strathern's critical/political contributions seem most often applied to Euro-American knowledge practices, this is indeed the case. She has noted that her role is to criticize her own knowledge practices, rather than those of others (Viveiros de Castro and Fausto and Strathern, this volume). And yet, Euro-American knowledge practices have an inordinately powerful reach. They are crucial to attend to because they can affect how other societies come to organize themselves and even understand themselves politically. Strathern makes this clear in a recent piece, where she revisits a report of hers from the 1970s that she wishes she had written differently. In particular, she wishes she had written it without the concept of 'ethnicity', which she used to describe the different groups that had migrated to Port Moresby, the capital of Papua New Guinea.

Her wariness of ethnicity is due to how academic descriptions of 'ethnic' conflict in Papua New Guinea are converging with political/managerial descriptions thereof. It is not without consequence, she argues, to assert that what has 'always' been happening in Papua New Guinea is 'ethnic conflict', which assumes conflict grounded in perceived group differences and/or similarities. Indeed, the concept of ethnic conflict has perhaps come

to constitute – maybe even drive? – the conflicts themselves. In light of this, Strathern redescribes her old forgotten report; she displaces the term ‘ethnic’ she used to describe different groups and now proposes that her interlocutors of the time saw each other by means of moral analogy, aware of the sociality that composed them all. In other words, ‘There was not any common ground or viewpoint outside the entities being brought together, as one might imagine Euro-American appeals to *humanity* or *citizenship* lie outside’ (Strathern 2011a, 96, my emphasis – she could have placed ‘society’ alongside ‘humanity’ and ‘citizenship’). Today of course things may be different among migrants in Moresby; they might even see themselves in ethnic terms. But the question remains: how did conflicts there come to resemble ‘ethnic’ ones in the first place? There may be more than one answer to this question, certainly, but the suggestion is that persistent scholarly descriptions of ‘ethnic conflict’ have had an important role to play.

‘If not a politics of [ethnic] identity, then what politics?’ Strathern asks (2011b, 126), referring to a comment on this aforementioned piece by Pedersen (2011). She attributes the answer to him, yet it is really her own answer. It long has been. Strathern’s own politics ultimately lies in revealing the ‘inalienability of relations between, and thus the entanglement of persons with respect to, one another’ (Strathern 2011b, 126). I emphasize that this does not mean that she sees relations as inherently ‘good’ (they can be divisive and violent after all). Relations, simply, are a permanent fact of life and anthropologists must work towards having this more comprehensively acknowledged in contrast to individualizing Euro-American politics. Similarly, for Strathern the mutual entanglement of persons does not mean either that that we are all fundamentally the same nor, for that matter, all fundamentally different.

Rather, there is unity in diversity. Strathern concedes that this might be a bit of a Euro-Americanism, ‘but that is all right. There are many contexts in which that might be a good thing to do and one I have made my own indeed involves constantly returning to Melanesian materials’ (Strathern 2011b, 124). Yet returning to Melanesian materials over and over again does not just mean viewing them in stark contrast to Euro-America in order to better understand the latter (as imagined by some commentators). Rather, listening closely to what others have to say – indeed *seeing* and *writing* with them – might make us more ‘us’ as well. All her work adds up, then, to a commitment at once anthropological and political: to move beyond our overdetermining analytical frames to practice writing as closely as possible – redescribing – with the perspective of others. She frames this as an invitation ‘not just to imagine knowing about one thing through another,

but to work through what it would be like in practice to write about Hagen migrants while writing about Corsica or the Darhad's Mongolia' (Strathern 2011b, 127).

In other words, she invites us not to replicate her redescriptive mode, but to practice an anthropology akin to hers, one that perennially rewrites what we think we know by enacting the particular sum of relations – the persons, places, various works and so on – we each encounter. Might any of us, one day, be able to parallel her? Perhaps not quite.

V. THIS VOLUME

Analogy, not-quite-replication only: this is indeed the point. Any anthropologist will only be able to write *with* Strathern while of course writing with all the other conceptual and interpersonal relations they contain within them (intentionally or not). This inevitable difference does not mean that others cannot enact their own redescriptions; as I noted at the outset, for Strathern, scholars are redescriving all the time (see also note 3).

However, I have shown that Strathern has her own unique techniques for redescription – her conceptual displacements and search for analogical/relational knowledge is recursive, attaining even the structure of her texts and her sense of authorship. Therefore developing a *Strathernian* redescription would entail questioning society and thinking relationally or analogically at least on some level of analysis. As noted at the outset, the essays collected here all offer their own kinds of Strathernian redescription, even as their ethnographies often begin far from her usual terrain. Their aim is to both honour and to inspire others to redescribe relations from wherever they write, with all of the political implications that this entails. This has certainly been my hope, too: as someone whose unlikely engagement with Strathern's work has been transformative (which I elaborate on in my acknowledgements), I know that her thinking can spur anthropological and political reflection in the most unexpected of ways.

Carol Greenhouse's 'The Scale(s) of Justice' reminds us that among the numerous impacts that Strathern's work has had on anthropology, what has been absorbed the least is how she studies the relations between relations in defiance of scale – what I have argued constitutes the core of Strathern's own mode of redescription. To demonstrate the critical vantage of a Strathernian approach, then, Greenhouse offers a redescription of the rise of US neoliberalism and the idea of the state itself. She focuses her ethnography on 1990s legislation: the failure of a major civil rights act and a new welfare reform law. She shows that these legislative developments

supported neoliberal reform, enforcing an increased individualism and the occlusion of structural inequalities along the lines of race, for example.

Yet the reforms also reinforced the image of the state as transcending its citizens. In other words, with US ethnography Greenhouse shows what Strathern anticipates: not only that there are certain descriptive procedures that individualize, abstract and (re)scale entities, but also that the ‘relationship’ between the individual and the state is legislated, forged (in all senses of the word).

Alberto Corsín Jiménez similarly attends to the relations between relations with the aim of redescribing earlier work as well as the notions of analogy and symmetry – at least for a Euro-American context. His ethnography begins with the relocation of one of the world’s largest oil companies to a new Latin American headquarters in Buenos Aires. Exploring the responses across different company departments to the ‘paperless office’ policy enforced for the new building, he finds that each department mobilizes specific and different ‘equations’ – arguments about the relationships between paper and the production of knowledge – as means to comply with and potentially modify expectations of paperlessness.

Thus, whereas he was once concerned with the analytical constraint of relationality for anthropology (Corsín Jiménez 2004), he now agrees that Euro-American knowledge is produced through relations – and through the ‘exchange of equations’ in particular, which he offers as a redescription of analogy for the Euro-American knowledge economy – a distinct epistemic form therein. In the process he questions the emerging disciplinary interest in symmetry, which he defines as equations between knowledges: should anthropology not instead, he asks, be seeking modes of redescription that ‘breathe and transpire a certain “inadequacy” . . . that are not ad-equated’. In short, shouldn’t anthropologists be crafting modes of redescription that do not mimic the equations between relations?

Stuart Kirsch’s contribution also explores what the relations between relations can teach us – in particular how ‘thinking across domains’ can redescribe the practice of comparing indigenous rights. Whereas much scholarship has either compared different definitions of indigeneity, or has been critical of indigenous rights as a category, Kirsch begins with Strathern’s riposte that one can analyze indigenous claims without devaluing their political purchase.

He then shows via comparison of Surinamese land struggles and US repatriation claims that distinct national contexts see the mobilizations of different domains of knowledge and practice to support rights claims. In Suriname, indigenous land claims mobilize the domain of ‘freedom’. In the United States in contrast, claims surrounding Native American human

remains invoke the domains of science, property and kinship – and often no single domain dominates the other in importance. Thus Kirsch's analysis not only develops Strathern's relational interests in domains of knowledge practices – particularly those of law, science and kinship – but sheds new light on how political claims are fashioned through modes of domaining more generally.

Then, in order to redescribe the technologies for peace she studied in northern Cyprus, Yael Navaro asks a Strathernian question: how do new technologies reimagine relations? She answers this by looking for the knowledge embedded in the artefact; indeed knowledge, as Strathern notes, always travels with the artefacts it makes, accumulating along its routes. Looking specifically at a computer program called Structured Dialogic Design Process (SDDP), which was developed to facilitate dialogue and reconciliation between Turkish and Greek Cypriots, she finds that it is a 'paradox in the making' insofar as it deploys a cybernetic organism or cyborg to accomplish a humanist project; cyborgs are reimaged as a way to mend human relations.

Of course at the core of this paradox is that military cybernetics was the crucible for technologies such as SDDP, while the latter's developers continue to assume that technology is by 'nature' peaceful. Thus Navaro is redescribing these 'pacifist devices' as not-quite-pacifist, while noting, as Strathern and indeed Haraway does, that cyborgs are never innocent, even as they develop their own particularities and paradoxes in given relational arrangements.

Casper Bruun Jensen and Brit Ross Winthereik then offer a redescription of audit's very power of description. They do so not only via ethnography of the Danish National Audit Office but through their research itself being drawn into what they call audit loops: recursive audit practices that occur across, outside and within organizational boundaries. In their case, their research looped between their writing and the audit office, which critiqued their findings and demanded modifications. This (participant) observation and analysis of audit loops tells us what comes after the audit explosion of the 1990s: an implosion of a particular kind.

Jensen and Winthereik go beyond an earlier prediction by Power (2000), who argued that after the audit explosion would come implosion, an internalization of audit practices becoming part of, as opposed to external to, organizations themselves. Instead, Jensen and Winthereik show not only that implosion entails increased internalization but that external and internal modes of monitoring begin to be indistinguishable – in a sense there remains nothing external left to relate to. This is what they mean by audit loop and how it consequently puts 'the *epistemology* and *form* of audit . . . under pressure'. Thus audit's seemingly ever-growing power of description,

as identified by Strathern (2000a), is put into question, facing challenges from within and without.

Viveiros de Castro and Goldman's contribution then follows with comments on a few of Strathern's texts. Some of the issues they highlight of course appear in Strathern's wider work, and I have also touched on some of these themes above. Of particular interest to them, however, is her engagement with Amazonian perspectivism, especially how her discussion of Melanesian persons and relations can be described as an 'exchange of perspectives'. This exchange of perspectives is made possible not via different bodies (as it would be in Amazonian perspectivism, say) but by virtue of the relation, as they explain: 'The exchange of Melanesian perspectives is not an exchange of seen worlds; it is an exchange of relations between "giver" and "receiver"'. In other words, Melanesian perspectives (on relations) are created and made visible between 'social persons' because they are party to a relation in the first place.

Viveiros de Castro and Goldman ultimately characterize Strathern's writing itself as modelled on this Melanesian exchange of perspectives (eliding the Euro-American pluralist vision), and can stand as an analogy to what I have described here as Strathern's redescription of anthropology. Indeed, relations in Strathern's redescription as I have characterized it can also be grasped as exchange¹⁷ – and the cyborg who writes anthropology, like the Melanesian person, is constituted by an exchange of perspectives.

Simply put, given that each contributor draws on Strathern to redescribe relations within their respective fields, there are certainly other Strathernian themes that appear across the essays (in particular a concern with scale and domaining and re-domaining). Yet what distinguishes this collection from others of its kind is precisely how the authors deploy such Strathernian insights to focus on how practices of (re)description generally are a source of knowledge and thus entwined with politics in the broadest sense: politics here referring less to state elections and parties than to forms of governance.

Certainly Greenhouse, Kirsch and Jensen and Winthereik present ethnographies more directly to do with the state and the entities that buttress it, and their collective insights are important for any scholar interested in law and bureaucracy in particular. If on the one hand Greenhouse and Kirsch show that the establishment of particular domains make certain political forms appear, Casper and Winthereik predict, on the other hand, a seemingly dangerous and immanent collapse of domains: one in which a state institution becomes no different from the outside it is supposed to evaluate – even ethnography being somewhat co-opted in the process as well.

Strathern has regularly cautioned against anthropology's absorption and even potential elimination by forces of governance (as well as flagging

the co-optation of ‘knowledge’ more generally, Strathern 2000a, 2006). It is with this in mind that Corsín-Jiménez argues that anthropologists should avoid reproducing the ‘exchange of equations’ that governs the Euro-American mode of knowledge production. Indeed, he suggests that one might seek to contest this governance by writing against the oft-presumed symmetry between relations.

Navaro’s account offers other vital suggestions for us still: namely, that we take care with the very idea of relationality itself, which like everything else can ultimately be co-opted and ‘dehumanized’ by emergent forms of governance seeking to ‘protect’ it. This is not to say that Navaro is promoting a more ‘humane’ or even ‘human’ form of conflict resolution *per se*. It is just that she crucially notes that in the context of such technologies for peace, ‘relationality’ becomes a technique to be acquired, a practice of ‘dialogue’ and ‘communication’ that is paradoxically deemed ‘best managed’ and ‘made useful’ through a post-human cyborg. Put otherwise, Navaro’s piece also suggests that we should not only write to protect the right to ‘useless’/‘ungoverned’ knowledge, but we should also care about the very ways that a codification of ‘proper relationality’ might be used as a way to discipline and govern relations themselves.

Finally, Viveiros de Castro and Goldman importantly remind us not to be governed too much by a concern with ‘politics,’ one of the ‘overarching practico-theoretical modes of our society’ (this volume). And yet, they also suggest that writing ethnography through an exchange of perspectives, as Strathern does, offers a more powerful anthropological politics than writing in favour of this or that struggle – and necessarily so. Indeed, ‘Strathern wants to escape the alternative between “pluralist” or “liberal” relativism, on the one hand, and “imperialist” or “conservative” universalism, on the other. It is not necessary to choose between these two alternatives,’ they say, ‘another world is possible...’. In other words, it is by writing differently, as Strathern invites us to do, that anthropologists can contribute to the very political transformations that can in the long term be slowed by the recourse to ‘politics’ itself.

While I will let Sarah Green extend our perspectives on her own terms as a conclusion to this volume, some words on Strathern’s afterword are appropriate. Certainly, in addition to being an exemplary redescription of the shifts in British bureaucracy through the twentieth century, it is also one of her most ‘personal’ essays. She conducts her analysis through the lens of the William Wyse Professorship, a post she held for over a decade at the University of Cambridge and was leaving at the time of her writing. ‘The Disappearing of an Office’ thus tells many stories, but most importantly for our purposes it brings Strathern’s project home as it were: making visible while working within the changing conditions, limits and potentials of

(anthropological) knowledge production and its politics. She does this of course by looking at one set of relations alongside another, here doubling down on redescription by illuminating bureaucracy through the self-revised perspective on Garia (Melanesian) ethnography by Meyer Fortes, a previous William Wyse Professor. Fortes was of course an Africanist at the forefront of the study of society in its heyday. No more needs to be said about Strathern's critique of society, but it echoes in Fortes's own redescription: he admits that his commitment to the study of structure (especially segmentary descent theory) left him unable to believe in the fluidity, even absence, of Garia social structure when it was first presented to him by Peter Lawrence in 1950. As a result of this scepticism, Lawrence only published his full view of the Garia over thirty years later in 1984, yet invited Fortes to write the foreword (Strathern 1992b). As Strathern (this volume) puts it, Fortes's 'handsome admission of a different perspective meant (indicated) that he was writing from a world that had already shifted'. Part of the shift she is referring to is an anthropological one, where the concepts of 'office' that Fortes had once championed, together with the concepts of 'role' and 'status', no longer held sway.

Yet this shift interests Strathern precisely because it elucidates a similar and more recent change within British bureaucracy in academia and beyond: the concept of public office and its related 'persona' has also begun to fade. In practice this means that post holders are ever more concerned with their own personal agendas than with representing their institutions, which was once the norm. This, Strathern notes, is a complex reconfiguration rather than a liberation *per se*. Yet the lesson she offers anthropologists here is less about how to proceed within bureaucracies (she speaks about this elsewhere, e.g. Strathern 2000a), than how to move on to the next redescription: 'how one might think anthropologically about any of these changes will be coloured by the comparisons one brings to mind' (Strathern, this volume). Indeed, in this characteristically recursive call to bring ethnography to bear on disciplinary practice and the anthropologists it produces, she invites us not only to continue discovering new relations but to keep redescribing – and reinventing – anthropology as well.

NOTES

1. The seminar was held on 21 May 2007 at CRASSH, the University of Cambridge. The question at issue was my own.
2. While the current volume draws some impetus from an earlier special issue (Deiringer and Lebner 2008/9), the aim was to extend and connect the par-

ticular discussions of bureaucracy, knowledge and anthropology (foregrounded in said volume) to general issues in Strathern's thinking on ethnography and politics.

3. Strathern also does not always use 'redescription' to refer to herself and she makes different kinds of arguments therefrom. In addition to using it to name what she is doing even in later parts of her work (e.g. Strathern 2011a; 2014b) she also sometimes uses it to critically note what others are doing with specific concepts – and perhaps should not be doing (e.g. Strathern 2003b).
4. Strathern associates having a programme with conceiving a somewhat totalitarian 'overall end' that others should follow (Borič and Strathern 2010, 281; see also Josephides, Rapport and Strathern 2015, 399).
5. Commodity thinking implies a set of assumptions about how individual persons are considered subjects that are different than things or objects; the former can act, own and alienate property, which they hold in their own persons and in things (though supposedly not in other persons). Much attention has been paid to Strathern's critique of commodity thinking; the interest in relativizing the distinction between subject and object is also found beyond anthropology, especially in the work of Bruno Latour. For this, and because Strathern's critique of society encompasses, includes and goes beyond the critique of commodity thinking, I focus on the former.
6. I thank Marilyn Strathern for the correction of the original citation.
7. It is true that Strathern's ethnographic synthesis of Melanesia resonates with Lévi-Straussian structuralism (particularly his work *Mythologiques*), insofar as cultural differences are rendered as versions of one another. Nevertheless, as she states in the interview in this volume, structuralism has served her more as a technique than a theory. Moreover, classic social anthropology had robust thinking on the relation as preceding terms, and she focuses in her writing on her social anthropological influences (e.g. Strathern 1995). This is another reason French readers should stop thinking that her anthropology is just another structuralism in disguise (adding to Allard 2014).
8. In this case she was responding to anthropologist Annette Weiner, who had accused Strathern of writing from a male point of view. See Strathern's interview with Viveiros de Castro and Fausto, this volume.
9. Society and the individual are spoken about as ethnographic objects, however, mostly via her ethnographies of England and the United Kingdom.
10. In AN, pluralism refers to the Euro-American idea that the world is composed of a 'plurality' of individual forms that can be bundled into groups: humans/individuals, animals, societies. Her idea of the 'merographic' relation captures other aspects of this pluralist view: that each of these forms can be described as parts of others, which serve as 'contexts' and therefore are never the same as the other (AN, 72–81). Both pluralism and merographic relations are ultimately related to society thinking; indeed, the concept of merographic connection, which is technically broader, is modelled on society thinking. She states that different forms of classification are 'given in the indigenous (English)

merographic connection between individual and society. One may switch perspectives from one entity to the other, so that the two perspectives seemingly encompass between them everything that might be said about social life' (AN, 76). I am aware that not all social constructionists may consider themselves postmodernist, but at the time of AN (1992), they were increasingly synonymous. AN is an attempt to specify the emerging 'postplural' epoch that is grounded less in the interrogation of truth than a recognition of the contingency of a pluralist grasp of reality. More recently Strathern has referred to this pluralism as 'perspectivalism', which continues to persist in some renderings of science and technology studies (not to be confused with perspectivism, see Strathern 2011a).

11. 'Society, in the twentieth-century Euro-American sense, is, as I have suggested, already evidence for such conceptualisations of infinity. [It] is held to contain diversity within it to be made up of countable/countless different subjects, each with their own view – whether those subjects are institutions, groups, categories or individual persons' (*Property, Substance and Effect*, 237).
12. Certainly, the journal articles of committed ethnographers trained around mid-century belied a certain sense of comparison/generalisation as a 'higher aim' in anthropology (e.g. Pitt-Rivers 1977).
13. Comparison in Melanesia seemed to promise an explanation of how societies could be connected, how and why they changed and even how they transformed from one 'kind' into another (Strathern 2004).
14. Commentators often misrecognize merographic relations as being a mode of thinking that she is promoting rather than critiquing; see note 10.
15. Although the 'ontological turn' includes a cross-disciplinary cohort of scholars, Strathern is primarily concerned with the anthropologists developing the concept of ontology (Viveiros de Castro 1998, 2011; Henare, Holbraad and Wastell 2007; Holbraad, Pedersen and Viveiros de Castro 2014; Holbraad and Pedersen forthcoming). Different ways of thinking about ontology within this growing group notwithstanding, they are not relevant for understanding Strathern's response. Indeed, she has been explicit enough about her concerns with the effects of *prioritizing* the development of 'concepts' generally and 'ontology' in particular, regardless of definition, and I discuss these issues below (see also the introduction and section II). Yet to these we might add another critique that can be deduced from her wider work (see also Lebner 2017): ontology privileges a *consummate* Euro-American philosophical concept (and a rather unitary one at that, thus evoking society, the individual and comparison) and assigns it to the task of ethnographic description. While she is fully aware that scholars cannot wholly escape their language, the engagement with such weighty concepts, especially ones that might conjure society thinking, is precisely what she has avoided in favour of defining anthropology's unique contribution.
16. It is worth noting that one of the three ways in which Foucault claims concepts are formed within specific discursive formations are through 'procedures of

intervention' (Foucault 1989, 65). These procedures may be of various kinds, including, for example, '*techniques of rewriting*' (ibid., original italics), which resonates with Strathern's redescription. Yet Foucault also notes that a system of conceptual formation is defined by the relations that constitute it, in particular how, 'for example, the ordering of descriptions or accounts is linked [related] to the techniques of rewriting' (ibid., 66). Thus the relation for Foucault is more than a concept – it is also what makes concepts possible, emerging between ordering and rewriting. (Moreover, Foucault's central concern with relations as constitutive of discourse often goes misrecognized, according to Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983, 63). Relations precede concepts too for Strathern, though as a result, the relation is where she trains her focus: her modes of rewriting or redescription move anthropology *beyond* the mere concept or discourse to the social consequences of relations – conceptual and interpersonal – that is her intervention.

17. See Gell's (1999) depiction of exchange as equivalent to relations in Melanesia; and also Strathern's discussion of her redescription of perspectivism (2011, 198).

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