

Theorizing Ethnography

QUEERING KNOWLEDGE

**ANALYTICS, DEVICES AND INVESTMENTS AFTER
MARILYN STRATHERN**

Edited by

Paul Boyce, EJ Gonzalez-Polledo and Silvia Posocco



Queering Knowledge

This volume draws on the significance of the work of Marilyn Strathern in respect of its potential to queer anthropological analysis and to foster the reimagining of the object of anthropology.

The authors examine the ways in which Strathern's varied analytics facilitate the construction of alternative forms of anthropological thinking, and greater understanding of how knowledge practices of queer objects, subjects and relations operate and take effect.

Queering Knowledge offers an innovative collection of writing, bringing about queer and anthropological syntheses through Strathern's oeuvre. It will be relevant to scholars from anthropology as well as a number of other disciplines, including gender, sexuality and queer studies.

Paul Boyce is Senior Lecturer in the Anthropology and International Development at the University of Sussex, UK. He works at intersections of anthropological theory and global health research and is currently preparing a monograph – *Sexualities, HIV and Ethnography: Sexual Worldings and Queer Misrecognitions in India*. His recent co-edited book is entitled *Researching Sex and Sexualities*.

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Theorizing Ethnography

Series Editors: Paul Boyce, Elisabeth L. Engebretsen,
EJ Gonzalez-Polledo, and Silvia Posocco

The 'Theorizing Ethnography' book series seeks to reorient ethnographic engagements across disciplines, methods and ways of knowing. By focusing on ethnography as a point of tension between abstract thinking and situated life-worlds, the series promotes ethnographic method and writing as an analytical form that is always partial, open-ended and epistemologically querying.

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The book is dedicated to Marilyn Strathern.

Paul Boyce, EJ Gonzalez-Polledo and Silvia Posocco

Queering knowledge

An introduction

Paul Boyce, EJ Gonzalez-Polledo and Silvia Posocco

History and context for the project

This collection of essays draws on the significance of Marilyn Strathern's work in respect of its potential to queer anthropological analysis and to foster the reimagining of the object of anthropology. Strathern's ethnographic contributions to studies of personhood, kinship, gender relations and reproduction in Melanesia and Britain have achieved wide recognition in anthropology, gender and science studies. Against this background, this volume expands the purchase of Strathern's widely acclaimed writings, and their reception, to ask how they might reframe the relationship between anthropology and queer theory. Strathern's analytic devices, rhetorical forms and figurations, and her strategy to conflate conceptual and empirical ontologies, have had profound effects on anthropologists' responses to the crisis of representation, especially for those who have drawn on the productive capacities of her thinking to conjure up the ethnographic present. Amidst such effects the volume emerged out of conversations held over several years in formal and informal gatherings at the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA) biennial conference (Tallinn 2014), American Anthropological Association (AAA) Annual Meetings (Washington 2014; Denver 2015; Minneapolis 2016) and European Network for Queer Anthropology Workshops (Budapest 2015), as well as smaller research events. Bringing together a range of authors and themes, the book aims to capture the momentous influence that the scholarship of Marilyn Strathern has had on scholars working at the intersections of social and cultural anthropology, gender and sexuality studies, queer and ethnographic theory. It contributes to the field of Strathernian scholarship most recently mapped in the volumes *Recasting Anthropological Knowledge: Inspiration and Social Science* (Edwards and Petrović-Šteger 2011), *Knowledge and Ethics in Anthropology: Obligations and Requirements* (Josephides 2015) and *Redescribing Relations: Strathernian Conversations on Ethnography, Knowledge and Politics* (Lebner 2017), extending the debate in new conceptual directions.

Queering Knowledge takes merographic connections as a structuring device for concept-work (Faubion et al. 2016) that can generate points of connectivity

and productive rupture in and across the chapters. The merographic relation denotes ways in which parts of things may become shared to effect both differences and connections *through the act* of being contrasted as things. The imaginative act that brings together separate parts as attributes for recognising differences comprises an apposite analogy for the present collection, wherein each chapter comprises a convergence through and around specific Strathernian analytical devices. The present volume thus reflects ways in which ethnographic work might move beyond conceiving 'queer' as a subject category for use in culturally comparative work, instead considering the productivity of Strathernian analytics through their potential for connectivity and opaqueness. Cross-identification, as a paradigmatically queering knowledge practice (Sedgwick 1993; Muñoz 1999), is activated in the writings collected in the volume through varied generative deployments of Strathern-inspired modes of analysis, connection and abstraction. Conversely, the authors brought together in the book utilise a range of imaginings and analytic subversions to focus on how people might relate to queer object categories partially, merographically, or in terms of a sense of dissonance from signifier and self. In this sense we seek to evoke a sense of representational estrangement and explore how varied analytics, devices and investments become relevant to figuring out intimacies, desires and the politics of sexual and gender diversity. The volume, therefore, proposes a reading that both flows and diverts in connected and unfinished analytic forms, especially in our hope that, as the chapters travel via the interpretations of different readers, the synergies and divergences that the book offers may extend beyond those contained within its pages. The volume asks: through what analytical operations do the participating authors engage in queering knowledge formations, objects, relations and analytics? What knowledge do merographic connections between the chapters elicit? How do they queer knowledge and to what effects? What type of analytical devices does Marilyn Strathern's work offer in respect of the queering properties and potentialities of ethnographic knowledge? What forms of un-concealment, opaqueness and creativity might conceptual connections between Strathern and queer theory elicit?

Out-contextualisation, perspective and the productive life of concepts

Successive readings of Strathern's work have drawn out particular themes and investments in her writings in order to reconfigure links between anthropology and a range of fields. Strathern's interventions, as well as her reflexive engagement with the status of knowledge, made a profound mark on conceptualisations of accountability, the importance of description and debates about interdisciplinarity. Strathern's own relation with the ways in which her work is received in anthropology – as well as in other disciplines – remains one of open curiosity and partial disavowal. In an interview with Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Carlos Fausto (2017), Strathern downplayed the interviewers' claims about the sheer originality of her work in favour of

situating her oeuvre in the particular context of British anthropology, and its even more particular engagement with structuralist and Marxist traditions. Although Strathern did not explicitly privilege a direct application of the tenets of structural analysis in her own writing, a sense of embattlement and inadequacy led Strathern to confront key questions animating structural and Marxist readings of social process within the discipline of anthropology. Key amongst these was the need ‘to take seriously the feminist claim that in talking about gender, we talk about society’ (2017: 47–48).

Mary Douglas’ review of the *Gender of the Gift* a year after its publication highlighted the book’s achievement in terms of its strategy to reposition traditional feminist debates in anthropology by re-situating ‘backstage’ problems – such as the central and performative character of categorical thinking in the West. Reading Strathern’s writing as an example of postmodern anthropology, Douglas commended the book’s depth of argument and framing while lamenting the loss of traditional positivist ethnography in a post-modern turn to reflexivity. For Douglas, the main achievement of *The Gender of the Gift* derived from its problematisation of categories of personhood, agency and economic life, which Strathern innovatively plotted against fictions and metaphors not easily comparable or translatable. Strathern’s break with the anthropological canon opened the way for a less classificatory and hierarchical form of theoretical production, even if so doing imperilled the comparative ethos of the ethnographic method. Strathern’s anthropology was seen as the kind of ‘alternative fiction’ which could ‘counterpoise the hack political narratives that lie to hand’.¹

Drawing on the impact of Strathern’s new wave of gender constructivism in Melanesia, Jolly (1992; see also Lipset 2008; Morgain and Taylor 2015) argued forcibly that a new ontological proposition emerges not from the exposition of particularly Melanesian gender relations, but from a ‘new’ gendering of relations – the rendering of persons, artefacts and sequences as male and female (Jolly 1992: 137). For Jolly, unlike traditional anthropological comparison, Strathern’s investment in partiality opens up analysis to further interpretations, while writing her vantage point into the analysis – breaking existing convergences between ethnographers’ interests and Melanesian men. Sarah Franklin has further argued that Strathern’s social theory of gender, already contained in her early writings, proposes a kinetic theory of gender. In a manuscript originally written in 1974, and re-edited as *Before and After Gender* (2016), Strathern demonstrates that rather than being circumscribed to particular sets of relations, not least between men and women, gender is, in fact, a mechanism, a system of symbols, objects, and relations that ‘can be used to represent other things, and vice versa’ (Franklin 2016: x). The isomorphism between an analytic object and the process of analysis, between content and form, emerges as a generative result, a relation that reveals, ‘the relation between the reader to the text, the texts to each other’ (Franklin 2016: xx). In this sense gender presents itself as an effect, a play of forces that enclose and reveal the workings of sociality. Franklin situates Strathern’s

kinetic theory of gender as precursor to the emergence of a performative theory of gender in the 1990s, arguing that ‘using gender as a performative analytic principle – offers a demonstration, and imitation, of what Strathern argues gender is, means, and does’ (Franklin 2016: xvii).

Indeed, for Strathern, the problem of gender was never just about gender. Studying the complexity of social worlds, conceptuality itself becomes generative (Franklin 2014; Street and Copeman 2014; Edwards and Petrović-Šteger 2011); like gender, a performative conflation between abstract and concrete worlds (1995a: 7). For example, imagining ‘the relation’ as an ‘internal’ feature of sociality, yet also a holographic device that allows the analyst to grasp the social world as a system of relations, Strathern uses vernacular concepts, and the ways these travel across domains of social life, to conceptualise and route generativity and reproduction. Such routings can be taken up in various contexts. For example, thinking through relations *between* women and relations *within* women’s networks in London and Manchester, Sarah Green (2002; see also Riles 1998; 2001) twists Strathern’s relational view of sociality through a perspectivist lens. Green’s ethnography remarked that the networks that linked gay women after the widespread introduction of internet communication technologies in women’s organisations in London and Manchester did not constitute a new or indeed the main basis for sociality, but, rather, the workings of particular cultural formations. These were seen to intervene to make relations meaningful in particular and changing ways. For Green, it is these cultural motions, and not simply infrastructural development, that provide the network metaphor its generative capacity. Navaro (2017) similarly looks for the pathways through which knowledge travels in the making of distinctly cultural devices to accomplish a large-scale humanitarian project. Yet, for Navaro, the introduction of these technologies does not alter social process in a significant way as much as it allows new questions to be asked regarding the constitution of the human in peace processes. Disentangling the conflated idioms of technology and humanism, Navaro’s analysis draws on Strathern’s thinking to examine how the human and the machine are produced as phantasmal devices that emerge in collective processes of production and transformation, circulation and entanglement.

Strathern’s reconfigurations and recombinations yield forms of knowledge with surprising effects. Partial connections drawn from different fields of fact – such as Strathern’s binary operators, for instance, ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ – detach knowledge from origin, as they press common idioms against unfamiliar domains (Edwards and Petrović-Šteger 2011: 3). Franklin (2014) turned to Strathern to revisit merographic connections in the context of an engagement with theories of social reproduction in the biosciences, opening up the devices and discourses in which analogies ‘travel back’ in shifts of context and scale. Reading the ‘new genetics’ as one such metaphor, Franklin argues that conceptual generativity lies not only in the capacity of metaphors to engender new agencies, but in their capacity for return. For instance, reading into the limits of literalism in predictive genetics, Franklin finds that dissonances and

variations ‘do not travel easily or automatically out of its rather narrow knowledge context’ (2014: 4). Rather she observed that analogic return makes possible ‘the ability to create, to maintain, and also to change and disconnect the perspectives, or vantage points, out of which we “do” both the social and cultural work of kinship – as a practice of connection as well as meaning and symbol’ (Franklin 2014: 4–5).

Generativity presents a relation between author and work that makes particular sets of relationships thinkable (Biagioli 2014; Haraway 1988). Readings of Strathern after the ontological turn have recently led anthropologists to consider new ‘questions and problems’ with ontology and, particularly, redefine the purchase of ontological debates away from philosophical grammars (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017) by underlining a sense commonality between description and epistemology.² Holbraad and Pedersen have suggested that Strathern’s own relation with the ontological turn, however awkward, is characterised by her proximity with postmodern anthropology, particularly as a result of the reflexive turn in the 1980s. Strathern’s self-reflexivity, for Holbraad and Pedersen, connects her analytic toolkit to feminist scholarship, as it does with the new reflexive anthropology that inspired the revival of ethnographic theory and the ontological turn. Indeed, there is a two-way traffic between the performative effects of analytics, and the way that concepts shape our own formation as analysts. Holbraad and Pedersen (2009) have illustrated a convergence between the analyst and her area of work by encapsulating Strathern’s analytics with a figuration of the analyst (which they term ‘planet M – which stands for Melanesia or Marilyn’, and indexes Strathern’s ‘idealism’ and her productive critical engagement with ‘context’ and the practice of comparison). Such a conflation reveals Strathern’s conceptual analytics, such as scale, substance and post-plurality as isomorphic of the relation between abstraction and concreteness in her writing, which Holbraad and Pedersen argue bring forward her ‘peculiar sharpness’ (Holbraad and Pedersen 2009: 380).

Queer anthropology queering knowledge

As editors we are each especially intrigued by how knowledge traverses contexts to varying effects – concrete and abstract. These qualities can involve fissures in the midst of analytical connections, misunderstandings of intent, and iterations of conceptual and ontological divides across information communities. Ethnographic knowledge might be understood as coming into being in respect of such parentheses and extensions whereby information is relationally constituted, while it in turn is a form of knowledge that takes relations as its object. This involves consideration of where and how information may be included in any given paradigmatic and/or institutional setting *as knowledge*, and where and how it may not be (perhaps because not admissible materially, socially or conceptually). For anthropologists, and others, with interests in the forms and functions of knowledge production, such

observations present a range of challenges. These relate, for instance, to how contextually derived ethnographic findings might connect to wider conceptual formations and dialogues (for example in respect of relations between different disciplines and fields of practice). Ethnographic data (especially as noted in respect of its postmodern readings) is not simply a descriptive form, e.g. for the employment in cultural comparison. Rather ethnography might better be conceived of as a figurative epistemology; located in fieldwork yet calling into question ways in which culture, persons and relations are conceived of analytically (Moore 2007; Strathern 1995b). Such analytical strategies become especially complex when ethnographic research is taken up in respect of queer theoretical perspectives.

As Mark Graham (2014) has recently reflected, anthropology has an especially complex history with respect to its (comparative) representation of same-sex sexualities, as indeed it does with sexualities in general (Vance 1991; Kulick and Willson 1995). However, ethnographies of sexual and gender relations offer formative insights into the development of queer anthropological work, and its relations, or otherwise, to sexual subjects. Sexual and gender relations, as a domain for legitimate ethnographic study, might be seen as repressed in much anthropological writing even while in other readings it has been interpreted as ubiquitously present (Lyons and Lyons 2004). A possible evocation here is of a Foucauldian hypothesis of the repressed; sexuality as *conceived and made present* by moral foreclosures and public subjugation (Graham 2014). Re-readings of the ethnographic record have opened outlooks relevant to such parallels. Margaret Mead's public silence in respect of her bisexuality, for example, has been interpreted retrospectively as having informed conservative and normative analyses of (American) women's sexualities. Being in any way pro-actively vocal about rights and recognition in the case of non-heteronormative sexualities might have called into questions Mead's own sexuality, as well as the veracity of her analytic practice, with unwanted exposing professional consequences (Freeman 1983). By implication, this exposure indicates a fissure amidst Mead's work and experience that informed a normative analytical register in her oeuvre (Graham 2014: 15–16). And yet too Mead has also otherwise been important for her foregrounding of *relative* perspective on socio-sexual norms and moralities. Her work has been claimed as precursive to the emergence of non-heteronormative anthropological theory and practice (Newton 2000). No singular figuration (of Mead) is conclusive or complete in these terms. Her influence on, and connections to, contemporary anthropologies of sexuality are partial and multiple.

In another formative example, that in turn further queries the anthropological record, Don Kulick and Margaret Willson (1995) employed the posthumous publication of Bronislaw Malinowski's private diaries (1967) as a conceptual device to reposition otherwise *hidden* registers of sexuality as having long been implicit in the production of anthropological knowledge. Malinowski had written about sexual desires regarding his Trobriand Island

informants in his diaries in a manner not included in published ethnographic accounts. Deploying such instances figuratively, Kulick and Willson contributed toward the development of analytic spaces for reflexive ethnographic writing wherein sexual experiencing has been reclaimed from its putative suppression and instead conceived of for its analytically generative capacity. Such restorative actions position the reflexive sexual subjectivity of the ethnographer as a device aimed at disrupting hierarchical relations in fieldwork. This has often been an especially important epistemological and methodological strategy for queer ethnography over the last two decades, in concert with decolonising logics and crises of representation as addressed in both queer and ethnographic theory (Muñoz 1999; Adjepong 2019; Bakshi et al. 2016).

Knowledge making about sexual life-worlds, in respect of representational debates, opens further questions about the relation between queer ethnographic perspectives and subjectivities. A critique of queer ethnography is that it may write over ‘other(s)’ experiences by designating subjects of research *as queer*, when in fact this may not be a form of language or identity that is recognised by fieldwork interlocutors. Queer, as a domain term, has been queried accordingly for not necessarily bringing anything new to the analytical palette beyond what (feminist) ethnographers already do – allowing for multiple voices and standpoints on gender and sexuality in the writing of research. Moreover the sensitivities that anthropologists have shown in not imposing LGBT terminologies into other global contexts have been seen as compromised by the utilisation of ‘queer’ as if a universal signifier – applicable to the naming of sexual subjects in their rendering as ethnographic objects (Lewin 2016).

We recognise the conceptual lineages and contemporary problems with ethnographic practice that such an argument points to. Yet, in the present volume we are especially interested in ways in which queer ethnographic engagements may offer unique viewpoints on ways in which non-heteronormative worldings may fall outside of any conceptual or spatial ordering that might render ‘queer subjects’ as identifiable – as if socially or spatially evident as queer(s) (Boyce and Dasgupta 2019; Decena 2011; Engrebretsen 2013; Gonzalez-Polledo 2017). This stance resonates with an important attribute of queer theory; its calling into question any assumed isomorphic connection between categories and lived experiences of sexual difference. Given the predominantly heteronormative nature of social structures in almost any given global context, queer life-ways may unfold with sensations and affects that may be purposefully and profusely intangible, suffuse with contexts that do not call same-sex sexual subjects into being in respect of self-identifications (Manalansan 2015). Queer ethnographies, accordingly, can move *beyond* the representation of same-sex desiring subjects or the giving of voice to such persons via the cipher of fieldwork (although this may indeed feature as a methodological in some queer anthropology). Rather, queer perspectives may emerge more so for their non-affective, *impersonal* properties; for their *not* treading a path back to the framing and naming of queer selves and worlds but rather opening

epistemologies and ambiguous (re-)contextualisations of experiencing outside of heteronormative analytical assumptions.

Queer ethnographic strategies, interpreted in this way, are not so much concerned with the cartographic description or designation of sexual differences, but with how knowledge is organised around practices of sexual differentiation, informing everyday experiences of body, space and identity in ways that may not conform around singular figurations of same-sex desiring individuals (Graham 2014). 'Queer', in such terms, does not function as a conceptual device for the designation of extant non-heteronormative subjects in research. Instead queering instantiates understandings of social worlds as not cohering around wholly identifiable, or self-identifying (sexual) selves or other seemingly categorical imperatives as they might come to bear in the naming of entities. It is after such terms that queer ethnographic analytics have been increasingly extended to a range of projects that in ostensible terms have little or nothing to do with sexual subjects but wherein connected analytical ciphers reveal new perspectives on relations with other objects and species (Boellstorff and Howe 2015; Chen 2012). Queer ethnography might thus be seen as emerging amidst incomplete connections through and in social and material worlds. These may effect changes within people's experience but they do not wholly correspondence with any external designations of queer subjects. Taken up in these terms, queer ethnographic knowledge typically does not orient toward linear object conclusions or the definite evidencing of social contexts or persons. Rather queering performs as an abstraction, an analytical strategy that might displace any assumptive regular connections between (queer) life-worlds and the making of ethnographic knowledge.

Questions of abstraction relate to ways in which anthropologists write up their research by typically removing themselves from research settings. In order to produce knowledge, in textual, visual, performative or other forms, the anthropologist needs to also remove themselves from the relations about which they write, to compose analysis both *out of* and *away from* them. This is why anthropological knowledge might carry within its composition necessarily partial forms of representation. As an epistemological enterprise, anthropology cannot be wholly isomorphic with the worlds that it derives from; it is knowledge of a different order. Social worlds emerge differently, temporally and geographically, when looked back at from the present or when re-described from elsewhere. Relations in field-sites endure and change, meanings and signifiers alter and new writing compels itself accordingly. In these terms social-worlds are never contained in information about them, in as much as such information might be imagined as temporally and contextually locative (providing evidence about particular persons or places within measureable timeframes). Rather, a typical anthropological approach is to probe putative 'facts', as they might seem to provide reductive conclusions. An effect is to query knowledge in reference to the suffuse complexities of ethnographic engagements that typically do not render decisive end-points (Engelke 2008).

After such conceptualisations ethnography, and in relation anthropology, might be imagined as knowledge forms unfolding in present, past and future temporalities together, as opposed to an epistemological commitment to singularly empirical or extant evidentiary instances. And in these terms such knowledge further resonates with queer viewpoints. Queer life-ways might echo the kinds of temporal dispersions described in respect of their conditions for proper realisation not having arrived. Such conditions might be imagined pessimistically, for example after Lee Edelman (2004), stressing that social worlds of the present do not contain conditions for the fulfilment of queer ways of being. Or in a more optimistic vein, as associated with the work of Jose Esteban Muñoz (2009) for example, queer life-worlds might be conceived in respect of futures yet to come, in a utopian manner. Either way, and in a quotidian sense, queer subjects and subjectivities have been conceived of as deferred domains – as *elsewhere* both temporally and in respect of their not being coterminous with readily self-proclaiming ‘non-heteronormatively’ identifying social actors. Questions pertaining to the relational qualities of ethnographic knowledge insist: if epistemologies of queer relations have not yet been achieved in the present how might we conduct ethnographic research in relation to them? What memories and moments might we draw on reflexively, and what kinds of knowledge might queer kinds of ethnographic experience engender? Such questions suggest the potentialities for a kind of ‘radical othering’. Ethnographic viewpoints might facilitate ‘manifold possibilities’ for *anticipatory* alterities (Hendriks 2017). What this suggests is a multiplicity of *possible* queer life-worlds as ontological entry points for ethnographic work – each of which may cohere and aver in respect of any attempt at complete empirical grounding or evidencing.

Such a way of conceiving knowledge, or of ‘queering knowledge’, offers divergent perspectives into how information is valued and enacted in different times and contexts. Academic research, to take a salient cotemporary example, is increasingly called upon to demonstrate impact; its application beyond purely disciplinary discourses and debates. Assessments of research efficacy derive from capacities to demonstrate such effects – knowledge arising being valued in these terms, while in turn evidencing such values may become attached to on-going investments in knowledge production (by funders). For those of us working in a queer idiom such values can be especially challenging where our research and other forms of engagement may be more typically concerned with how knowledge and relations take shape in contextually multivalent and temporally unrealised forms. As Nadja Millner-Larsen and Gavin Butt have recently observed, ‘queer activism – not to mention queer life – is a particularly rich resource for imagining, experimenting with, and enacting the improvisational infrastructures necessary for managing the unevenness of contemporary existence’ (2018: 4). Such improvisational qualities open out perspectives on the ‘commons’ for Milner-Larsen and Butt, framing viewpoints on already existing queer forms of social action that do not converge around individualistic properties or bounded forms of being.

Rather, they reside in shared experiences of space, knowledge and sustenance. The evocation here is one of trans-bordering connections – across domains; communal forms of knowing countering singular ownership and enclosure of properties (e.g. where land and information may be similarly evoked as forms of property). More open – common – engagements in turn point to less enclosed re-contextualisations of knowledge, not prefigured on whole (or wholly owned or defined) objects but rather figuring non-individualistic subjects and incomplete (or merographic) connections. In turn, the present volume seeks to capitalise on the creative analytical potential inherent in queering the relation between property and knowledge (Strathern 2004). By trespassing academic boundaries and disciplinary domains, the book repositions Strathernian analytics at the heart of newly (re-)assembled queer commons.

Merographic connections, queering effects

Strathern does not use the term ‘merograph’ as a noun, but, rather, deploys the etymologically related adjective ‘merographic’ mostly in reference to connections. For Strathern, a merographic imaginary ‘works through the incompleteness elicited by comparison and shifts in perspective. It is an organising device that produces merographic connections’ (Strathern 1992: 73). Relations are a way of figuring parts and wholes in the order of experience and interpretation and this extends to the way anthropology figures its own objects and analytical devices. Merographic connections, therefore, are fundamental for ethnography; they operate in and across the registers that organise worlds through lived experience and conceptuality to the effect that ‘a merographic imaginary or modelling orders the analytics of ethnography across fieldwork and writing and observation and analysis’ (Strathern 1999: 246). Merographic connections elicit a sense of incompleteness through juxtaposition and comparison as a ‘a type of analogical perspective, or agentic comparison’ (Franklin 2014: 243). In the process, they generate an element of possibility or surprise (Strathern 1992; 1999) that arises out of the shifts in perspectives engendered by partial connectivities and ‘cuts in the network’ (Strathern 1996). They are activated in acts of re-description and connect to acts of creation and imagination.

In this volume, the authors creatively explore Strathern’s conceptual imagination and analytical repertoire as a repository of queer analytics and devices through which presuppositions concerning knowledge, subjects, objects and relations are disassembled and re-oriented. Strathern draws from anthropological theory but re-tools ideas and, as Gell (1999) insightfully argued, provides a meta-anthropology *of* anthropology. The work of establishing a distance from familiar assumptions concerning what appears as common sense resonates with the critical thrust of the interdisciplinary domains of queer theory and queer studies that have sought, *inter alia*, to denaturalise presuppositions about the stability and coherence of sexual and

gender identifications and desire. In this respect, we contest the narrative that positions ‘queer’ – when it positions queer at all – as a disciplinary sub-field in anthropology or in any other disciplinary configuration. In Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s influential early iteration, queer theory entailed a challenge to the logics of minoritising discourses and political tactics (Sedgwick 1990). In Sedgwick’s (1990; 1993) formulation, a critical reading of minoritising and universalising views on the homosexual/heterosexual dyad resulted in an anti-separatist and anti-assimilationist stance. Whilst a minoritising view of the homosexual/heterosexual dyad assumes a ‘small, distinct, relatively fixed homosexual minority’ or perspective, in the universalising view, the dyad is generalised and reified to be universally important (Sedgwick 1993: 3).³ However, as Sedgwick argues, ‘lines can never be drawn to circumscribe within some proper domain of sexuality (whatever that might be) the consequences of a shift in sexual discourse’ (Sedgwick 1990: 2–3). In Sedgwick’s post-perspectivism, then, ‘queer’ does not delimit or circumscribe, but rather, it is tied etymologically and epistemologically to transitivity, relation and strangeness (1993: xii).

Against this background, merographic connections become devices that can further the analysis of intractable definitional issues, and problems with categorical congruence and stability. This is particularly important in anthropology because here, as we have argued elsewhere (Boyce et al. 2015; Boyce et al. 2018), queer perspectives are subject to extremely uneven institutionalisation and are often either ghettoised or disavowed. The politics of queer, then, cannot be reduced to ill-judged or straightforwardly nefarious projects of inclusion – into disciplines, institutions, communities or worlds (Puar 2007; Haritaworn et al. 2014). Inclusion is conditional and dependent on acquiescing to a range of normativities. Further, inclusion is often framed so as to leave the very premises at the heart of the constitution of a whole, be that a community (of scholars) or a body politic, its boundaries and limits, unquestioned and unchallenged. This volume treats merographic connections as devices with the capacity to engender a problematisation of received assumptions regarding the stability or naturalness of parts and wholes – and by a queer extension, of the presuppositions inherent in minoritarian *and* minoritising politics. Whilst the politics of merographic connections have remained implicit in the work of Marilyn Strathern, that is, they are not the subject of sustained commentary and reflection, the queer readings of Strathern’s oeuvre collected in this volume provide the occasion for focussed commentary and performatively activate this important critical dimension. The contributions gathered in this volume mobilise the generative analytical potential inherent in shifting perspectives to offer multiple, innovative and unexpected re-contextualisations of the work of Marilyn Strathern vis-à-vis feminist anthropology, queer studies and anthropological theory.

In the first chapter in the volume, ‘Wild gender’, EJ Gonzalez-Polledo addresses Strathern’s early work on gender in the context of the emergence of feminist anthropology and in view of the publication of Strathern’s ‘long

waylaid' (Franklin 2016: xiv) manuscript *Before and After Gender* (2017) originally drafted in the mid-1970s. Gonzalez-Polledo traces the key features of Strathern's framing of gender as a set of questions concerning the figuring of differences between kinds and the substitution of a model of singular persons with a composite made out of substance, parts and relations that do not neatly map onto into male and female. Gonzalez-Polledo connects the Strathernian vision of gender as operator, combinatory device and matrix of multiplicity and dividuality to contemporary thinking on transgender embodiment. The chapter draws out the strikingly anticipatory aspects of Strathern's ideas vis-à-vis contemporary debates in the biosciences and transgender studies and works through deconstruction or disassembling that Strathernian gender thinking entails for natural categories and cultural forms. This, Gonzalez-Polledo argues, has pressing contemporary resonance for many social and theoretical projects that seek to 'think past gender' normativity and over-determination to make space for gender as a relation whose effects are differing and indeterminate. As we have discussed in the opening of the book, and as Gonzalez-Polledo argues in this chapter, the futurity of Strathernian gender thinking in *Before and After Gender* opens up gender as an excitable relational threshold of merographic connectivity. The anticipatory qualities of the Strathernian corpus and its potential for retroactive and futural articulation are explored further in the following chapters.

In 'The (im)possibilities of transgression, or, reflections on the awkward relation between Strathern and queer politics', Irene Peano undertakes an innovative repositioning of Strathern's work. Peano out-contextualises Strathern's oeuvre vis-à-vis the work of two key contemporary theorists, Donna Haraway and Judith Butler. Peano mobilises another important Strathernian device, the 'partial connection' (Strathern 1991), to extend these thinkers 'beyond themselves' and into relations of connectivity with one another. Peano's aim is to offer a reflection on the awkward relation between Strathern's work, queer politics and the politics of disciplines and institutions. Peano critically examines attachments to 'discipline' (anthropology) and the 'university' (institution) – as composite objects shown in the process of ruination. From the ruins of institutions and disciplines, the chapter resists nostalgia and engages instead in the work of imagining how to queer the contemporary post-disciplinary condition and increasingly fragmented and precarious institutions. Strathern is simultaneously placed in this time and in a different temporality, where distinctions between office and person, and academic and activist could be drawn and meaningfully sustained. The queerness in Strathern's proposition lies in the insistence on the work of gaps and interstices where political maneuvering can unfold. Further, Strathern's tentativeness is shown to be a potential queer affect and tactic. Most fundamentally, Peano shows how 'Marilyn Strathern made us queer', engendering multiple re-orientations of queer theory and the politics of anthropology in the current post-apocalyptic, post-disciplinary, post-institutional terrain.

Politics in the interstices of disciplines, institutions and life-worlds tie Sorainen's chapter to Peano's intervention. Antu Sorainen's staging of the question in the chapter, 'Gay Back Alley Tolstoys and inheritance perspectives: re-imagining kinship in queer margins' centres on the life experiences and urban queer worldings as these emerge in the narratives of four 'off-scene gay men', or 'Back Alley Tolstoys', in Helsinki. Sorainen focuses on new kinship practices – a quintessential Strathernian theme (Strathern 1981, 2005), to frame how Back Alley Tolstoys are reinventing the meaning of kin relations through everyday affective and conceptual negotiations and adjustments of normative and experiential framings of what it means to be kin. More specifically, Sorainen draws attention to how the act of will writing has the potential to reconfigure kinship queerly. 'Willing' is the practice that the Back Alley Tolstoys adopt to figure their relations of mutual care and dependence. Through unorthodox kinship charts they illustrate their affective relational worlds to Sorainen, and, by extension, the reader. Their contouring of kinning arrangements defies the traditional anthropological conventions for tracing and figuring kinship. Traditional anthropological diagrammatic conventions for representing descent and affine relations are replaced by loose intricate charts that give a form to the complexity, fluidity and ambiguity inherent in the task of tracing and figuring queer kinship. Back Alley Tolstoys renegotiate their malleable and porous queer ties experientially and conceptually vis-à-vis a multiplicity of legal, social and cultural normativities engaging in everyday practices of queer world-making.

Hadley Renkin's chapter, 'Partial perversity and perverse partiality in postsocialist Hungary', also brings Strathernian frames into conversation with queer theory, and the work of José Esteban Muñoz more specifically, to redescribe queer lives and experience in postsocialist Hungary. Renkin reflects on the discomforts and failures that punctuate research on sexuality and sexual politics and postsocialist homophobias in East European contexts, drawing out their anthropological and analytical purchase. Intersecting post-colonial and Strathernian critical perspectives, Renkin opens up 'post-socialism' as an ethnographic object to examine the partial connections and disconnections that constitute it and produce it. Connecting Strathernian insights and José Esteban Muñoz's framings of mechanisms and processes of disidentification (Muñoz 1999), Renkin elicits the complexities that connote relations, connections and disconnections that stabilise and naturalise the boundaries of sexual selves through idioms of sameness and difference drawing out their significance for boundary-work around citizenship and the political in a postsocialist Hungary. Renkin suggests a reading of the postsocialist moment as a time of queer misalignment where agentive transversal identifications and dis-identifications emerge in queer everyday relationalities and exchanges.

The analytical idioms of dividuality, reassembling and queer world-making explored by both Renkin and Sorainen are also mobilised in the next chapter. In 'Property, substance, queer effects: ethnographic perspective and HIV in

India', Paul Boyce extends questions of postplural thinking to explore social and epistemological relations as they come to bear in the production of knowledge across contexts. Taking community-based HIV prevention in West Bengal as a locus for theorisation, Boyce connects the effects and affects of health promotion actions at differing scales of analysis and experience. Taking an established empirical and epistemological connection (queer subjects and HIV) Boyce employs Strathern's re-framing of ethnographic perspective as a heuristic device to re-imagine ways in which the sexual subjects of public health actions may be 'written' and 'seen' at the confluence of data and life-worlds. Doing so calls attention to 'dividual worldings' amidst the practical production of epidemiological and demographic information. These evoke connections between Strathern and South Asianist anthropological lineages as a means to trouble acts of HIV prevention knowledge making in the past and present, in India and internationally. Queer subjects, in relation, emerge as enmeshed with various 'external' properties and substances (such as data-sets and HIV prevention medications). This is so even as they might be conceived of as *singular* objects of information for health promotion purposes. In drawing attention to such obverse iterations Boyce dis-locates queer subjects, perceiving them as entities pulled into divergent knowledge making forms and relations (each of which transitively refracts the other).

The final chapters engage with the Strathernian devices of prefiguration, scale and postplurality. Hoon Song's chapter, 'Prefigured "defection" in Korea', mobilises Strathern's thinking on parts and wholes to consider registers of (re)unification in North Korea. The chapter reframes geopolitical dynamics – notably those associated with the Cold War and its aftermaths – postplurally, that is, not taking at face value, but rather, probing the logics that frame bipolarisms. Song locates a concern for bipolarity at the heart of Strathern's analysis of prefiguration in relation to gender – also explored in Chapter 1 by Gonzalez-Polledo – elegantly transposing this onto the pre-figurations that subtend the distinctions and parting of two Koreas. This foregrounds the sensorial dimensions of the Strathernian notion of prefiguration and the aesthetic, lyrical and scaling properties that emerge from such thinking. Overlaying Strathern's discussion of gender onto Jean Genet's probing of the seemingly self-evident status of the nation-state, Song transposes the Strathernian analytical arsenal of the prefigured to critically address and unpack the State in a discussion of the memoir by exiled North Korean poet Zini Choi. Song explores the defector's enunciatory position, emphasising its mobile qualities and prefigurative capacities to perform a queering double-take on 'what is already there'.

Limits and challenges to logics of pluralism and perspectivism are explored further in Silvia Posocco's chapter, 'Postplurality: an ethnographic tableau'. Posocco focuses on the relation and disjuncture between analysis and experience and mobilises Strathern's work on scale to reflect on the analytical implications and consequences of postplural scales and postperspectivism. Posocco explores how ethnographic objects such as signatures, documents

and archives in Guatemala, rather than stable entities, are in fact implicated in shifts in scale. For Posocco, ethnography ensues out of a series of shifting ethnographic tableaux which are assembled and disassembled giving ground to a succession of postplural effects. ‘Queering’, for Posocco is an ‘ethnographic effect’ that operates through scale, and more specifically, through a socially, historically and culturally situated scale of postplurality in the aftermath of genocide. Postplural framings fundamentally problematise assumptions regarding the assumed self-evidence of notions of bounded, organic and/or integrated social wholes or individual subjects, as well as the assumed transparency of analytics of gender and sexuality – and the idea of ‘proper objects’ of queer anthropology. While Song emphasises movement and flow in processes of composition and decomposition, Posocco foregrounds shifts and jolts in the sensory and conceptual assembling and reassembling of subjects, objects and worlds.

Whilst these chapters locate queering in analytical operations of overlaying, overturning and transposition, performing a merographically structured analysis, Eriksen and Jacobsen, in the next chapter, contextualise and out-contextualise Strathern’s oeuvre meta-theoretically vis-à-vis contemporary anthropological theory and queer theory. In ‘On feminist critique and how the ontological turn is queering anthropology’, Eriksen and Jacobsen reflect on the impact Strathern’s work has had on the discipline of anthropology. They foreground the way Strathern has inaugurated a postplural, post-representational alter-anthropology and see the ontological turn in its current iteration (e.g. Holbraad and Pedersen 2017) as located squarely within a feminist genealogy. Whilst it could be argued that ‘the ontological turn’ disavows such a relation to feminist scholarship – or only very partially, selectively and ambivalently acknowledges a debt to feminist criticism, Eriksen and Jacobsen provocatively re-contextualise Strathern’s oeuvre, and in turn, out-contextualise and queer contemporary debates about ontology. The queering impetus exerted by Strathern’s work relates, for the authors, to the way it challenges epistemological and ontological presuppositions, hence ‘not only the relationship between subject and object in representation, but also the ontological assumptions in this relationship’ (page 149). From this perspective, the reproduction of established categories is problematic and this extends to sexual and gendered identity classifications, including those emerging out of feminist and queer identitarian designations and projects, a theme taken up also by Sorainen, Renkin, Boyce and Posocco in earlier chapters. The Strathernian model of recursivity found in the relation between subject and object is a device with radical queering potential that can inform and re-energise a critical analysis of normativities – a field largely still marginalised in the discipline of anthropology. Eriksen and Jacobsen challenge any minoritising politics or claims principally reading Strathern in relation to key debates in contemporary anthropological theory.

The writings collected in the book reposition ‘queer’ as a boundary object (McSherry, cited in Strathern 2004) whose circulation through disciplinary

and interdisciplinary epistemic communities reconfigure anthropology *and* queer studies. In a conversation with the volume editors held in Cambridge in March 2018, Sarah Franklin reflects on the inspiration and influence that Marilyn Strathern's work has exerted over her research trajectory and career at the intersections between anthropology, sociology, science studies and gender theory. This relation extends from their encounter at the University of Manchester in the late 1980s to Franklin's editorial work on Strathern's 'lost manuscript' originally written in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, in 1974 and published as *Before and After Gender* in 2016. In the interview we conducted for this volume, Franklin unpacks how her engagement with Marilyn Strathern shaped her ethnographic approach to scientists' work in the field of reproduction, notably assisted conception technologies as well as cloning, and, more recently human embryonic stem cell derivation. Franklin's project has consistently focussed on exploring the multiple dimensions of conception as this process is recontextualised through ethnographic practices of re-description. Franklin argues that conception is queer in the sense that it does not fit into normative narratives of what reproduction is like, but rather reveals genealogy as a normative fiction in social and scientific practice.

The analytical practices mobilised in the chapters elicit the queering capacities inherent in Strathernian devices, uncovering connections that were, arguably, already present, and in the process, conceiving new knowledge formations about relations, knowledge, gender and queer as heuristic devices that converge newly via the Strathernian investments that each of the authors open out (and which taken as a related set the chapters also together become). The multiplicity of queering analytics and investments collected in the book foreshadow connections already present in the thinking of the contributors in various ways. Through queer relations to the Strathernian archive, the authors brought together here queer genealogies, enact differentiating concept-work and renew investments. They return to us a differently imagined terrain for queer studies *and* anthropology.

Notes

- 1 See Douglas (1989).
- 2 For Pedersen, this sense is exemplified in Strathern's recent reflection that 'What is true of what is observed is also true of the manner of observation' (Strathern in Holbraad and Pedersen 2017: 210).
- 3 Anthropological empiricism, for Strathern, emphasised 'relations known to the observer as principles of social organisation, and relations observed as interactions between persons' (1995a: 12). Contradictions ensue between transitivity and separatism, but Sedgwick's analytical strategy is not to adjudicate in reference to a normative framework, as the epistemological conditions to do so do not exist. Rather, Sedgwick insists on the 'nominally marginal, conceptually intractable set of definitional issues [pertaining to the homo/hetero distinction] which will lend to the domain of sexuality a continuously intractable, un-circumscribable and ultimately constitutionally unstable quality.

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1 Wild gender

EJ Gonzalez-Polledo

This chapter draws on Marilyn Strathern's early characterisation of gender, which emerged after her fieldwork in Melanesia, in the wider context of the emergence of a feminist anthropology, to explore ways in which this could be understood to relate to trans perspectives on embodiment. Particularly, reading the evolution of Strathern's gender thinking after being in the field in Melanesia from 1969 to 1976 and rewriting those arguments from *Women in Between* to the *Gender of the Gift*, the notion of gender brought forward a kind of thinking that has been termed speculative and intensively differential. Whereas her original intention as an ethnographer had been to investigate conflicts and disputes between men and women, and how these played out in civil court processes, in dialogue with the material collected, Strathern's ethnography of gender relations evolved by entangling the dynamics under description and meta-reflections emerged around the task of doing anthropology. As 'gender' became normalised as a key analytic in anthropological analysis, however, it opened up a way of thinking through and across natural categories that ultimately challenged its own existence. This chapter invokes some threads in Strathern's thinking to reframe some of the key questions that animate trans and queer studies today: How did gender, as a category, become a productive threshold capable of attuning abstract sensibilities towards sets of relations and associations not hitherto understood to be attuned? If multiplicity marked the beginning of gender, opening up ways to study relations which did not take for granted binary gender, is this notion now obsolescent? What forms of thinking emerge after gender?

Arguably, at the time of its normalisation in anthropology 'gender' had been used as a clinical marker in the biomedical and the psy- sciences, from the 1970s it also became a 'shock to thought', particularly of a shock to scientific thinking, as well as a conceptual and political evolution of anthropology's engagement with relations. Indeed, Strathern's long lost thesis – now re-edited as *Before and After Gender* (2016) – has recently reopened, again, a space to think gender through and against semantics and semiotics of representation. Gender, for Strathern, was always a 'whole society' issue (*ibid.*), a generative notion that rooted mythologies and genealogies in the thinking processes on which social hierarchies rest. Following Ann Oakley, Strathern

delved into western assumptions that ‘the differences between the sexes are more important than any qualities they have in common’ (Oakley quoted in Strathern 2016: 264). Strathern’s project was framed as a study of social worlds shaping differences between kinds, a project chiefly concerned with how these differences, in turn, shaped fundamental aspects of social structure. In fact, in the *Gender of the Gift*, Strathern relates the problem of gender to the fiction of singular persons, which ‘only emerges as a holistic unitary state under particular circumstances’ (1988: 15). Singular persons, understood as a derivative of multiple substances or identities, may only be transformed in distinct male or female elements under particular modes of thinking. Indeed, the type of thinking that results in binary gender is analogous to the kind that produces individuals from society – a fiction that produces homogeneity by way of eclipsing difference or through detachment. For Strathern the genders contain each other, as individuals contain societies, but the existence of one ‘individual’ or ‘society’ is predicated on gender, as gender ‘provides a form’ through which visions of individuality are realised, while at the same time it is formed by them (1988: 17). In this context, figurations of nature and individuality bring to life the continuities and discontinuities underlying structures and animacies of social worlds. Categorical relations, and relations mediated by categories, naturally truncated as they may be (Sedgwick 2015), bring forward ways in which knowledge and practice are often productive *together*, highlighting that boundaries must be conceptualised at the right level of complexity (see Valentine 2007, for instance). Strathern shows that the relations between these realms implicate and produce the analyst. In the field, knowledge is always grounded in a particular body and its chance encounters, its condition of being ‘in place’ (Strathern 2002: 91).

Three decades after the notion of gender opened up new social idioms of identity and relations, the notion of gender as a marker of differentiated social identity is arguably becoming a sign of times past (Thurer 2005; cf. Moore 1988). Not only have gender specific perspectives been mainstreamed and absorbed within traditional academic disciplines, but the promise of emancipation from the limitations of reproductive biology has become testament to how categories demonstrate the inherent artificiality of gender as a system of relations, while pointing to the forces that persistently sustain it in place. Reading herself backwards, Strathern identifies as elements of her early field guide, including gender signs and symbols, stereotypes, families and roles in reproduction, heuristics that enable an analyst to think with relations about the different kinds of environments that enable the practical functioning of social worlds, which can include anthropological writing practices. Strathern shares with feminist technoscience scholars, such as Susan Leigh Star, a concern with the moral consequences of representations.¹ She maps out this relational field of symmetries between worlds and thought, such as those that preoccupied Charles Sanders Peirce and Gregory Bateson, productive frictions where homologies, affinities and symmetries define complexity, mental and organic systems (see Parisi 2012; Bateson 2000). After all, as Viveiros de Castro has noted, an

investment in multiplicity constitutes ‘the main tool of a “prodigious effort” to imagine thought, an activity other than that of identifying (recognition) and classifying (categorisation), and to determine what is there for thought to think as intensive difference rather than as extensive substance’ (2010: 223).

A drive to understand divorce practices through anthropological conventions of the time – particularly through a perspective influenced by Leach and Meyer Fortes – led Strathern on a path of exploration primarily concerned with understanding ‘all kinds of hidden political choices that arise when we activate our knowledge’ (2013: 244), while enmeshed in the bureaucratic and everyday rhythms of academic life. Strathern’s method is as concerned with aesthetics, as with the pragmatics of knowledge.² While we can talk about gender norms in contexts where gender is taken for granted, or *given* in particular relations, but when by association with analytics that destabilise the boundaries, practices and infrastructures of gender, the notion of gender becomes a proxy for both engaging with locality and utopian, conceptual deterritorialised forms of anthropology. Strathern uses concepts and ‘the concreteness of certain forms’ to connect multiplicity while preserving the stability of particular formations. Categories extend heuristics to social process: without elucidating these models, one cannot frame the problem of their effects. Categorical analysis brought Strathern to compare the symmetries and asymmetries of nature and culture through relations of analogy that hinge on the possibility of reversibility, a figure-ground reversal in dialogue with Roy Wagner. Wagner illustrates this analytic leap in relation to anthropological thinking:

COYOTE: We come to a point where the difference between organic and inorganic SYMMETRIES disappears—the vanishing point between what the old anthropologists used to call ‘nature’ and ‘culture.’ All ‘cultures’ merge with one another—as you say, holographically—and so, in fact, do all ‘natures.’

ROY: The anthropologist wants to be the figure as well as the ground. And so, in fact, the figure-ground reversal itself honestly believes it is an anthropologist.

COYOTE: Though it is really the interference-patterning between the two that counts most: the way in which any two polarities interfere with one another.
(Wagner 2010: 138)

Gender, rather than a unit predicated on presence or experience, suggests both disjunction and conjunction, a composite of the relations that make up persons and things. Strathern writes:

The succession of images allows no between: for a person or body is either the inside our outside of another person/body or else its pair form, its other half (...) If forms are thus conceived in an either/or mode, both are always present.

(Strathern 1992a: 81)

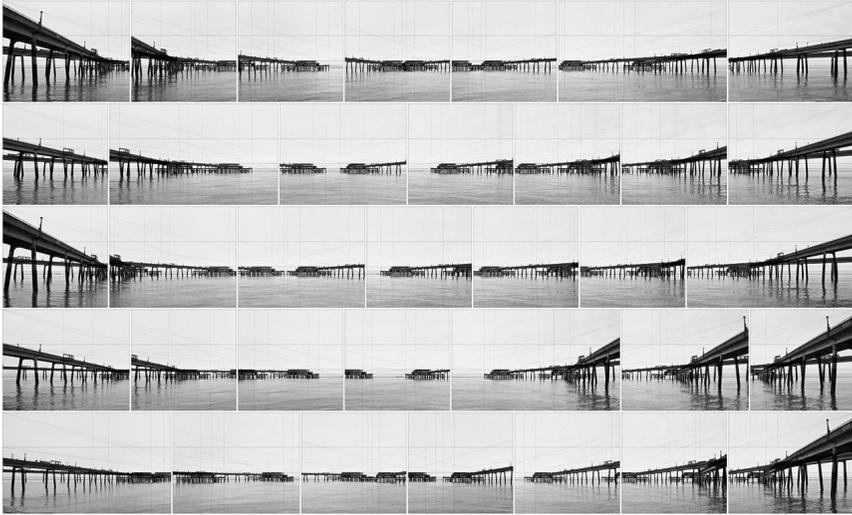


Figure 1.1 Nishimura – Random Structures 01-B, courtesy of the artist

Strathern notes that the task of knowing ethnographically reveals something about how something becomes understood. After all, Strathern is concerned with workings of relations, including genealogies, conceptual infrastructures and analogies; the capacities of thought to conjure up relations and dispositions, orientations, binaries, bodies and persons, the commoning and practice of knowledge. Gender can be understood through its capacity to conjure up multiple, combinatory ways in which a problem can be grappled with, an iterative process which could be seen to work not unlike an artist's composition (see, as my own suggested illustration, Figure 1.1).

Holbraad and Pedersen (2009) have argued that Strathern's thinking and method relies on making visible the space of distance to perform anthropology through theorisation and abstraction. But where Holbraad and Pedersen describe Strathern's contribution as playing on the conflation between analytics and objects in the figure and work of the analyst – M, for Marilyn or Melanesia, and a reference to Alfred Gell's description of Strathernian analytics in 'Strathernograms' – here I read her conceptual toolkit as a field guide that purposefully evades classification and makes a point of not fitting in, queering its position vis-à-vis other responses to the problem of representation. Conflation and detachment between object and analytic form, in other words, need not necessarily produce either alienation or convergence, but, rather, a perspectival diversity and multiplicity, a movement of thought that provides a sense of continuity between modes of being and knowing.³ Here the task of writing anthropologically, as Corsin Jimenez notes, 'amounts to an incursion into and out of the social in order to de-stick it from its own internal recursions. It is the reversibility – the inside-out – that accomplishes

the analysis' (2013: 22). Indeed, optical games and interpretative shifts are a key to how anthropologists perform a figure-ground reversal, which, for Strathern,

takes a divergent form: at some moments it seems as though there is nothing beyond interpretation, for there is nothing that is not amenable to human comprehension and in that sense the product of it, whereas at other moments one appears to see through the practice of interpretation for the very artifice it is.

(Strathern 2002: 88)

Gender after the fact

Looking back at the history of the gender category in the biosciences, the 'facts' of gender include quantifiable traits and classification; capacities, clinical and observational, that constituted gender's performative prerogative. This facticity ran through the course of gender's multiple scientific histories. Fausto-Sterling (2000) points at how the distinction between sex and gender in fact provided solid ground for a populational biopolitics,⁴ a trend historians trace back to scientific cultures of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Facts allowed thinking gender, against a continuous experiential form, around categories, diagnostic strata and classifications, as alternate figures *and* grounds of experience. In its becoming fact, gender was *de facto* anthropomorphised, linking physical attributes and social function through standards that enforce social, sexual and aesthetic conventions. Endocrinological, mental health and surgical protocols not only directly affected transsexual and intersex populations, they became important regulators of gendered bodies and sexualities (Roberts 2007). Sexology, as a self-proclaimed 'science of dimorphism', reemerged in an enduring form in post-World War II North America as a group of practitioners

engaged publicly in such matters sexual as were, in those days, politically, legally, and morally suspect: trial-tests of the contraceptive pill; overt advocacy of the positive value of recreational sex in or out of marriage; endorsement of hormonal and surgical sex reassignment of patients whose diagnosis of transsexualism had formerly been medically unrecognized; explicit sex therapy for people in trouble with their sex lives as well as their love lives; and advocacy of the rights of women to legal abortion.

(Money 1976, 84)

In this context, enabled by gender idioms, plasticity was perceived as an attribute of humanity (Morland 2014; Kessler 1998). This projection of anthropomorphism⁵ became a form of political physics (see also Barad 2007; Parisi 2006) concerned with regulating bodies. Not only did sexology's emphasis on plasticity inform gender politics (see Stryker 2008; Preciado

2002), but, as the acclaimed sexologist John Money put it, sexology became 'difficult for medicine to accommodate' because of its concern with a sexual system that attempted to normalise a balance between social non-conforming behaviour and views of natural dimorphism that sexologists, including Money himself, saw as resting on universal principles of reproductive physiology (many of Money's key scientific texts refer to dimorphism and to the complementarity of sexual identities, but see particularly Money 1976; Money and Tucker 1975). Sexology's interactionist paradigm furthered an ideological agenda drafted around principles of humanist psychology (Adler 1927). Here, notions of sex and gender emerged as complementary (see Kessler 1998; see also Namaste 2000), and gender became a mode of communicating of sexual capacity long deployed in clinical and legal contexts to naturalise human practices.⁶ Indeed, gender was often framed as a form of originary humanity, one that, as Kirby put it, frames the subject as it arrives, as it has come into being (2011: 20). Gender was now both the origin and the effect of methods and optics that classified, enhanced, simplified or trivialised, corrected and fetishised conditions of life.

Indeed, for Strathern, not only gender but modernity signified a shift defined by 'the sense of being after an event, of being post-' (1992b, 7). 'After nature', Strathern thinks through gender at a time when idioms about the relations between men and women were beginning to change in anthropological thinking, and in public life, a shift toward structural connected to movement for the rights of women, and the emergence of 'a new era of self-made selves' (Franklin 2016, xxxvii), sustained by the principles and practices of modernity. In this context, Strathern grappled with gender as a form of elementary relationality that 'deals equally with the definition of boundary and the establishment of communication' (Strathern quoted in Franklin 2016, xlili). These transferences marked the emergence of gender, allowing a shift in thinking from which new transferences between domains such as subjectivity, materiality and politics could be newly effected. Yet these transferences, in instantiating the processes gender was good to think with, marked the emergence of gender as an 'immutable mobile' (Latour 1986); a representation that 'convey[s] information over a distance (displacement) without [itself] changing (immutability)' (Star 1995: 91). Immutable mobiles, as Latour emphasises, hold an internal tension between the need to be instantiated and adapted in context, and the need for standardisation, becoming the go between practice and the conventional grammar of formalism operating through the regularities that structure communication. Star argued that immutable mobiles manage this tension through their own layered structure that conveys not only the content of representation but facts about the representational process. For Star, 'different parts of the representational process are allocated (or displaced) to different strata of the artifact being constructed; in the end, these strata must be aligned and made to function together in a mutually structuring way' (1995: 94).

Consider the following illustration of gender politics, where Strathern draws on Young and Wilmott's first description of the wedding of Sylvia

Hanbury and Harry Buxton in Bethnal Green. Strathern illustrates how the ceremony must perform a social function to enact the coming together of families, and how it is, in the end, through lineage membership that a man gains access to a livelihood. Becoming an in-law provides the right to make specific demands on a group of other in-laws, as well as draw specific obligations between them. Thinking through the language of gender, its mythologies and stereotypes, Strathern points out how debates around biological facts may overemphasise the role of biological function in producing two different kinds of persons, men and women. This overemphasis fails to explain the complexity and shifting nature of gender systems:

In our emphasis on biology we dismiss culture too lightly. The assumption is that a man-made thing can be unmade. But it can only be unmade if 'it' is properly identified. To say that gender differences between men and women are basically cultural and not biological in origin does *not* lead to the automatic conclusion that they are therefore malleable and weak. They may be very strong. Proving that there is no genetic basis for gender discrimination does not even begin to approach the problem that such discriminations may be embedded deeply in society—not just in those institutions which allocate this or that range of roles to men and women, but in our whole perception of mankind's place in the world. At the present, the idea of sex and gender is providing a potent focus for the individual/society problem. Its use will be a vehicle for constant redefinition. In fact, the more we work the concept of gender, whether by denial or affirmation, the more nourishment we give it. Gender, for us, is like a mandrake. Pull it up for its poisonous or for its medicinal properties, and you find the root has human form.

(Strathern 2016: 276)

For Strathern, although the status of gender may vary from culture to culture, the distinction between public and domestic affairs structures hierarchical relations between the sexes. The division between nature and society sets out the domain of gender as a figure against ground: all relationships between the genders exist in the realm of the domestic, and are by this opposition social *and* political. Gender boundaries are marked by their outside, a realm where human beings and spirits exist by virtue of continuities and differentiations.⁷ The domestic is indeed a relational realm which bears the dynamics of culture, but this does not mean that gender relations are conceived as either/or: rather, the domestic slides up on a scale or a continuum where things can be more or less cultural and more or less hierarchical, more or less expressible. The existence of such difference in activity accounts for the divisibility of gender – the fact that in multiple spheres there may be equality between women and men as members of the lineage, but their inequality when faced by external relations of various kinds.⁸ Boundaries become a necessary trope that destabilise both objects and ways of knowing by making and breaking

equivalences. In 1977, Strathern set off to conduct additional work on a shared anthropological and statistical project which recorded data around the north-west Essex village of Elmdon (Strathern 1981). Although she had met the Elmdon villagers in 1962, she did not, upon writing the book, renew their acquaintance, which in part determined her distance from the 'distinctions' that were important to villagers in terms of occupation, styles of life, networks and so on, to open up a new space of engagement with 'real' villagers, their relation to British society at large and, of course, their connection with the anthropologist. It is in this sense that Strathern laments the possibility that, in their ethnographic encounter, the ethnographer might have 'violat[ed] people's images of themselves'. Indeed, in this early work, Strathern argued that alongside the important distinctions through which people relate to each other in Elmdon, their imaginary identification with an idea of the village – itself a relation – preceded the actual relations between them. The identification as village insiders, unlike family or social adscription, became a veritable proxy for the real, and, at the same time, a set of intra-village relations, and a relative distribution of the right to exist. 'Real Elmdon' invoked around itself a boundary of inclusion that provided a formal model of the relation between parties, their preferred labels, as well as a focus for this relation. For Strathern, this identification was not, however, the mark of a static set-theory combinatory that placed the individual neatly as part of a whole; rather, it marked a kind of ingression and movement. Gender acted as a kinetic multiplier through which alternation between cultural forms was enacted, repeated and patterned in a vision of social life in perpetual movement that did not necessitate individuality. Rather, persons, as products of relations, are always partial and internally differentiated. In this way, gender became patently anti-individual, opposed to the logic that characterised English individualism after the idea of nature.

In this way, as a mechanism through which the social operates a kind of inscription in biology, and vice versa, gender becomes not only detached from any claims to nature, but a testament of intrinsic dividuality: 'the point at which persons appear as composite of male and female elements and the point at which a single gender is definitive are also temporal moments in the reproduction of relations that take a mode imagined across Melanesia' (Strathern 1992a: 97). The starting question is not necessarily based on positions, but on perspectives from which positions may or may not seem negotiable. As an anthropologist, the starting question 'What kind of text?' brings the anthropologists to the task of assemblage – dismantling the layer of narrative so that it reveals that 'all texts are put together in the same way; susceptible to multiple reading, containing traces of other texts, partial utterances that evoke what has not been said' (ibid.: 65). Like a text, artifice is partial, never completely describing the body (ibid.). Rather, the text becomes an analogue of reproduction: a vivid image of the partial construction of wholes and societies, and a representation of sets of relations between things. Strathern sharply distinguishes her own method of deconstruction from

analysis as ‘cultural critique’ popularised by some of her feminist critics. Gender thinking, for Strathern, implied not simply evoking a new conceptualisation of culture, a utopia or an alter possibility of emancipation, but rather a deconstruction that drew on the ways constructivism could account for collective activities which are apparently aimed at the opposite effect. Theorising brings Strathern to relate to the experience of interpretation, a modernist knowledge practice ‘that takes as axiomatic the idea of a continuum of characteristics as the background (ground) to any singular specific one (figure)’ (2002: 89). Figure and ground relate through instability, so that the distinction between figure and ground is only marked when an excess on either direction generates transitions between and within modes of representation. After all, the process of representation creates a movement or oscillation that generates further interpretative movements that relate only partially to the first (for example, an image which may be re-interpreted beyond its author’s original vision, see Strathern 2013), specifying new conditions that distinguish figure from ground. The effect of interpretation, then, is to ‘make things move subsequently, as a result of attention to them’ (Strathern 2002: 94). Each figure ground configuration provides characteristic depth to ethnography.

Thus, for Strathern, the value of thinking gender ethnographically pits gender against, *and* works through, binary thinking, since it is through binary abstractions that make sense in particular times and places that gender matters, through cosmopolitics, imaginaries and relations that come into being. In her fieldwork in Melanesia, for example, nature and culture are brought to bear on the analogy between domestic realms and the wild, a distinction which makes sense in relation to particular social worlds rather than a universal, and where the domestic is contraposed by an outside that draws on a different image of the real. Indeed, the opposition between the domestic and the wild maps not so much onto gender as a manifestation of nature and culture, but to gender as a bearer of individuality. In Melanesia, for instance, once a dual gender identity has been discarded, a person is no longer considered as androgynous but considered, instead, single sex. As people activate relations during their lifetimes, as a composite of maternal and paternal kin, relations become intrinsic to the living person, to the point that gender becomes one only at the time of a person’s death, when there is an oscillation between androgeneity and single sex, such as, for example, ‘when groups from elsewhere in Papua New Guinea conceptual shed members of one sex (in marriage) in order to reconceive themselves as one person composed of the members of the other’ (1992a: 97), or when, at the time of a person’s death, the person is divided and ‘the descent group achieves unitary form as a collection of ancestral spirits waiting to be reborn’ (ibid.: 98).

Indeed, in the Melanesian context that Strathern pits against EuroAmerica, only at the time of death is a person stripped of relations, which at this point dissolve into kin. Thus, more than facts of *kind*, gender stages a relation between model and reality that can only emerge, as Strathern put it, ‘after a

fact': 'In this theory that is also a model', she writes, 'values can be seen as constructions after social facts, or societies can be seen as constructions after natural facts' (1992b: 2). As an abstraction that speaks to cultural formation and transformation, Strathern thinks through gender through a categorical comparison between 'western' and 'other' models of nature, proposing a critical ontological stance reframes gender's technicity. Gender becomes a technology, as Strathern suggests, by adopting the form of the relation, troubling stable ontologies of the sexes. In pursuit of gender, Strathern's analytics become a particularly useful field guide – since the making of facts, and their classification in abstract oppositions, is a premise of their undoing. Strathern was concerned not with finding specific local contexts for events and behaviour, but elucidating a general context for those contexts – the nature of sociality (1988: 10). Extending previous positions rather than simply refuting them, the 'lifetime recursive' movement between flesh and representation marks the making of convention and invention, through manipulating received usages of terms rather than erasing binaries.

After gender

The move to think through gender in registers other than the relations between men and women has been crucial to queer and trans analyses that have troubled the definition and limits of gender in the past decades. Bringing attention back to the ways in which gender makes and remakes medical, legal and social categories, the history of gender categories in the sciences has become widely contested, for example, in the context of the management of intersex and trans health programmes, and, indeed, after an technoscientific epistemic shifts emerged from both feminist and critical trans analyses (Moore 1988; Preciado 2013; Kessler 1998). A key question raised by critical trans activists and trans cultural producers is now whether the notion of gender makes sense, after all, once its medico-legal underpinnings wither out. Paisley Currah, whose work addresses transgender rights in the United States (Currah, Juang and Minter 2006), has recently speculated that the transgender rights of the future may not need to be anchored on a preexisting, totalising theory of gender based on distinctions between men and women. Instead, looking through the lens of employment equality legislation, Currah finds fault in that cases argued on the basis of gender discrimination which appeal for a rigidity of traditional roles emphasise status and the immutability of gender identity. Currah argues that contemporary legal approaches uncritically moored on social norms and values are in fact never neutral, but political orientations to maintain deep-seated hierarchical divisions in place. Tensions between the minoritising and universalising capacities of the notion of gender as protected by the law opens up spaces to think through what these worlds make possible, as well as 'to think through the terms of their incommensurability' (Currah 2017: 451). Indeed, as Currah, notes, 'agreement on the origin of gender is not required to challenge the ability of employers and

judges to force people to agree to gender norms. What is required is a shared commitment to the political value of gender equality' (ibid.).

The drive to theorise alternative gender ontologies that has transformed (trans)gender studies in recent years also reveals hidden joints that make particular structures – as well as the forms and processes that make them work. Like an infrastructural form, gender works across scales and analogies, drawing on capacities that originate in interactions between organs, people, inanimate objects and social worlds (see also Dunn 2011; Gonzalez-Polledo 2017; cf. Žizek 2016). Lucas Crawford's architectural infrastructures subvert the 'privatization' of gender in the domestic sphere (2014). Crawford's metaphor of transition, 'derivative plumbing', figures through bodily processes as substance transmission mechanisms by twisting the common phrase 'original plumbing', reading gender experience through modernist architectonics that derive function from the citational processes that become essential in practices of making space. For Crawford these citations are themselves 'an act of transing' (2014: 626), not only because they contextualise space against ideology, but because they 'jolt feigned stabilities back into ceaseless movement (ibid.). The focus on the washroom, as an enclosed, policed, modernist room, matters not only because it promotes an individualist view of gender but because this is based on obvious economies of shame and erasure. If washrooms are devices that make public notions of living in the wrong body or gender, the erasure and transmission that characterises its social function may also allow for material exchanges. Producing an illusion of totality, gender ontologies drive attention to the consequences of representation. If 'theory is what is constructed after a fact', as Strathern put it (1992a: 2), binaries that become important in framing correspondences, (mis)recognitions and (ex)communications recast relational politics of knowing (Butler 2005).⁹ In this context, human and non-human practices that constitute the biological, scientific and cultural facts of gender, including hormones, cells, genomics and metabolomic identities, are but routes of complex biopolitical entanglements (TallBear 2013; Davis 1995).

These visions open up assemblages in place of traditional objects of knowledge.¹⁰ The work of decomposition and recomposition of relations and social worlds these assemblages do is driven by a need to reflect biopolitics against through highlighting the 'trickster' language of analysis. For example, reflecting on the category transgender as it is mobilised by *waria* in Indonesia, Hegarty (2017) reflects on how *waria* reflect on transgender as a fragmented identity category that is in fact entrenched in particular sets of structural inequalities that shift along the life course. Indeed, gender realities are framed by regimes of value and visibility that respond to global capital forms and inequalities, situating class aspirations, identity politics, embodiment and aesthetics in relation to global conditions of insecurity and economic regimes. Gender draws a cartographic imagery concerned with transits and ad hoc discovery, a process where invention, in the Tardean sense, generated in the ongoing practice of thinking, a process generative of spaces between strange

and familiar mythologies. These spaces, infrastructurally and formally, are an arrangement of priorities: the result of ordering with respect to a set of questions; a practice of arranging more important things closer to the centre, less important ones farther away. For David (2017), transgender has become a consumer object tied to practices that anchor trans people in material relations and cultural production. For David, the location of transgender amid these affective economic flows supports the emergence of elites, as well as individualist agendas that profit from vulnerabilities of trans people in the labour market. From this perspective, trans ontologies are inextricable from global organisations and commodity cultures, as well as regimes of labour and value. As an interface, gender works as a generative force across scales and domains, transversing knowledge and politics through selective recognitions and analogies enabled by boundaries between domains. To make explicit, as Strathern noted, has an effect: an out movement of ‘outliteralisation’, that forces us to apprehend an event by virtue of its intrinsic qualities. Thinking through the worlds that become as an effect of binaries, particularly in queering ‘the personal biological’ (Franklin 2013: 178) may be a binary ‘license’ that gender studies can now take from Strathern.¹¹ In fact, gender thinking gender beyond enumeration opens up new gender grammars and vocabularies to think with relations, bringing forward a deconstructive practice that may displace substance and meanings. Yet rather than being the inversion of western form, gender enacts connections around a basic premise: ‘to make evident people’s social (cultural) capability, or sociality’ (Strathern 1992a: 74). The fragmentation of gender is located in dichotomies that work through inversion and negation, presenting gender as ‘kinetic’ (Franklin 2016: xvi), generative within and across forms.

Coda

The relevance of a model of gender that shifts gender away from the reductive medical and legal definitions is now more urgent than ever as forms of gender critique are mainstreamed in advocacy and education environments, fuelled by social scientific ways of knowing. However, anthropology, particularly in Europe, ‘has yet to do more’, broadening its remit to recognise knowledge practices, identities and contexts that relate to queer utopias and modes of existence, a ‘work of enumeration’ (Boellstorff 2007) which must remain at the core of the queer anthropological project. In the American context, at a time when queer theory and anthropology were beginning to cement mutual objects of interest, Boellstorff lamented anthropology’s refusal to include terms such as ‘queer’ (as in ‘queer studies’ or ‘queer theory’) in its routine practices of enumeration. Even though many anthropologists working around queer issues and epistemologies associated the term with unsolved histories of violence, not naming queer implied an omission, an erasure of subjectivities, practices and relations that effectively effaces them. Boellstorff writes that ‘this logic of enumeration thus points toward a frontier for further research

analogous to the project of transcending ethnocartography—“looking for evidence of same-sex sexuality and gendered ambiguity in ‘other societies’—more than a decade ago” (2007: 19). As a consequence, Boellstorff argues, recuperating these enumerations through a reimagined task of ethnocartography, anthropology must resist the temptation to defer theorisation to reinterpret subject and object relations that emerge from queering knowledge, of *queering* as a way of thinking, situated in practices, histories and subjectivities. In this context, thinking gender opens up ecologies of thought where there is ‘no clear starting point or finish line; [where] it’s all cycles within cycles’ (Hayes 2014: 5; see also Ong 1987).

As a relational capacity, allowing for transmissions and politics, wholes and parts, gender thinking holds all new relevance particularly as relations between anthropology and queer and trans studies, as well as between anthropology and various forms of feminist and decolonial thinking. This immediacy links through the practice of knowing the determination and indeterminacy of relations, constructing the field of knowledge. The end of gender, from this point of view, recasts the ruins of modernity’s conceptual apparatuses through conceptual modelling and the productive value of critique. It is in this sense that, thinking with Strathern, queer and trans anthropological thinking can newly recast gender as a relation as concerned with expanding the parameters of realism. Thinking past gender, as trans studies research demonstrates, implies thinking against the totalising qualities of particular external forms, and recasting the uncertainty in the external analogues of gender thinking, framing multiplicity as an ontological hold. As Strathern put it: ‘So we imagine that we shall learn more by dismantling those forms – undoing them to see what they are made of, an activity always proliferating, always incomplete’ (1992a: 86).

Notes

- 1 For Strathern, as for Star, the possibility of life, and of science, depends on membership of multiple, ecologically connected ecologies of knowledge, and communities of practice. See for instance Strathern (2004).
- 2 Although not as a necessary consequence, reflecting on her contribution to human rights organisations Strathern felt that enquiry reciprocated the gift of knowing by opening up engagement with community practitioners, a space of intellectual liberation that could in many ways outperform the gains of a model of engagement based on making the anthropologists’ expertise available as a set of expert recommendations or an issue handbook.
- 3 Strathern argued for anthropological description itself to be conceptualised as a kind of intervention. Self-description, as a mode of self-accountability, ‘is seen as a precondition to change things’ (2004: 24), it duplicates description and institutional dynamics in ways that ‘brings anthropologists and bureaucrats into proximity’ (2004: 25).
- 4 Multiplying bodily categories, and mechanisms, the science of sex was built on observing physical and psychosocial continuities, using the framework of pathology to classify bodies and identities that did not conform with ideal standards, while at the same time, bringing forward their social recognition.

- 5 For example, drawing on Lauretis' conceptualisation of gender as a technology, Preciado notes how 'gender is the effect of a system of signification that includes modes of production and decoding of politically regulated visual and textual signs' (2013: 108), making gender possible only insofar as a subject simultaneously produces and interprets these signs, and remains involved in a corporeal process of signification and representation.
- 6 These gender stories were inevitably racialised and linked and linked to other social technologies, including projects of racial and environmental domination (see Weheliye 2014; Snorton 2014).
- 7 Strathern does not in fact imagine that the distinction between mbo (the domestic) and romi (the wild) are collapsible, though these binaries are more readily amenable to be rendered analogous to that between *korpa* and *nyim*. Nyim and korpa grossly tally up to qualities of successfulness and worthlessness: nyim, associated with big men and things of prestige, and korpa, associated with women who are tardy in returning debts, who is a bad wife and does not mind her husband, or a man who fails to allocate a woman's pigs and is thus unsuccessful in domestic life, and with things which are rubbish. Instead, while the wild can be seen as anti-social, anti-political, or a space of madness, it is a source of extra-social power, where men can 'present their individual achievements as the ability to step beyond social bonds' (1981: 206). It is a sign of unrootedness – the capacity to roam with a force opposite to the grounding effects of cultivation, of remaining planted.
- 8 In *The Gender of the Gift*, Strathern writes: 'Society and individual are an intriguing pair of terms because they invite us to imagine that sociality is a question of collectivity, that it is generalizing because collective life is intrinsically plural in character' (1988: 12).
- 9 For example, adding to a long history of discussions of trans recognition (e.g. Spade 2015; Hines 2013) that think through the perverse effects of normalcy, thinking through recognition against a politics of real diversity. After all, as non-binary performing duo Darkmatter succinctly asseverated, 'much of what we call trans *issues* are just issues that cis people have with trans people' (my emphasis, see also how performing issues may stage fieldwork practice in Castaneda 2006).
- 10 In response to the lives of technologised images in the context of a 'third vision' of the body in late modernity, Edwards, Harvey and Wade not only find that 'visualization and communication technologies are implicated in what it is possible to know and in how the body mediates such knowledge' (2010: 3), but highlight that the consequences of these ruptures stage 'a shift of attention from the molar to the molecular' (Rose in Edwards, Harvey and Wade 2010: 3) and give rise to a new attention to 'life itself' that now has the life of information at its chore.
- 11 As Strathern finds, 'affinity, by derivation connoting "on the borders" or "bordering on" and thus neighbouring or near to others, gives the viewpoint of the speaker as an ego in a center looking outward. Indeed, there is, in this respect, no ontological difference in the radiating spheres of affinity and of consanguinity' (2014: 33).

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2 The (im)possibilities of transgression, or, reflections on the awkward relation between Strathern and queer politics

Irene Peano¹

MARILYN STRATHERN: ... what is it then that I substitute for religion that might have the same effect on my intellectual life? I think I would say *an interest and love of institutions*.² [...] I suspect that those aspects of religion that inspire social scientists are indeed those aspects to do with the ecclesiastical organization of religious life, as it were, regardless of what belief systems are involved. And if you were to look for a counterpart of that in my own life I would say that I have always liked being in contexts where there was organized life around me. I like being in hospital, for example, find that very relaxing – it depends on what one's in for, but I'm not frightened by the notion of institution as such. I enjoyed departmental life from the *organizational demands* that it makes. I am clearly very much a college person and I've enjoyed being in the institution. So that is where I think in my own life I might echo where people with religion might find some inspiration for being interested in how people arrange their social relations.

ALAN MACFARLANE (INTERVIEWER): Is this the same as ritual? Because a lot of (particularly Jewish) people I interviewed say that of course dogma and the intellectual side is unimportant in their lives, they are secular Jews, but the rituals gave a pattern and meaning to their lives – is that really what you're talking about, the patterning of life for Jews, symbolic elements, or is the social relations of the institution that really appeal to you, being part of a team?

STRATHERN: I think *it has to be both*, and what is ... or what I found about the ritualisation aspect (particularly in college but also elsewhere), or aspects of it, and ... – my mind slides over to bureaucracy, it starts taking ... goes off in different tangents – but if you keep to the benign rituals, like for example having a seminar at 5 o'clock on a Friday afternoon, then what I ... *a particular pleasure I derive is the relationship one has to a convention, where one willingly follows a convention, but in such a way that in no way impinges on one's autonomy. In other words it's a discipline, it's a willing submission to a convention for the pleasure of the convention, but at the same time one is conscious of oneself very much, it's*

not as if one disappears underneath the convention but on the contrary one is an active participant. And I have always found the relationship between person and office – which is what I discuss in this contribution to Cambridge Anthropology – an actual source of intellectual pleasure, something that I enjoy managing.

[...]

MACFARLANE: In a recent piece you wrote for ... I think to be published in *Cambridge Anthropology*, which is a reply to something I wrote, you put forward the (as usual) counterintuitive argument that there wasn't enough bureaucracy in the post of Head of Department of Social Anthropology and so on. Could you explain what you were arguing there?

STRATHERN: I was following a particular writer who laments the demise of old-style civil service and of the notion of a bureaucracy as a service order within government, distinct from politics. And what is being lamented is the personalization of administrators, *the extent to which civil servants these days are meant to have ownership of their projects as opposed to being very much personally involved and so forth*. So that what is regretted is not bureaucracy *per se*, but this very particular form of understanding in the Civil Service that there were procedures and principles that, as it were, saved one from the effects of too much personal investment in what was going on. One of the things I do mention there is that some of the functions of that old-style bureaucracy you find not these days in bureaucrats, but in some of the techniques they surround themselves with. So *one of our problems in the current era, when we feel oppressed by what we might call bureaucracy, is not so much the activities of individuals but it is the kinds of programmes that are set up that we have to conform to*. So for example the head of department has a constant sort of pro-forma things to be filled in, where only certain answers to questions will do because otherwise the machine throws them out or whatever. And I think this is a new – well, I shouldn't be evaluative about it I'm sure, but it's certainly a new way of dealing with process and procedure.

[...]

The University [of Cambridge] is running (well, *you* know!), it's running in many epochs, you know, there is a monastic culture, there is an eighteenth-century coffee-room culture, there's a corridor culture, there's a nineteenth-century entrepreneurialism, there's twentieth-century management, and these things are all running simultaneously, and it makes it a very complex place. And that of course keeps it creative. *The complexity means that there are all kinds of metaphorical corners and nooks and crannies that allow idiosyncratic procedures (or used to) to flourish.*

(Interview given in 2009, part of Cambridge historian-anthropologist Alan MacFarlane's series on 'leading thinkers')³

Strathern+Butler, via Haraway: Assembling, disassembling, reassembling cyborgs

The article cited in the interview above (Strathern 2009), alongside this exchange itself, speak to foundational issues within queer politics, if ‘counterintuitively’ – in characteristic Strathernian fashion, as MacFarlane would have it. Indeed, queer as a philosophy of praxis may be seen to work at cross angles from Strathern’s project, and it is with this intersection, which is also an interference, that I am concerned. I work through a feedback loop that allows to recursively play out one set of arguments against the other and thereby reconfigure them, showing how ‘queer’ can be both an effect and a source of some of the challenges that Strathern addresses, whilst both contain their own unresolved conflicts. Her long-standing (self-)reflections, in which the project of anthropological knowledge production stands in awkward and oblique dialogue with the concerns of feminism, Marxism and the critique of neoliberal bureaucratic power, among others, are both superseded by and incorporated into queer thinking. Yet, their encounter may produce new reverberations and ripples. In a sense, the assemblage I am about to conjure up is also anachronistic, or perhaps cannibalistic – feeding on and into its own previous parts.

Thus, articulating Strathern’s reflections to queer thought means confronting what looks like a novel rehearsal of the ‘awkwardness’ that she herself identified between feminism and anthropology (Strathern 1987; 1988; 2004 [1991]), one that has been displaced onto new grounds. The terms of such awkward relation have changed along with the reconfigurations of institutions and disciplines themselves, as it is only natural to expect. What follows is thus an attempt to elaborate on and extend those ‘partial connections’ with which Marilyn Strathern (2004) productively experimented, an operation I conceive as a work of constant assembling and disassembling for the sake of making disparate elements compatible, cyborg-style, in an attempt at subversion against totalisation.

In order to proceed with this work of assemblage it is necessary to choose one’s parts carefully, knowing that both scales and sides matter. As a way to ‘capacitate modes of life currently around us but without an explicit force among us’, this is, by definition, a risky enterprise, full of potentiality and exhaustion (Povinelli 2012: 454). I begin with two authors and their intellectual corpus – already complex and composite entities within themselves: Judith Butler and Marilyn Strathern. Yet, for this process to be accomplished it will be necessary to make partial connections also to and through the intellectual production of Donna Haraway, and particularly to the concept of *cyborg* as the central image of ‘an ironic political myth faithful to feminism, socialism, and materialism’ (1988: 149). Haraway’s conceptualisation is one of the principal inspirations for what can rightfully be considered as a *method* as well as a position. According to Strathern, the image of Haraway’s cyborg is what best renders the endeavour of partial connection-making. It is a way

to extend the capacities of each part, where the latter cannot be subsumed under a coherent whole, but will always belong to different orders – and where the extension of capacities is to be understood against totalising fantasies and practices of domination, oppression and diminution.

In a sense, Butler and Strathern, like Haraway, seem to belong to the same scale and part in more than one way, as their productions have been spawned in parallel, and in some cases even in dialogue, since the dawn of ‘the post-plural’ (Strathern 1992) and of queer (Butler 1990) on the horizon of critical reflection. They intersected and even contaminated each other in several occasions, in books and elsewhere. Strathern’s work clearly contributed to the elaboration of Butler’s queer thinking, most directly by unsettling the stable opposition between nature and culture which was foundational to much feminist thinking in the 1970s.⁴

Assembling awkward cyborgs is an explicitly *queer* operation, insofar as it is about transgressed boundaries, not only those between human and animal, between human-animal and machine, and between the physical and the non-physical, but indeed those between man and woman, in both their sex *and* gender dimensions – it is

an effort to contribute to socialist-feminist culture and theory in a post-modernist, non-naturalist mode and in the utopian tradition of imagining a world without gender, which is perhaps a world without genesis, but maybe also a world without end. [...] The cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world; it has no truck with bisexuality, pre-oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labour, or other seductions to organic wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity.

(Haraway 1998: 150 – cf. also 176, 180–1)

Yet, drawing partial connections means avoiding ‘assumptions of comparability’ (Strathern 2004: 38). To be assembled as a cyborg, parts need to display the characters of incomparability which define the exercise of making them *compatible* for a clearly partisan project (Haraway 1988). Hence, all three components in this experiment at cyborg assembling (Strathern and Butler, via Haraway) may be connected only through some radical difference, which however needs to be actively worked – after all, the connections are manifest.

This might, then, begin as another rehearsal, or a revitalisation, of the now decades-old dilemma of awkward relations. It is not really an innovative attempt but rather a contemplation of an already assembled cyborg, or meta-cyborg. However, contemplation from a situated position, and as a performative act in itself, is necessarily an addition to, or reassemblage of, the cyborg, queer style. It is a queer act, if queer can be stretched to encompass resignification of norms that do not pertain (or not only) to the domain of sexuality (as indeed Butler herself acknowledges, for example in articulating sex to race in *Bodies that Matter*; cf. Halley and Parker 2007; and Howe

2015; and Boellstorff 2010 on queer as *method*), and if we then take Strathern's, Haraway's and Butler's bodies of thought as ever-redeployable *tools* to rework 'abjection into political agency' (Butler 1993: xxv). Contemplating Strathern+Butler as a cyborg, through Haraway's conceptual device, means regenerating and extending 'them' as bodies of thought, as Haraway would have cyborgs do. Thus, of course, if we are still to identify an awkwardness, this is inevitably displaced from where it was originally spotted.

In the first place, going back to the interview with which I opened my reflections, the relation between what Strathern calls persons and their roles, which she characterises as a twentieth-century mode of discipline founded on the willing adherence to a summoning order, is addressed by Butler for what it leaves in its shadow. From queer perspectives, it is non-adherence to the norm that must be attended to, in relation to an architecture of power relations that reproduce themselves through constitutively frustrated attempts to satisfy their interpellations. In doing so, they point not only to the ways in which norms are reproduced by their negation, but also explore the potential of subversion inherent in inhabiting the law from the position of the abject. Thereby, a space is opened up in which different ways of relating can be recuperated for an insurgent politics, here and now.

In queer terms, there are no pretensions to the 'separation from an anti-theoretical Other which [feminists] desire' (Strathern 1987: 290) – the transgressive posture which constituted the object of anthropology's mockery of feminism according to Strathern. That Other, the prohibitive paternal law, is seen to function in its very failures, in a perpetual play between repression and transgression which reproduces order. Butler's queer theory seeks to go beyond the 'singular and prohibitive' account of the Law, 'a fictive and repressive notion' (Butler 1990: 156 fn. 51), and rather speaks to the possibility of enacting an identification that displays its very own phantasmatic structure, and therefore the radical, constitutive impossibility of the law's prohibitions and demands (Ibid.: 31) – which is, at the same time, the mechanism of its reproduction. In this sense, there is no such thing as an 'ethical bureaucrat' in keeping to the book. Transgression, here, is the starting point rather than the end goal.

[T]he contentious practices of 'queerness' might be understood not only as an example of citational politics, but as a specific reworking of abjection into political agency that might explain why 'citationality' has contemporary political promise. The public assertion of 'queerness' enacts performativity as citationality for the purposes of resignifying the abjection of homosexuality into defiance and legitimacy. I argue that this does not have to be a 'reverse-discourse' in which the defiant affirmation of queer dialectically reinstalls the version it seeks to overcome. Rather, this is the politicization of abjection in an effort to rewrite the history of the term, and to force it into a demanding resignification [...]. If there is a 'normative' dimension to this work, it consists precisely in assisting a

radical resignification of the symbolic domain, deviating the citational chain toward a more possible future to expand the very meaning of what counts as a valued and valuable body in the world.

(Butler 1993: xxv–vi)

In fact, Butler sees the kernel of such an approach already at play in Strathern's early reflections on gender, published only very recently (2016 [1974]): the displacement of stereotypes through their embodiment, the phantasmatic character of role descriptions and the ensuing possibilities for mimicry and critical reflection, as well as the different forms of attachment to fantasy (Butler 2016a: 296–9). And yet, here is where some gap opens between Strathern's and Butler's thought, and thus where the cyborg-assembling work might begin.

The concept of subversion and the cognate one of transgression, whilst for the most part not directly addressed by Strathern in her analyses, may be seen to underlie many of her musings – on feminist politics inside and outside academia, and on the foundations of such thought and praxis within the dyadic matrix of individual and society. Much of Strathern's work was devoted to questioning the juxtaposition of the logic of a freedom-constraining power upon relations and dynamics – most notably those that accrue in Melanesian contexts – that seemed to follow different preoccupations entirely. By reference to a 'Melanesian' perspective on feminist-anthropological concerns, Strathern has conjured up a vision in which

gender is not construed as a role 'imposed' on individuals 'by culture'. Conversely, there is no problem about membership 'in society' or one's fitness to participate in the social contract. There is no anxiety, *pace* Mead, about whether or not one's attributes will qualify one for this or that role. Anxiety, so to speak, is not so much about the control of behavior (people's 'freedom') but about how their behavior will appear to others (their 'performance').

(Strathern 1988: 324)

What is left of 'politics' from this perspective, then? Strathern shows how the language of rights attendant to (at least a certain) activism is premised on a vision of persons as self-owners and as singularly responsible for the production of, and thus entitled to, goods through their work and labour (Ibid.: ch. 6; 2016 [1974]; cf. Green 2016 on how this was the case in late-1980s feminist separatism in London). Yet, as Carol Pateman (1988) among many others reminds us, both Marxian (and in some cases Marxist) and some strands of feminist thought openly *reject* the view that individuals as self-owners can be foundational to a politics of liberation. The discipline of anthropology, and Strathern's work within it, has arguably contributed to forge this critique. For Pateman, however, as for many others, the solution is one of upholding limits to freedom in the name of an autonomy which is yet again predicated on the

integrity of an unviolated, unitary self (attributed with binary sexual difference) that arguably still draws from individualist Enlightenment philosophy (Szörényi 2014).

Reacting against such a stance, Butler's more recent work has sought to conceptualise a radical politics based on the recognition of mutual interdependence, understood in terms of vulnerability (e.g. 2004; 2016b). For Butler, the impasse of individualism and its attendant identity politics is overcome, again also referencing Strathern's writing and thinking, if relationality as interdependence is taken as the grounding for identification (2016a: 300–2). At the same time, however, Butler's is a stance in which resistance, the play between individual freedom and social constraint, is very much at stake – as it is for queer and gender theory more generally (Povinelli 2007). To what extent, then, is her thinking incorporating, partially connecting to, the 'Melanesian' one, in Strathern's sense – and should it? And to what extent is Strathern's thinking and dealing with institutions transcending the postulates of individual, autonomous selfhood?

To put it very bluntly, we could say that whilst (part of) Strathern's work was dedicated to understand the meanings and uses of *exploitation* attendant to specific constructions of personhood (Melanesian – as perceived, imagined and crafted from the point of view of a 'Euro-American' anthropological discipline devoted to making partial connections), in which 'resistance' can only take interpersonal or nonhuman form,⁵ for Butler the main question is to re-define, in an activist sense, the meanings of *resistance* and *selfhood*. Butler's thinking is self-consciously inscribed within, and against, a specific genealogy, that of heteronormative, patriarchal, Enlightenment thought, in which exploitation is understood as a wounding violence, which appropriates and excludes. Butler's and Strathern's work thus meet at cross angles – hence the awkwardness, and the potential for partial connection.⁶

Within these incompatible starting points, Butler's awkward relations with Strathern also lie in the former's reliance on a decidedly psychoanalytical account of how gender norms are internalised, which she pits against a sociological one. '[W]hereas for the latter, the internalisation of norms is assumed roughly to work, the basic premise and indeed starting point of psychoanalysis is that it does not' (Rose, cited in Butler 1990: 156, fn. 51), such that 'insurrections' against the law are somewhat to be expected. In fact, for Butler subjectivation is always and necessarily a matter of ex-centricity in relation to a symbolic order which is by definition unattainable. If 'Melanesians' can only be described as being concerned with other sorts of issues, when dealing with 'Euro-Americans' (or 'the English') Strathern is rather interested in accounting for how individuals make their relations in 'society', or indeed how they conceive of 'relatedness' and thus only obliquely, if at all, touching on the impossible relation between subject and symbolic law, and thus on the phantasmatic character of the individual. Considering this gap would amount to undertaking a work of interpretation, of reading between the lines (in considering the type of attachments of the person to the office, as

it were), which is antithetical to Strathern's understanding of the task of anthropology as 'redescription' (Lebner 2017a),⁷ or to addressing the psychoanalytical discourse head on as cultural script which complexifies the notion of individuals and individuation by reference to desire, which simply she has not done.

Furthermore, the notion of discipline, which Strathern defines in rather specific, narrow (classical?) terms as a willing act of submission to an institution, in fact identifies a sort of anachronism, perhaps a 'postplural nostalgia' (cf. Strathern 1992: 186–98). Discipline is particularly good to think with when reflecting on the political aspects of intellectual production, as it immediately foregrounds that exertion of power through the institution, to which Strathern reveals her attachment. At the same time, 'discipline' signals the acquisition of knowledge as a tool, indexing a process of learning by following, taking on, accepting, thus pointing to the open-ended possibilities of subjectification.

Whilst of course disciplines are, like all modern social forms, inherently plural and diverse, I take the academic disciplinary order to be an instantiation of a more general form of institutional discipline. This of course has implications for anthropology in its disciplinary dimensions. Indeed, Strathern's writings often proceed by self-consciously adopting the perspective afforded by anthropology as a *discipline* – also granting a definite (if internally plural) positionality to feminism as its counterpart (but not homologue). On the surface, then, Strathern's insistence on disciplinary commitment is at odds with, for example, Butler's explicit invoking, in one of the founding texts of queer thought and/as praxis, of an 'interdisciplinary and post-disciplinary set of discourses in order to resist the domestication of women studies or gender studies within the academy and to radicalise the notion of feminist critique' (1990: xi). And yet, of course, this being at odds is the foundation of the awkward relationship, in Strathern's terms, for feminism there figures as necessarily internally diverse, transdisciplinary. Here I suggest some ways in which Strathern's enjoyment of institutions, her disciplinary commitment, might regenerate and extend in queer fashion, where 'queer' stands as the placeholder for a political situatedness, indeed a political challenge, within the domain of knowledge production and beyond. But I also stress the limitations of such exercise.

From the position of the subject of power, discipline entails adherence to a pattern, a model of behaviour, and thus an identification with norms of some sort, which might appear as the un-queer process par excellence. However, not only is identification (the mechanism by which institutions, rules and laws continuously shape subjects) inevitable also from Butler's perspective (e.g. 1990: 30), but if for Strathern, as she elaborates in the interview excerpt cited above, discipline is not necessarily loss of autonomy, one might imply it *can* in fact resist domestication in the sense Butler advocates. Indeed, in Strathern's view it is in the *gap* opened up, in modern institutional cultures, between person and office – as in that between different institutional cultures and their

temporal stratifications – that this autonomy (and the creativity it necessarily entails) can be fostered.

This can, again, give some pause to those of us who have grown up, *intellectually and politically*, learning that ‘the personal is political’, that the public-private distinction is to be deconstructed, and that therefore there must always be at least one (and usually more) person(s) recognised as standing behind and within the office, that the (public) office cannot be fully separated from the (private) personal dimension which nurtures and re/produces it. To sustain this fiction of separateness, we learnt, was to reproduce an exploitative model founded on segregation. Moreover, a dubious sense of ‘impartiality’ (another political anathema) lingers in the dutifully observed gap:

The specific persona of the bureaucrat is of one who takes pride in preserving impartiality and overcoming his or her own opinions. The moral agency here involves initiative and independent judgment on the part of the incumbent, although it is an agency that has its source not in the individual but in institutionally given obligations. However, while authority comes from outside the individual, this does not mean that individuals doff and don personae at will. On the contrary, personal dedication to instituted (impersonal) purposes becomes an index of the bureaucrat’s ethical habitation of his or her office.

(Strathern 2009: 132, paraphrasing du Gay)

Yet, despite her hesitation in ‘being evaluative’ about change, when prompted to reflect on the evolution of the university’s structures Strathern laments the disappearance of the distinction between person and office. This amounts, perhaps, to the demise of discipline itself, or its displacement onto a machinic order where one has to conform to restrictive protocols (thereby re-articulating bureaucrats into cyborgs devoted to oppressive practices, one may say). In Foucauldian terms, we could tag this process as one in which individual discipline gets incorporated into, and transformed by, a governmental regime in which the managerial ethos takes prominence, in the university as elsewhere. In the era in which not only has the distinction between person and office collapsed, but where its ruins have been put to the service of new techniques of extraction, exclusion and accumulation, we must ask ourselves how to make the old feminist adage productive again, how to reclaim it from its appropriation and reversal by a neo-liberal regime which personalises the political (and the institutional), and thereby neutralises its radical, subversive potential. How to re-wire the political-made-personal into a utopian queer cyborg, beyond nostalgia? How to successfully mourn the death of modern disciplines and institutions?

Despite their nostalgia, perhaps Strathern’s remarks about the autonomy afforded by discipline can give us a clue. Of course there are a number of ways in which they could be qualified – by pointing out that not all rituals are ‘benign’, for example (which she herself admits in the interview with

MacFarlane, especially in relation to the new bureaucratic regime), and that disciplines are not always (or only) about willing adherence, or by questioning willing adherence itself as guarantee of autonomy:

the bureaucratic/symbolic Institution not only reduces the subject to its mouthpiece, but also wants the subject to disavow the fact that he [*sic*] is merely its mouthpiece and to (pretend to) act as an autonomous agent – a person with a human touch and personality, not just a faceless bureaucrat. The point, of course, is not only that such an autonomization is doubly false, since it involves a double disavowal, but also that there is no subject prior to the Institution (prior to language as the ultimate institution): subjectivity is produced as the void in the very submission of the life-substance of the Real to the Institution. [...] in an obsessional ritual, the very performance of the compulsive ritual destined to keep illicit temptation at bay becomes the source of libidinal satisfaction.

(Žižek 1999: 258–61, *passim*)

In this light we may ask whether, then, a post-disciplinary (governmental?) form of self-conduct might not also contain its own (kinky) pleasures and perks (cf. Butler 1997), and hold possibilities for queering. This is where our current challenge lies.

However one thinks about institutions' interpellations, though, the point is hardly weakened that 'loss of autonomy' can never be full (except of course with the demise of the self) even in the face of harsh disciplinary demands. Resistance (and/as resignification, if we wish to follow Butler's lead, not unlike Haraway's own)⁸ is always a possibility, however costly and risky and however 'weak' or 'strong' it is deemed to be.⁹ Yet, all would agree (and this is the point of debating 'politics' in the first place) that the self can never be reduced to the mere replication of structures over-determining her. This is an implication deriving from Butler's arguments, of which we can hear echoes in Strathern's bureaucratic pleasures and in her pointing to the 'corners, nooks and crannies' of thickly layered power structures – bearing in mind, of course, that Strathern's stance, in her own words, is rather that of

an academic, rather than activist, feminist. And that means, in the university context, that my concern is *to reiterate the contributions that feminist scholarship has made in thinking about debates, especially in anthropology of course, but insisting very strongly, and it still needs to be insisted, that these are contributions to the intellectual project.* But not as an activist, in the sense that I don't in fact have a *particularly well thought out [political] position that would translate into university dealings*, except in a sort of modest way: while in the context of making appointments and the conduct of meetings and so forth, just being aware of gender issues. But, as I think you know ... I am sensitive, but I am not terribly

sensitive. It took me ages to appreciate the position [that women academics often have to occupy]. I think I've been protected as well ...

(interview with Carsten 2014: 273, emphases mine)

In the light of the first interview cited at the beginning of the chapter, these are perhaps an instantiation of Strathern's characteristic propensity to understatements. This – together with her embracing of awkwardness – makes 'her' (as a public persona, but one in which the 'private', intimate dimension does clearly surface, feminist style – witness the passage above) a product of her context, albeit one who has made itself queer through several contaminations and partial connections. After all, the ability and willingness to play through the gaps could be characterised as a political position, and a queer one at that. At the same time, this last passage points, I would argue, to a residual dualism (between the academic and the political) which remains partly unacknowledged in Strathern's reflections on 'awkwardness'.

Yet, leaving aside for now the fraught distinction between intellectual and activist positions (especially within feminism), the productive side of 'the law' (of institutions, of power relations and their structuring effects) is something that we can identify in both Butler's and Strathern's work (as in that of many other influential thinkers, most notably Foucault in his re-reading of Nietzsche – cf. e.g. Foucault 1978). For Butler, speaking about the specific discipline that is sexuality,

the postulation of a normative sexuality that is 'before', 'outside' or 'beyond' power is a cultural impossibility and a politically impracticable dream, one that postpones the concrete and contemporary task of rethinking subversive possibilities of sexuality and identity within the terms of power itself. This critical task presumes, of course, that to operate within the matrix of power is not the same as to replicate uncritically relations of domination. It offers the possibility of a repetition of the law which is not its consolidation but its displacement.

(Butler 1990: 30)

The notion of power at work in subjection [...] appears in two incommensurable temporal modalities: first, as what is for the subject always prior, outside of itself, and operative from the start; second, as the willed effect of the subject. This second modality carries at least two sets of meanings: as the willed effect of the subject, subjection is a subordination that the subject brings on itself; yet if subjection produces a subject and a subject is the precondition of agency, then subjection is the account by which a subject becomes the guarantor of its resistance and opposition. [...] what is enacted by the subject is enabled but not finally constrained by the prior working of power. Agency exceeds the power by which it is enabled. One might say that the purposes of power are not always the

purposes of agency. [...] agency is the assumption of a purpose unintended by power, one that could not have been derived logically or historically, that operates in a relation of contingency and reversal to the power that makes it possible, to which it nevertheless belongs.

(Butler 1997: 14–15, *passim*)

I take this to be, or suggest how it articulates with, what Marilyn Strathern refers to in her interviews and written accounts, reflecting on the roles, or offices, she held for decades within the university. It is also the premise for making of awkwardness, of cyborg-style assemblages, the principle governing thought and praxis more generally from a postplural/queer perspective. However, as anticipated, awkwardness must be located at a different place in the assemblage from where Strathern originally spotted it.

Opening up this disconnect, this awkwardness, means positing the question of activism as directly related to that of social description, in a sense – that is, it is to ask exactly how we relate to norms and their impossible requests. We might love inhabiting modern institutions, mourn their demise, work through their nooks and crannies, probe and challenge them for their managerial practices which call for a self-defeating transparency. Indeed, despite Strathern's shying away from activist subjectivity, there is of course an 'active' dimension to intellectual critique, including her own – words do things, as Butler is keen to remind us, and as many scholars and their writings have repeatedly proven through the centuries. In her own (characteristically modest) words, Strathern conceives of her posture as 'from time to time challenging conventional ways of thinking'.¹⁰

Indeed, recent engagements with Strathern's analytical strategies are beginning to address the latter's political dimension in relation to critical re-description. They note the political implications of her reflections despite an apparent absence of specific references to politics as such, which is related to the deep embeddedness of such term within a specific intellectual tradition which Strathern seeks to de-centre and challenge (Lebner 2017a; 2017b). However, by directly engaging feminist thought, as well as Marxism (and the interlacing of the two), in her re-description of exploitation, of inequality and of exchange, most notably, but also in accounting for the workings of institutional-managerial cultures, Strathern arguably positions her work firmly at the centre of political debate, in a much more evident, if lateral, fashion than many accounts of her work are ready to acknowledge.

Which discipline? Awkward politics, militant politics, anthro-politics

Embarking in this reiterative experiment of cyborg assembling, I am of course making claims and taking my partial sides, both towards these domains of knowledge production, agentive in themselves, and in a wider sense. I am writing from a position in which not only have institutions in their modern (ist) form disaggregated (and then reassembled), to the point where we have

been hearing of ‘the university in ruins’ for decades (Readings 1997), but where one’s attachment to such ‘debris’ is ever more precarious, let alone desirable or indeed pleasurable. This may be so for all concerned, but certainly demands, expectations and rewards are unequally distributed, and require ‘a concern for the future already among us—a future that a kind of curiosity mixed with a kind of willfulness one could pull out of the present’ (Povinelli 2012: 453).

In this conjuncture, the ‘metaphorical nooks and crannies’ evoked by Strathern in her interview with Alan MacFarlane may no longer be productive gaps but all there is left of the old institution. In overly complex, ruined structures, therefore, idiosyncratic procedures are no longer granted any more than is the internally plural structure itself – something to which Strathern seems to hint with nostalgia. It goes without saying that what has risen out of the debris, perhaps feeding off the process of its ruination, is a powerful organisation – but one of a different, postplural nature, in which differences may be seen to proliferate only at the expense of their neutralisation. There is now wide consensus, among both academics and the general public, that the neoliberal university has progressively ceased to function as a distinct kind of institution to take the form of a corporation, where creativity and complexity are erased in the process of their valorisation and where scholars are increasingly turned into managers. Indeed, Strathern’s reflections on the subject (most famously her *Audit Cultures* edited collection, 2000) were crucial to illuminate aspects of this process. The question, then, turns to what the place and nature of discipline might be in such context.

Thus, whilst taking inspiration and starting from her reflections on knowledge, the university and a number of other issues, my partial connections are obviously taking me to rather different directions to those trodden by Strathern. To speak of ‘queer’ from the point of view of academic discipline(s), of those institutions which are close to home for (or better, are indeed home to) all the parts in the assemblage I engage with, seems like a good way to reflect on *politics* from a perspective (one which owes much to feminist thought and critique) in which the private, intimate, personal, on the one hand, and the public, on the other, are themselves intimately intertwined. As Boellstorff has noted with specific reference to anthropology as an academic discipline, and to the anthropology of gender and sexuality in particular (2007: 18–19), its institutional context has been central to the development of queer studies, as the vector making certain kinds of approaches possible, indeed creating ‘homes’ for their scholars – thus mutually imbricating subject and object, figure and ground. Echoes of Strathern’s thinking surface here.

And yet, insofar as it is on the inescapably *political* qualities of queer within the ruination of university that I wish to focus my attention – on queer as a *method* and guide for change, and thus on the ever-fraught relationship between knowledge production and transformative action – I am departing from Strathern’s own language, if not from her concerns. From this angle, I am facing an unease which the contemporary university as an institution built

on ruins makes particularly stark in many ways. Indeed, while a disciplined institutionalisation of queer projects may be undesirable and unattainable, or at best anachronistic, for the purposes of radical politics, in the current academic context it is their very recognition, indeed their radical effect, that is at stake (cf. Borghi, Bourcier and Preiur 2016; Boyce, Engebretsen and Posocco 2017). More often than not, the institution acts to neutralise and appropriate such projects, or even to erase them. The challenge is thus that of assembling a subversive tool that can help us configure more just forms of knowledge-production and relations. Perhaps we need to renew our disciplines, once again, in order to pursue this project.

This is what remains partially hidden in Strathern's reflection on the incomparability between feminism and anthropology: the *militant nature* of the feminist project, the fact that it is *not*, in the first instance, a purely intellectual endeavour (unlike anthropology, at least in its canonical self-representations). This is the fundamental awkwardness that drives cyborg assembling – after all, cyborgs are eminently 'political' creatures in Haraway's intentions, but being cyborgs they extend and remake the meanings of such politics (whilst, in Haraway's words, remaining faithful to feminism, socialism and materialism). The challenge, then, after having considered feminism's theoretical stance and implications, seems to be to come to terms with the political dimension of anthropology. What is more, it is perhaps in militancy that a sense of discipline can be recuperated, beyond modern institutions and as a way to create partial connections between scholarship and the domains it reflects on and describes. If Strathern identified a disconnect between radical politics and radical scholarship (1988: 27), the current conjuncture seems favourable for a re-articulation in which the one need not be conceptually conservative, or the other politically so. And this is thanks also to the work of feminist scholars such as Strathern and Butler, who have taught us how to be radical without assuming identity in its strong ontological sense.

Of course this means constant conceptual alertness and redefinition – the point of queer performativity. It is discipline in its ethical sense, but one which challenges oneself and the institution to cast both off and regenerate them (Povinelli 2012). Another thing is to have a 'well-thought out political position that translates into university dealings' – but then again, how definitive would we want this position to be anyways? Is it not more a matter of tactical subversions and alliances (echoes of lessons learned from distant lands and colonial settings?), of constantly reworking our politics from the point of view of relations? This is what one might read in-between the lines of Strathern's posture within the institution:

I knew right from the outset in Manchester that the one thing you need to prevent is a cleavage; you can have any number of prima donnas, alliances, whatever, but as long as the alliances keep on cross-cutting with one another, and different issues engage different constellations of interests, everything is fine. As soon as you have a cleavage in a department, a

crevasse, then every issue falls into it; this worked in Manchester, it had to be worked at in the Cambridge department, but is really true of Girton, that although from time to time the Fellows divide themselves, and although they have to always overcome some arts-science divide, simply because of the different kinds of demands of the University, I think I can fairly say there are no divisions that have split the community.

(Interview with Alan MacFarlane, 2009)

Yet the activist, queer posture is not simply a realisation of the impossibilities of adhering to the law: it is a deliberate reclaiming of this gap, of acting conflict out – whereas the role of ‘head’ rather implies acting to re-compose the gap, overcome it. This of course can be done in a number of ways, and carries itself an activist dimension: to be able to detect exclusion and abjection (of women for example), and to recognise its political agency, is what makes for a queer ‘head’. And the reclaiming (as much as the re-composition perhaps) is, as noted in the beginning, propped up by analyses, ideas, elaborations which may include those on ‘Melanesian’ ways, knowing that things can be done differently, that laws need not be carved in stone and that contamination, or partial connection, is a possibility, indeed a political necessity. In this sense, paraphrasing a well-known author, if ‘Margaret Mead made us gay’ (Newton 2000), ‘Marilyn Strathern made us queer’, both in her unsettling the grounds of gender identities and thereby also questioning the forms of militant politics that we deploy to contrast such strong forms of identification. Of course ‘Melanesians’ are a word doing things here, a shorthand for relationality as constitutive of selves, perhaps, in the awareness that what we are facing is a postplural world in which even the symbolic/institutional order might be in question and where, therefore, ‘queer’ might be defused in its subversive capacities and put to work for a regime of boundless consumerist enjoyment. Indeed, it is only by assuming our own vulnerability, deliberately assuming risk and exhausting ourselves, and recognising the violence and vulnerability endured by others, by those we work *with*, that we can turn discipline(s), including anthropology, into transformative projects. *Queer*, indeed, can only exist only as one of the names of this embodied, lived vulnerabilities and pains, lest it betrays itself.

But to demand of ‘heads’, institutional figures par excellence, in all their radicalness (a radicalness that Strathern and Butler both expressed in very different guises, at least ‘intellectually’ as Strathern would put it), to ‘queer’ knowledge or the institution is perhaps to miss a point. Their cyborg assemblage can only serve as a weapon in the hands of, and for, the objects – the precarious, the non-subjects of neo-liberal institutions. It is from that position, and only from that, that subversion can proceed, however it is then dealt with by institutions and their heads, who might or not accept the challenge of recognising and owning their own precarity. But however institutions, or their ruins, react, that should be no reason to interrupt our efforts.

Notes

- 1 I would like to thank Eirini Avramopoulou, Paolo Heywood, Ashley Lebner and the editors of this volume for their insightful comments on earlier drafts, which greatly helped clarifying and sharpening my argument.
- 2 All italics in the interview excerpt are mine, and are meant for emphasis.
- 3 Available at <http://sms.cam.ac.uk/media/1130673>, retrieved 19 March 2017.
- 4 Butler explicitly draws on McCormack and Strathern's (1980) widely known collection in her seminal *Gender Trouble* (1990: 37), to begin her questioning of the naturalisation of sex. This is the most obvious, even plain, way in which Strathern's anthropology (and not only hers) contributed to the elaboration of queer thinking. Much later (2016a), Butler will acknowledge Strathern's contribution to feminist theory even more extensively and explicitly. On her part, Strathern draws on Butler's thought less self-consciously, but see her intervention as chair of Judith Butler's discussion of 'Psychoanalysis and Feminism: A Radical Assessment of Freudian Psychoanalysis (Mitchell 1974)', part of 'Oppression & Revolution: A Symposium in honour of Juliet Mitchell's retirement from the University of Cambridge' (Centre for Gender Studies, University of Cambridge, 2009). In that occasion, I recall Butler's surprised reaction to Strathern's characterisation of her thought as 'pragmatist' – perhaps a hint to that awkward relationship on which I reflect here.
- 5 Strathern writes: 'As I understand Melanesian concepts of sociality, there is no indigenous supposition of a society that lies over or above or is inclusive of individual acts and unique events. There is no domain that represents a condensation of social forces controlling elements inferior or in resistance to it. The imagined problems of social existence are not those of an exteriorized set of norms, values, or rules that must be constantly propped up and sustained against realities that constantly appear to subvert them. *People are subverted by the actions of other people. Or they are attacked by nonhuman forces forever beyond their reach. The world is not mapped into spheres of influence, into adjacent and competitive empires. Nor do people envision a hierarchy of levels whose final battle ground is the subduing of the human body*' (Strathern 1988: 102, emphasis mine).
- 6 I see this as a way to overcome the distinction between different 'Others' which Strathern posits in her rendition of the awkward relation, which from my own vantage point do not (any longer) constitute mutually exclusive forms of subjectivation but rather can be articulated to each other. Strathern defines anthropology's 'Other' as a sort of subaltern figure, whilst feminism's own, in her rendition, is individualist, Western patriarchal law. I would say that in post-disciplinary times such alterities infinitely proliferate in any intellectual endeavour as opposite but complementary forms of self-defining difference.
- 7 As Lebner and Deiringer quipped, Strathern's anthropology aims 'to comparatively study how we make things known to ourselves' (2009: 3); or, in the words of Viveiros de Castro and Goldman, Strathern's is 'a perspectivist theory of description that takes as its privileged object the exchange of perspectives, which is of the same order as the relation between her discourse and that which she analyses', in a 'non-dialogic second person' (2017: 183).
- 8 In Haraway's terms, cyborg politics is also a form of writing, indeed writing is cyborgs' pre-eminent tool. It is about 'seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other [...] recoding communication and intelligence to subvert command and control' (1988: 175), it is 'the struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly, the central dogma of phallogocentrism' (176).
- 9 Here authors such as Butler and Žižek famously diverge in their evaluations. For Žižek, Butler's elaboration of a 'performative reconfiguration of one's symbolic

- condition via its repetitive displacements' (1999: 264) is not as radical an act as it could get. Performative reconfiguration is 'a subversive displacement which remains within the hegemonic field and, as it were, conducts an internal guerrilla war of turning the terms of the hegemonic field against itself' (Ibid.), unlike 'a much more radical act of a thorough reconfiguration of the entire field which redefines the very conditions of socially sustained performativity' (Ibid.). However, he perhaps mistakes Butler's idea of performativity as being predicated on transgression (which, on the contrary, Butler identifies as the normal procedure for subjection, as I later show) and does not quite explain how a radical act of thorough reconfiguration would essentially differ from queer performativity *qua* reiterative (rather than singular), redefining acts. From a feminist point of view, advocating a 'strong', singular, redefining act sounds suspicious to say the least.
- 10 'Inside the President's Studio – Marilyn Strathern', interview with Virginia Dominguez, March 2011. Available online at <https://blog.americananthro.org/2011/03/31/inside-the-presidents-studio-marilyn-strathern/>, retrieved 10 June 2017.

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3 Gay Back Alley Tolstoys and inheritance perspectives

Re-imagining kinship in queer margins¹

Antu Sorainen

Introduction: gay care, theory, society

Urban gay men, as a social group, have been relatively invisible and neglected as a specific caretaker/giver constellation by both society and literature. Queer support networks are always constructed in contingent and complex political frameworks, and at crossroads of gender, sexuality and law. Thus, these intersecting factors inevitably shape the terms of gay male support relations, including the state institutionalised and legally governed inheritance institution. At an individual level, effects often may feel deeply ‘personal’ rather than something systematically structured and organised. To flesh out some of the particularities of the impact of inheritance – as an institution – on urban gay lives, I will illustrate ways in which this legal and cultural processes may be of certain significance for queer support networks in liberal but rapidly declining Nordic welfare societies.

As Strathern (2005: viii) points out, law is the classic locus for situations where categorical and interpersonal relations confront each other: the law deals with ‘persons’ in relation to categories. Moreover, there is a particular purchase to bringing in legal thinking in the study on sexually marginalised groups since as a discipline and practice it has to deal with different kinds of relationships (ibid.). Also, through my own empirical research on inheritance arrangements in sexually marginalised groups in different societies, I have come to believe that the inheritance system provides one legal device to redesign and maintain alternative, sustainable lives and care networks that challenge the dominant cultural and legal forms and categories of kinship and family (Sorainen 2018). Therefore, I seek here to describe how the inheritance institution – specifically, the Finnish legal share system where all legal children are heirs whatever their lifestyle – impacts on such constellations of gay support networks that are designed in margins ‘with creativity and verve’, without comparing these to straight couples (Stacey 2011: 14).

In this thought process, Strathern’s (1981: 7–12; 207) early work on caregiving between ‘households’ in relation to an ‘insider/outsider dichotomy’ (in the English village of Elmdon) helps thinking about the social existence of urban gay men who live outside or at the outskirts both of the gay baby

boom and the urban cruising scene, and redesign their relationality accordingly. The context of my discussion, the Kallio district in Helsinki, is not a village, and nor is the micro community of the four gay men who are the subject of this study a similar entity to that studied by Strathern (1981: 7), whose subject of study was a ‘set of inhabitants associated with a single settlement area’. However, there exists a kind of shared although shifting understanding of who belongs as a ‘real villager’ to the increasingly heteronormative and gentrifying, formerly working-class and multi-sexual urban neighbourhood of Kallio, and who are ‘outsiders’ to the gay micro community of the four men – the ‘Gay Back Alley Tolstoys’ – that I will discuss here. In this exploration, Strathern’s (2005: 118–125) thinking on legal categorisations, as well as on ‘parts and wholes’, further provide a point to forge an analysis on how the position of these marginalised urban gay men in their queer ‘kin’ constellation could be connected to their status in the world ‘outside’.

The impact of inheritance institutions on gay kin relations is of importance here, as it helps to contrast the rooted assumptions of material emotional support and care as matters of feminine, familial or reproductive labour (Stacey 2011: 15) in relation to the gay experience of care ties at the margins of the declining welfare society in Finland. I will suggest that even a small inheritance or a future inheritance prospect may support a refusal of both homonormative and heteronormative social codes and values by reducing the personal risk and exhaustion for gay men living at ‘the margin of the margins’ of both the urban (gay) scene and normative kinship. I will show that to engage in non-normative queer support networks is not reserved chiefly for those gay ‘aristocrats’ who themselves succeeded financially in the globalising capitalist system, or who happened to be born as heirs to wealthy families or married to well-off partners.

Against this background, in this chapter I discuss conceptual devices aimed at queering our understanding of kinship. I focus on a case study of a group of four marginalised middle-aged gay men in Helsinki who practise domestic and intimate arrangements that do not accommodate easily with general (gay) relationality lexicons such as ‘couple’, ‘cruising’ or ‘Rainbow family’. I call them Gay Back Alley Tolstoys to paraphrase the cultural and historical figure of an idealistic self-learned philosopher and a social critic who is not in the glare of publicity but still partly blinded by his privileges and resources.² Referring to such a contradictory cultural character, which combines certain class and gender privileges while exercising fierce anarchist social critique, ‘Gay Back Alley Tolstoys’ indicates a male group that explores its social existence and possibilities without a proper audience, out of the radar or scope of both the mainstream straight and gay understandings of the singularity of the male ‘person’. In this, it has a certain queer aristocratic resonance as it risks to break the norm of both gender and individuality.

A Gay Back Alley Tolstoy, as an individual, turns out not to be so much a person as a relative to other Gay Tolstoys, but also a relative to

his own complex cultural becoming and position. The four Helsinki Gay Back Alley Tolstoys, in this study, are not literally ‘cultural-types’ of persons but rather contextually conceived subjects in relation to whom ideas about relationality, personhood, sexuality and gender can be expounded (Boyce, in this volume; Strathern 1990). In a way, they are both allegories in the researcher’s imaginary, and ‘real’ surviving remnants of the modern urban margins. This includes poor citizenry, engaged in productive industry, sexual outlaws, independent artists and other non-consumptive city figures who once populated the inner cities in conflict with the powers of gentrification (Chisholm 2005: 181). It is in the context of these practices that I have undertaken my current research project.

The Four Gay Back Alley Tolstoys in Helsinki

The four ‘Gay Back Alley Tolstoys’ of this study are self-identifying gay men in their mid-40s and 50s, and all practise arts or have a higher education degree in arts. They have created and maintained a web of mutual care since about 2010. Their support network includes cross-species and cross-national companionship: a stray dog they adopted from Spain. The context of their lives and gay care web (as well as my study) is about 1sqkm area where they live in close proximity from each other, in the former working-class but now rapidly gentrifying district of Kallio in Helsinki (Sorainen 2019).

My discussion of these four men who create non-conventional forms of relationality outside the public gaze is based on participatory observations, kin charts and in-depth interviews I conducted with them in Helsinki in 2010–2016.³ To better understand their relations, I asked them also to draw kin charts to visualise their everyday concrete support relations. The kin diagrams are part of the methodology here because, when discussing the hierarchies between different forms of off-scene gay relationality, a problem arises: how to conceptualise something that cannot fully be articulated in the cultural texts, or in the legal frame?

In this case, such queer kin diagrams worked particularly well because all the men are artists, thus this form of self-expression was familiar to them. As a different form of expression than language (interviews), their drawings offered a channel to figure out deeper complexity and mobilise diverse aspects about their queer relations than their interview narratives alone do. One of the kin diagrams is discussed in this chapter as a specific device to understand the deeper connections of gay personal lives with respect to metanarratives of individuality, cultural categories and care relations in the declining welfare state. This worked as an additional device to overcome the hegemonic apparatus of recognition that language may have hidden (even from their own view); language always tackles with hierarchies and lexicon that are necessarily created and shaped through heteronormative powers (Butler and Athanasiou 2013).

The central figure in the studied group of four gay men is *JR* (b. 1974). He has been the primus motor in building up this intimate gay care web, and in keeping it together. *JR* has an academic degree in fine arts. He has made uncompromised life choices, not following the conventional assumptions of the straight life course. He has not taken on a steady job; he studied for a philosophy degree at his own pace, already for 15 years, and has refused also other choices in terms of livelihood and relationships. This has been enabled, on the one hand, by having inherited a small sum from his grandmother and, on the other hand, occasionally receiving financial support from his retired parents – and living in a country where free higher education is (still) available.

The three other men in the group under study (*JF*, *JK*, *HR*) relate in variegated ways to each other – but they all relate in one way or another to *JR*'s idea of their mutual gay support and intimacy web. *JR* lives together with *JF* (b. 1963) who rents an apartment that is contingent upon where he works (a public library). Officially, *JR* is a sub-tenant in this flat even though they do co-habit – but in such a way that is not easy to explain by the conventional 'faithful couple' contra 'open relationship' lexicon. The network further includes *JK* (b. 1962) who owns a small flat that his parents bought for him in the 1990s. *JK*'s flat forms a central stage for the social configurations for all the four men, as the weekly hour at his apartment block sauna is the place where they all meet, on a regular basis. *JK* lives alone, and is looking to inherit in the future from his middle-class small-town parents – not much, but enough for him to be not too worried about his pension days.

JK has had an intimate relationship with *HR* (b. 1962) for almost twenty years. *HR* thinks that they are a couple in the midst of the foursome while *JK* is much more hesitant to use the couple word. *HR* has some savings because he inherited a significant amount of money from both his parents. He rents alone, lends occasionally money to the other three men, bought the shared dog, and mostly pays for its food and vets bills. The dog lives with *JK* who is its primary caretaker, while *JR* takes it for walks, vets and to visit his parents at the countryside. *JR* is something of a 'social father' for the dog while *JF* is not involved in the canine part of this relationship web, and *HR* remains a rather passive financial sponsor.

All the four men have childhood family homes at remote villages or small towns hours away from Helsinki, at different sides of Finland. One of the early life histories that they share in common is that they all were bullied at school. Further, they all lived through the AIDS pandemic in Helsinki as young and aspiring gay men and arts students, as they all moved to Helsinki after graduating in the early or mid-1980s. They also share the experience of having suddenly lost close people. The fragility of life has thus been concretised for them, shaking each of them and their mutual relationships in different ways. *JF*'s brother died in a work accident in the 1990s, while, during the period of my observations, *JR*'s big love died of alcoholism and a drag queen friend of *JK* and *HR* committed a public suicide by burning himself in

the Helsinki Central Park, after having suffered mental problems which went unnoticed by the state public health system.

For the purposes of the present study – focused on the conditions of re-imaginings of gay male relationality in the margins – it is noteworthy that all of the four men studied gender theory during their MA arts studies. They are politically interested, left-leaning intellectuals who more or less actively follow (and some of them practise) arts, philosophy and queer theory. While JF has chosen to work with a salary outside the fine arts world, the others are on social benefits or take occasional short jobs to survive. JK actively creates art and exhibits his paintings in small, independent galleries. To the contrary, HR has given up his (rather successful) artist career, using part of his inherited money for different cures for alcoholism and depression. He explained in the interview that his problems were partly due to the experience of having been bullied as a child, and having felt to be in the margins of his blood-kinship, the hierarchical art world and the increasingly homonormative gay culture. He also said that he suffers from deep feelings of grief: of missing his late mother who was a loving person in his life, and emotionally close to him.

Being in the margins of margins, on the basis of life choices pertaining to ‘career’ in the outside world, as well as to intimate aspirations and commitment choices in *The Gay Back Alley Tolstoy* support web arguably provides both social advantages and disadvantages for all the four men in the group. On the one hand, both the canine and the human beings in their circle of support are provided more care than they would be in more conventional relationships. This is because more people are involved in their care circle than perhaps in conventional gay couples or lonely wolf patterns, as each of the four men brings in relatives, exes, friends and lovers. They also bring in time, money and, in JK’s case, a flat that works as a stable base for socialising in moments of both good times and crisis. Further, the money that JR and HR have inherited makes it possible to rent other flats, and to pay for visits to Paris and Berlin, or to the childhood homes and sites. Inherited wealth also helps them to do soul-searching, study philosophy, have art exhibitions and borrow money from each other (even with contradictions and difficulties) in crises.

Without this intimate financial networking partly enabled by inherited money, it is doubtful that they would have means to live in the gentrifying Kallio neighbourhood, at least not in the same way they now do, as the costs of living there are skyrocketing. Mid-upper-class people and young professionals are moving in while working-class people, students and queer people are forced to move to cheaper areas, further from the old city districts (Sorainen 2014a; 2014b; 2019).

Queer(y)ing gay kinship in Finland

Personal lives, dependency bonds and real care relations in sexually marginalised groups are always embedded in larger politico-economic-legal frameworks (Smart 2007). Therefore, my usage of the term gay kin in this chapter is

open-ended. It comes close to Butler's (2000: 72) note that the critique of the structuralist account of kinship does not mark the end of kinship itself. Rather kinship

signifies any number of *social arrangements* that organize the reproduction of material life, that can include the ritualization of birth and death, that *provide bonds of intimate alliance both enduring and breakable*, and that regulate sexuality through sanction and taboo.

(Butler 2000: 72, emphasis added)

Also, my usage of gay kinship always implies Strathern's (2005: 10) concept of relationship, which asks us to think about *connections and disconnections together*.

The idea of the contingency of dis/connectedness is crucial because liberal sexual rights, even if hard-won, often tend to exclude other forms of queer intimacies save those understandable in the state's eyes in terms of coupledness, marriage and/or biological reproduction.

For example, in Finland, since becoming a European Union (EU) member state and a member of the Economic and Monetary Union of the European Union (EMU) in 1995, as well as part of the Schengen area from 2001, protection of individual rights instead of social goods has been increasing in legislative and policy debates. The state philosophy and the legal system in the relatively young nation state of Finland (it declared independence only in 1917 after a history of having been part of Sweden and then a Grand Duchy of Russia) were initially constellated through an interpretation of German Idealism, in particular Hegelian thought. In this tradition, the Finnish state was seen as a protective friend of vulnerable social groups rather than the enemy of the individual who needs to form interest groups against it in the liberalist tradition countries such as the UK. However, this understanding of the state in Finland has been rapidly transforming in terms of the liberalist tradition of individual 'rights' imposed by the EU directives and international agreements on the EU member states (Sorainen 2018). At the same time, conservative and populist right-wing parties have been feeding on fears about whether the 'traditional' family and marriage is dispersing. The explicit aim of the contemporary right-wing parties is to preserve the 'naturalness' of heterosexual reproductive family and blood-based kinship ties.

In such a contingent political and legal environment, not promising any instant good news for such off-the-centre social groups or individuals as the Gay Back Alley Tolstoys, forming non-normative queer support networks and kin relations is highly precarious. One reason for this is that the equal marriage form connects all sexualities to the reproductive capital mode as it abides by the increasingly dominant mode of neoliberal logic: capital ever more linked to inheritance within forms of kinship linked marriage (Duggan 2003). There will, however, be unforeseen developments. New challenges and consequences in queer sociability (as well as fields of law) have not been

studied enough from these perspectives. As such, better understandings are needed as to how queer sexuality and bonding actually work in the liberal legal landscape and through institutions and categorisations (Leckey 2015). Thus, although kinship relations are transforming in society, the corresponding legal changes are only now beginning to be discussed, probably lagging ‘behind’, for example, in respect of inheritance legislation which has not been seen as relevant for the queer community or critique until very recently (Monk 2013; Westwood 2015; Sorainen 2018). In this situation, designing queer gay care network relations – in terms of internal psychic and external social configurations – rely not only on constant re-imaginative work but also, crucially, on such material and intellectual resources that provide and secure space for the radical exploration and experimenting with queer kin and support constellations.

Gay relationality in Kallio, Helsinki

Gay male cultural practices are related not only to sexuality but also to social, cultural and aesthetic form (Halperin 2012: 35). In this sense, even the most distant urban gay niches (separated by class, income, district, education, place of origin, profession, politics, style or similar) share certain social practices and forms of ‘being’. Such gay niches in metropolitan cities can thus prove to be anything but anonymous or ‘free’ of social, gendered and cultural constraints (Summerskill 2012). The question of gay bonding gets further complicated when we look at such a small metropolis as Helsinki where the entire population is about 0.65 million. The Helsinki gay male population is thus relatively small, and in the age group 40–60 shares a certain history and/or cultural memory of bars, cruising places, events and gay-signified popular culture productions. What is more, people in this context often share sexual experiences and past intimate relations between the niches. As these spaces are quite small they require cross-bordering activities to keep the sexual life from becoming too incestuous.

An off-centre gay kin web in Helsinki therefore poses a high risk for the individuals involved in the ‘insider’ relationality, in terms of their personal ‘outside’ lives, sexual options and utopias. Marginal relations inside the already marginalised and small gay scene add to their marginalisation, as almost nothing in their network is ‘normal’ or obvious. Therefore, the four *Gay Back Alley Tolstoys* need to rely on uncertainty concerning most things – such as everyday economic survival, the conceptualisation of their relationship position and mutual network, and the recognition of their sexuality and social status – that people who live more conventionally could take for granted.

This means that their lives consist of constant (re)negotiations and tactical moves, small and big, in the gay cultural, social and legal sphere which often get interwoven and pose constant obstacles for them. Here, I refer, for example, to the hardships of sub-renting as a gay man on social benefits with another (gay) man in a non-conventional relationship, and to the social

restrictions caused by non-normative gay appearance (not trendy nor young). Such issues may be compounded by shortage of money, which seriously limits the Tolstoys' participation in the buzz of their upscaling, hipster, property-owning urban district in Kallio (assuming that they would sometimes like to participate in it). It is also hard everyday mental work for each of them, in their own ways – as divergent parts relating differently to the whole – to always concern three person's emotions (and the dog's). In particular, it is hard for JR who takes care of a number of his other marginalised gay friends, too.

These four Gay Back Alley Tolstoys in Helsinki, are, thus in divergent ways marginalised both from the wider society of the heterosexual family (even if their care web provides support for each of its members), but also from the mainstream gay scene of financial success and idealised male heroic independence. This is especially so as, as gay men, as sons and men, they are assumed and expected to enjoy more personal autonomy, physical mobility and sexual freedom than daughters and women (Stacey 2011: 41). In this situation, in the formerly queer-friendly but now gentrifying district Kallio is rapidly turning into a heteronormative middle-class neighbourhood with skyrocketing housing prices. This is occurring in the context of the crashing welfare state safety networks, meaning that every resource available becomes crucial for this type – A Gay Tolstoy – in terms of making survival possible. As one result, the marginal gay man type becomes more relational as it could possibly not survive alone anymore, in economic or cultural terms. In this process, relationality may become more of a necessity than a political, emotional or sexual 'choice'.

What, then, creates a relation? According to Strathern (2005: 52) it is the law that 'validates the relation.' Indeed, even though liberal modern law protects certain queer relations, it also tries to intervene into these as it only understands people in relation to prescribed categories; when it comes to relationality it best understands categories such as 'child', 'parent', and 'spouse'. Do we have words or cultural figures to cover other, queer and gay constellations? This question requires specific attention to how legal constellations and imaginations cut through 'existing' sexualities, sexual cultures and gender (Sorainen 2018). Addressing the gay male culture in the US, Halperin (2012: 269) claims that gay men 'have no ready-made social forms available to them for expressing their feelings, and whose every expression of an emotion therefore has to orient itself in relation to a preexisting, heteronormative social form, or genre'. For a Gay Back Alley Tolstoy type, the social form calls for an idealist man who could, due to his inherited or gained material, social and mental resources, turn his back to the conventions of his society while using his resources to connect with an audience or allies on the sidelines or shadows of his society and community.

While the historical, 'real' Tolstoy experimented with his writing, wife, and former serfs at his secluded rural estate, the four Helsinki Gay Back Alley

Tolstoys invested in art, literature, philosophy and soul-searching in their personal lives and queer support web, but outside of the high culture and the wider society. They are struggling for their lives, housing and gay care network, as they all identify and confirm the existence of their shared network of four (and the adopted dog). However, they each also have a partial, specific, contingent relation to this ‘whole’. But how do the four Gay Back Alley Tolstoys studied here actually relate when they create intimate support networks, or gay kinship?

Kin charts as a queer device

Not all of the four men have equally close relations with each of the other three. Some may occasionally have ‘external’ lovers, and there are some significant exes lurking around. However, I never asked about how the four Gay Back Alley Tolstoys organised their actual sexual relations, or whether they were jealous, possessive, exclusive, open etc. in their mutual intimate relations— this would be another study entirely. If they themselves wanted to bring up sexual issues in their interviews or drawings I took these seriously, as all things cultural and relational are organised in the heteronormative culture; thus everything of course always has to do also with sex.

When thinking about ‘parts and wholes’, persons may appear either as singular or as plural, or partible (Strathern 2005: 89). In queer relationality, kin charts may help to provide us knowledge not only of the external relations, or of such relations that could be easily articulated but also about such relationships that people could describe as internal or enmeshed in a complexity of internal and external relations. In this, kin charts could help to approach queer lives from the perspective of queer and gay social practices *and* cultural identifications with individuality rather than only from sex and sexuality. However, there are also other questions, such as the blood relatives, friends and the gay scene who not all directly support this network as a whole, while they may still support parts of it: one of the individual men, and/ or what they see as this man’s partner.

There is thus support readily available for the couple norm and the cruising form even if it is practised in a gay queer context. The risks that the four Gay Back Alley Tolstoys tackled during the period of my observations included personal and spiritual exhaustion, sexual recklessness, housing trouble, mental and substance abuse problems, loss of jobs, trouble with blood kin, and also experiences of marginalisation in the gay community. For example, the local not-trendy gay bar clientele occasionally questioned the relationships between the four men as non-faithful, cheating or recklessness. Also, in the straight bars, the kissing or embraces between the men were sometimes frowned upon. Because sexuality and intimacy is present, their network is not, at least not totally, covered through a ‘kinship grammar of friendship’ as this grammar breaks with an idea of blood, genes and epigenetics, even though culturally never entirely (Dahl 2015).

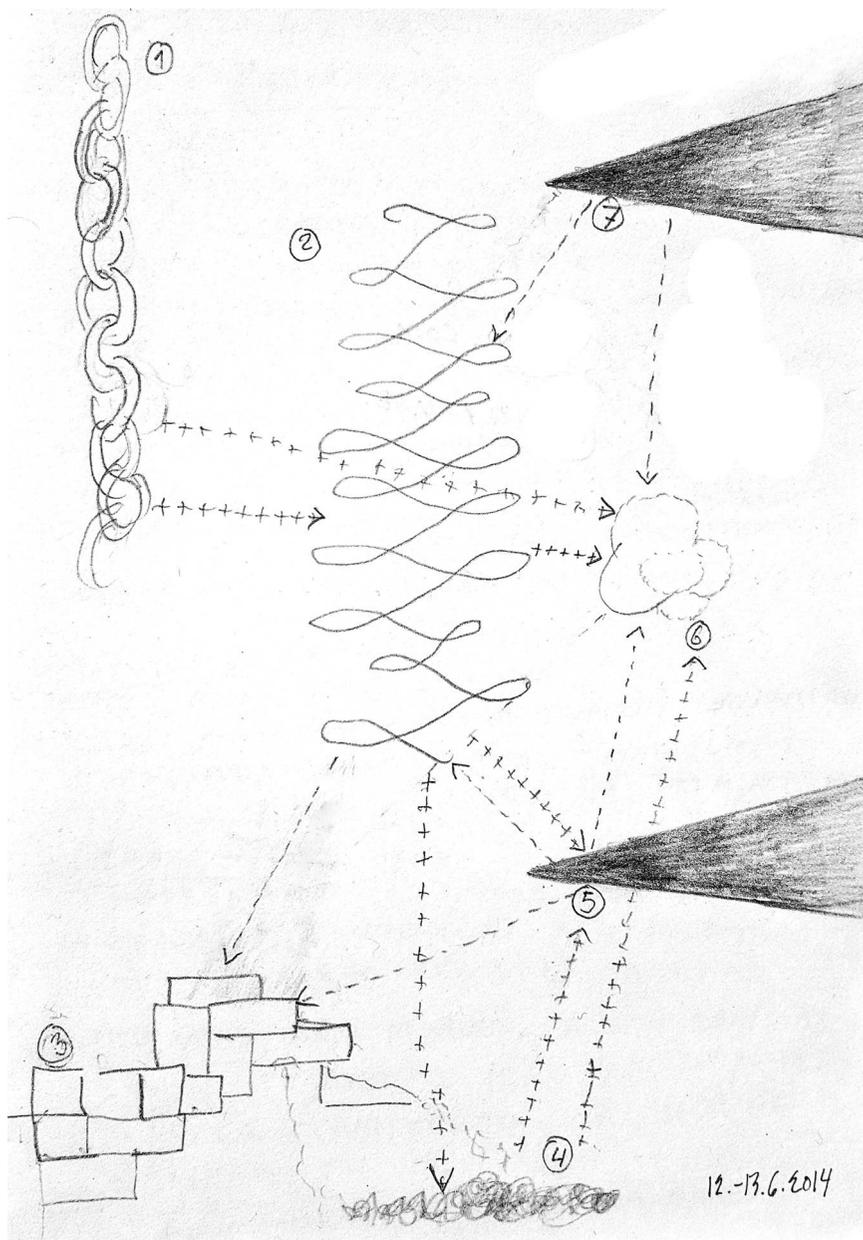


Figure 3.1 Kin chart sketched by JK

- ① Välittäminen talouden tuen muodossa
- ② Turvatekijät ihmisiin ja eläimiin
- ③ Lapseudesta lähtien rakennettu suojaus ympäristöstä vastaan
- ④ Välittäminen ja rakkauden saajuuksien muuttamista kairon alustaan uudelle.
- ⑤ Pyykki sairaudet, alkoholismi yms.
- ⑥ Identiteetti
- ⑦ Depressiivinen yhteiskunta

"Jin 7 muuttujaa"

12.-13.6.2014

Figure 3.2 The seven 'variables'

To better illustrate the complexity of this urban off-the-centre gay relationality landscape, it is informative to look at the kin chart that JK sketched (Figure 3.1). It describes his support network as consisting of seven ‘variables’: 1) Care in the form of economic support, 2) Emotional bonds with humans and animals, 3) The wall he has built, since the childhood, against the wider society, 4) The same wall crumbling under care and love – this forms the base for new things to enter, 5) Psychic problems, alcoholism etc., 6) Identity (in cloud), and 7) The Depressive Society.

In JK’s ‘seven variables’, as he chose to name his kin chart (Figure 3.2), the ‘befores’, ‘afters’ and ‘nows’ are intertwined and chiasmic, thus not presenting as a linear story which develops as a coherent narrative towards the happy end through some hardship. Still, something is crumbling in the picture; it hints to JK’s faith that the depressive heteronormative society will not have the last word in his personal life and relations. It suggests that he is capable of (day)dreaming a queer future and care web somewhere elsewhere, overcoming the current realities of his internal and social environment which was populated by crushed lives, crippled relations, ‘wrong’ habits and failed desires.

At the moment of drawing the chart, this ‘elsewhere’ for JK was Berlin, but it was also his relationships with HR, JK and the dog that provided the necessary everyday healing, care and love for him (for JK, in the interview, JF was present as part of the wider web but not personally so important a connection as the other two men and their shared pet). From these caring connections, JK gathered new strength and power to fight against the psychic maladies attached to the stigmatised and marginalised gay sexual position that he had identified with since his bullied schooldays and ‘nice’ but also sexually oppressive middle-class childhood home.

Such a radical gay kin web, which sets itself against and works as a powerful queer critique of the current ‘let’s all get hitched’ politics of the mainstream lesbian and gay movement, could thus provide social advantages in terms more effective and variegated support and resources than a long-term couple form. This was so even as JK also positioned himself as being in such a relation with HR. Yet such a relation alone would do for JK.

The question that arises here is: could the support network on which JK, and the other three Gay Back Alley Tolstoys depended on provide for something else than basic survival? Inspired by Strathern’s (1981) focus on relationships between ‘households’, I find it important to bring the relevance of place even more into the discussion of gay kinship networks.

Challenging the queer/gay metropolis

In the gay literature, the metropolis has often been presented as the only or ideal site in which all human creativity and sexuality would be maximised (Halberstam 2003; Chisholm 2005). Muñoz (2009: 53) feared that the context of such individualised ethos, amidst the growing privatisation of personal lives and neoliberal political thought values, might bring about a

wayward path that leads to the return of the destructive, pre-community solitary pervert model. Arguably, the promise of anonymity accompanied by the nostalgia for the heroic gay cruiser that the metropolitan gay tales repeat might be apt to isolate gay men from each other. However, the cultural discourses of loss have often little to do with the 'actual experience and experiments of life' within the groups who are slightly off the centre (Povinelli 2006). 'Often we are the first ones there and the last to leave', wrote Muñoz (2009: 183) to point out that gay/queer temporalities are not only different but outside.

The dream of the metropolis as a gay paradise has attracted many small place queers to move to Helsinki. Many queer people have countered the pervasive politics of cultural misrecognition in their personal lives, and many have made the choice of not seeing the metropolis as the most livable option (Sorainen 2015). As noted, the four Gay Back Alley Tolstoys also all come initially from small places. They moved to Helsinki in the 1980s, intrigued by the possibility to get away from homophobic bullying, to study fine arts and philosophy, and to meet other gay men, to forge new community and to explore, experiment and experience gay sex and sociability. However, the four Gay Back Alley Tolstoys in Helsinki do not conform with the norms of the metropolitan gay culture as it values a steady job with good salary, property-owning and a proper appearance (fitness, muscles and design clothes) for the middle-aged men. At the same time, the idealised age sets for the promise of the more promiscuous joys of gay sexuality for the younger men. Upon reaching middle age, the four Gay Back Alley Tolstoys succeeded in creating a porous micro community of their own, partly by mobilising in practice those theories of alternative relationality they had read about in queer and gender studies literature. This took place in Helsinki from 2010 onwards, in the context of the transforming and eroding public gay community heightened by the transforming forces of gentrification and gay online sociality.

The four Gay Back Alley Tolstoys became a loose but distinct intimate network, in which ideas and forms of coupledness, gay cruising, male kinship, cohabiting, gay care, renting and owning got mixed; none of these forms is clearly dominant or independent of the other. This gay care network looks bit like a human form (or method) of the 'Benjaminian montage' in collecting alternative dispersed impulses, resources, practices and dreams together in one web (Chisholm 2005: 180). It consists of parts and wholes, which are and are not about queer kinship as each of the men has a different, constantly renegotiated dependency relationship with this larger network constellation while they all, in their own ways, recognise and, at least partly, relate to this network. The family inheritances that two of the Gay Back Alley Tolstoys had received, and partly shared with the others, as well as their variegated ways to survive on small incomes and social benefits, and to tackle the housing problems and other crises helped them to survive – *together*.

In this practical gay kin economy, the four Gay Back Alley Tolstoys both challenge and follow Simmel's (1950) after-war sociological analysis (or

dream) of the individual personality in the context of modern, metropolitan life. Simmel contrasted the social forces and structures of urban living with that of rural or small places, locating the urban setting as both more constraining and more liberating. In the 1960s, Situationists took this idea further in their dreams of the city: for them, the city would be inimical to a day-dream, to the degree that it would do away with the need for it, re-dissolving fantasy back into play (Debord 1992; Dart 2010: 91). To contrast this, the care network of the four Gay Back Alley Tolstoys in Helsinki is very private, with many pleasantries and a certain tranquillity. It is also socially vulnerable, requiring a lot of hard emotional work and everyday renegotiations, and exposing each of the men to constant, repeated feelings of dissatisfaction, disappointments and conflicts.

And why does any of this matter? Because ‘homosexuality’s social acceptance is being won by the sanitizing of queer people’s image’ (Dean 2009: 19). The more it gets sanitised, the more risky, exhaustive and difficult it is to imagine and live other lives. While new legislations have been spurring on for equal marriage, adoption, reproductive technologies and other legal reconfigurations addressing same-sex kinship practices, other ways to create queer support networks and non-heterosexual intimate relations are still often not fully recognised. In this context, the four Gay Back Alley Tolstoys studied here expand the conventional understandings of gay men as ‘anti-kin’ by investing in queering gay care. They offer new forms of care and relationships into our cultural and social imagination. These work also as a critique of liberal sexual rights – in showing that a queer ‘choice’ can work as a critique of individualism, not just add to it.

Queer(y)ing the inheritance institution

Strathern’s (2005) discussion of hierarchies between different forms of relationality, domains of conceptualisations and the dominance of legal categories requires still more specific attention in the context of off-centre gay relationality. There are things that we cannot escape in regards to blood kinship, gender and sexual hierarchies and rooted assumptions – i.e. certain rules of inheritance, genetics, social attitudes and cultural configurations.

In queer succession, legal categories and real-life care relations collide as is the case for the four Gay Back Alley Tolstoys in Helsinki: even if two of the men inherited from their blood-relatives, they invested part of these resources into building a non-conventional gay support network. In such arrangements, however, the lexicon of legal kinship and succession as well as the dominance of the couple form may seriously challenge the outside world to redesign queer care networks. By this, I mean that succession could be reimagined as not only transformation of property but also as taking care of those who actually matter in one’s life: directed towards the community, to those who are or could become parts or wholes of real care webs. This could provide a pathway to new identifications as we could redesign new concepts for care

practices that society tries to hide from such people as the four Helsinki Gay Back Alley Tolstoys. At the same time, this could expand the impact of the already increasing reach of the inheritance institution in society, outside the wealthiest classes and hetero- and homonormative circle.

But is not the inheritance system a heteronormative practice par excellence? For example, Halberstam (2011) questions lesbian and gay wills as a key tool of middle-class logic. Accordingly, queering inheritance institutions could work to further reconfirm the social inequalities produced by the inheritance system. It is most certainly true that the aristocracy and money elites always knew how to settle marriages, lineage and official kin relationships in such a way that the family wealth would stay in the hands of the chosen few, in spite of whatever may have happened in the boudoirs, behind the curtains, in the town house or during the grand tour (Dennison 2014). Why, then, should such a corrupt system be addressed in the context of the urban gay experience and queer relationality in the margins?

In spite of Halberstam's well-placed critique, I am suggesting a more interesting and productive way to look at the inheritance system in relation to queer kinship and gay care. Monk (2011; 2013; 2015) has led the path to a productive alternative for the conventional left (queer) critique of the inheritance system, in taking queer wills seriously as a call for being attentive to the creativity and complexity of connectedness that informs the practices and memories of alternative kinship and the making of personal identities. For example, in the context of AIDS, 'queer will-writing' concerned not only people whom own property but also offered a possible site for an act of recognition, as naming someone in a will in the context of stigmatised sexualities may attest to the symbolic nature of inclusion. Thus, it potentially offers a site for queer acts as queer; being the scene for an ultimate declaration of one's final will provides possibilities not only to pass on property but also for passing of other kinds of 'goods' such as coming-outs, supporting the queer community and/or the chosen family, friends or lovers, disinheriting the possibly homophobic blood relatives, or publicly recognising the 'real' care and support relations in one's life.

It is noteworthy that Monk's ground-breaking study has been carried out in the context of testamentary freedom and liberal tradition. The sphere of his empirical research is the cultural and legal landscape where Miss Marple makes sense and belongs to. In Agatha Christie's crime stories the murder plot, indeed, almost always boils down to – in one way or another – to queer will and/or queer kinship, whether it's the lesbian daughter, the adopted son of the first (murdered) wife, or siblings weirdly in love, or in lethal competition with each other. Even though Miss Marple is very popular also in Nordic countries, in this sphere she represents a somewhat exotic legal (and family) culture; clearly an 'other' world, historically and legally as well as in terms of the fictional English family life.

How would Monk's suggestion of will-writing as a potential queer act work in a country such as Finland where legal share is norm? Legal share means

that all legal children (daughters and sons, adopted or biological, straight or queer, nice or evil alike) get an equal portion of at least half of the deceased's estate. Arguably, this legal proportion, together with the Finnish citizens' still commonly shared faith in the friendly and protective state, has kept Finnish will-writing the habit of the most wealthy – and the heterosexual, as many queer people, blinded by self-discrimination encouraged by the largely heteronormative society and legal system, believe that they do not 'deserve' their share of the family estate or should not pass their (even distant or homophobic) blood-kin in their wills (Sorainen 2015; Westwood 2015).

The kinship categories that the current inheritance law recognises have an influence on the dominant kinship economy by distributing wealth inside the narrow circle of the closest blood-related family and kin. The inheritance family that the inheritance institution acknowledges varies slightly from a nation state to another but the basic logic is about the same: those who were born in the wedlock or adopted in the family as kids are those who the law tends to see as the proper heirs and legatees (Sorainen 2018). In Finland, this means that the biggest inheritances go to the legal children of the married heterosexual couples in the age cohort of 45–65 (Kangas 1996).

The four Gay Back Alley Tolstoys in my study all fit this category, as they are around their 50s, and come from rather normative middle-class backgrounds. It is commonly assumed that this age group is the one who does not need money so badly as the younger ones who need to get an education and pay for a mortgage while struggling with the growing precarisation of work. However, also the new vulnerable groups, such as the elderly, the non-educated and the low-paid as well as the queer middle-age people who inherited the legacy of 'outlaw' preoccupation from the 'pre-legal equality' metropolitan lesbian and gay experience, increasingly need private funds and support arrangements to pay for the care homes, legal aid and medication in the increasingly privatising and costly sector of health care and housing.

In this situation, it looks important to pay attention to the fact that inheritance institutions could be better put in the service of queer relationality. However, the polymorphic law-making context in Europe, complicated by the confusion on whether EU laws are a matter of the foreign policy practices or internal parliamentary procedures, impacts on the inheritance legislation processes which sometimes seem to have no common thread. This again links to the rooted attitudes and historical practices of passing on one's legacy or defending one's right to the family share. Therefore, my final point is rather practical: even though I am critical of the inheritance institution as one device to widen the gap of unequal redistribution in society, the Gay Back Alley case suggests that the inheritance institution should be redirected to better support queer redesigns of care and kin because it serves in bringing to light more diverse and efficient forms of care and relationality. These may already be known to exist (Strathern 2005: 40) – or they may not exist yet, but could, and should.

Notes

- 1 Thanks to Paul Boyce, Alisa Zhabenko, Maria Svanström, Anna Avdeeva and Paula Kuosmanen for their productive and wise comments on the first drafts. The paper is based on an empirical and theoretical study on queer kinship and inheritance arrangements. Data from interviews, kin charts and wills is collected for the Academy of Finland funded research project 'Wills and inheritance practices in Sexually Marginalised Groups' (2014–2019). The analysis of the data is supported – although not discussed in this chapter – by data from a 6-lingual multinational survey (English, Russian, Hungarian, Romanian, Finnish, Swedish) from December 2015 to January 2016, with 1007 respondents, and a 2-lingual survey (English, Finnish) with lawyers on their queer clients with 112 respondents in 2017, for the Academy of Finland funded Research Project CoreKin – Contrasting and Re-Imagining Margins of Kinship (2016–2020).
- 2 The real Count Leo Tolstoy lived in 1828–1910. He was a Russian aristocrat and writer; a fervent pacifist and social experimenter at his rural estate. Coming from an elite nobility background, he did not always understand the social implications of his experiments or philosophy to his targeted audience, for example, that freedom for his just emancipated serfs was not the same 'freedom' as he, The Count, knew it, or that the return to 'nature' did not mean the same thing for the peasant women than it did for an elite man in the 19th century patriarchal Russia.
- 3 I have not formally interviewed one of the men (JF) as he is concerned about his privacy, but his participation in the four Gay Back Alleys constellation is evident, based on my long-term observations.

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4 Partial perversity and perverse partiality in postsocialist Hungary

Hadley Z. Renkin

It's the day of the gay pride march in Budapest, Hungary, some time in the early 2000s. As I arrive at the pre-march gathering area next to Heroes Square and its national-historic Millennium Monument, I'm greeted by Péter. Dancing towards me, wildly waving a rainbow flag in one hand, shaking a noise-maker in the other, he grins as widely as it's possible to grin. Calling out, "Welcome to Pride! Happy Pride! Hurray!" he rushes up to hug me, his gestures melodramatic, theatrical. At my look askance at such enthusiasm – for Péter is ordinarily restrained and supremely self-conscious – he winks archly. "I'm GAY!" he proclaims, grinning even more maniacally. "I'm GAY and it's PRIDE! Happy PRIDE!" he shrieks, and cavorts off again into the crowd, flag waving.

I begin with this somewhat discomfiting image because this chapter arises from my long-standing desire to find more productive ways of thinking about some of the enduring discomforts of researching, and doing, sexuality and sexual politics in postsocialist East European settings. These discomforts are analytical and anthropological, as in studies of postsocialist homophobias, from attacks on Pride marches to anti-homosexual propaganda laws and anti-gay marriage legislation, which render such phenomena particularly "post-socialist" (or "Eastern") problems (Graff 2006; 2010; O'Dwyer and Schwartz 2007; 2010), or work on the troubles of postsocialist queer movements which depicts them as resulting from either "failures" of society and citizenship or the neocolonial imposition of alien models – another kind of failure (Butterfield 2014; Essig 1999; Kulpa and Mizielinska 2011; O'Dwyer and Schwartz 2010). They are also personal and political: to be seen in the persistent resistance of East European queer people to enthusiastically align themselves with either LGBT activist organizations or events like Pride marches, and in their growing precarity in the face of the region's increasingly heteronormative national politics (Renkin 2015, forthcoming; Stella 2012).¹ And they are combinations of both (which, ironically, traverse the very lines they invoke), present in my discomfort at Péter's perversely (over)performative pride, and the increasing questioning by activists and theorists in postsocialist countries, frequently inspired by queer or postcolonial theories as well as their own personal experiences of bitter neocolonial realities, of the applicability of

Western theories and politics of sexuality to their situations (Kulpa and Mizielinska 2011; Stella 2012). These diverse discomforts challenge still common claims that postsocialist “transitions” have, at least for the most part, resulted in the breaking down of borders and the “return to normality” of formerly Socialist states and citizens (a status often symbolized particularly by the appearance of imagined icons such as queer organizations and Pride marches); they instead support the contention that both these transformations and their analysis have in fact been most fundamentally characterized by the reestablishment of what sociologist József Böröcz has called a neo-orientalist discourse of “European Difference” (Böröcz 2006; see also Buchowski 2006). Indeed, in this light, both postsocialist sexual politics and its analysis (anthropological and otherwise), often seem merely particularly salient elements of a much broader range of processes which not only depend on but recreate critical contemporary borders of identity, community, and politics between East and West, national and transnational, and past and present.²

Anthropologists of postsocialism have challenged and complicated the primarily discursive borders of such analyses, drawing attention to the ways larger mappings of geotemporal difference are produced and experienced on the scales of the intimate and the everyday (Berdahl 1999; 2009; Dunn 2004; Dzenovska 2018; Fehérváry 2013; Verdery 1996). These efforts have cast crucial light on the significance of these mappings and their boundaries for postsocialist personhood, citizenship, and politics, and for our understandings of them. Yet they have been less effective in accounting for the ambiguities, ambivalences, and multiple, contradictory frictions of selfhood and belonging that actually characterize people’s intimate, everyday relations to such patterns – and that are in fact responsible for their discomforting contradictions. As a result, they risk simplifying not only the complexly contextual relationalities within which personal and political positionings, and their interconnections across different scales, take shape in actual practice in these settings, but also the agencies central to their production.

The anthropological theorizing of Marilyn Strathern, however, has made its focus understanding precisely how selective and partial imaginings of relationality order patterns of similarity, difference, and power in ways that cut across, yet define, scales and borders. Enormously influential in anthropological thinking elsewhere, Strathern’s theoretical views have rarely been applied to the analysis of postsocialist contexts; attempts to do so have centered primarily on the ways personhood is shaped in relation to networks of property ownership and exchange (Aistara 2018; Verdery 2000; 2003; Verdery and Humphrey 2004). In this chapter I argue that Strathern’s critical perspectives can also provide us with new ways of parsing the complex meanings of postsocialism’s specifically sexual discomforts, and the complicated webs of connection and disconnection, boundary-making and breaking, and personhood and politics that lie at their heart. Particularly when conjoined with the postcolonial approaches to postsocialism mentioned above, I suggest, a Strathernian lens can help us see more clearly how the complexly interlocking

conditions of postsocialism produce selective and partial imaginings of relations of (dis)connection that naturalize spatial and temporal boundaries of distinction and difference between sexual and other selves, citizens, and politics.

Yet although one of her frequent analytical concerns has been gender and gender politics, like much of postsocialist anthropology, Strathern has devoted little attention to questions of sexuality and its politics. This is all the more surprising since Strathern's focus on the partial, relational character of personhood, and its significance for the making of borders of difference resonates strongly with queer theoretical approaches to selfhood which, in seeing sexuality as both central to and refracted across such processes, have over the last 25 years been a remarkably fruitful domain for thinking about the multiple and contradictory character of both subjectivities and citizenship.³ These resonances, it seems to me, suggest partial (dis)connections of their own, and the possibility of a fragmented and incomplete (and perhaps not entirely stable) cutting across theoretical, disciplinary, and other borders that may, nonetheless, promise a more productive analysis of postsocialist relations. This chapter therefore also points to the potential of such queer connections. By exploring the conjunction of Strathernian insights with key elements of the late queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz's approach to the frictive and contradictory (dis)comforts of queerness through examples drawn from my ongoing ethnographic work on queer activism in Hungary since 1999, I hope to reveal not only the critical, and critically agentic, nature of the oft-observed sexual connections and disconnections of postsocialism, but how an anthropology that is both Strathernian and queer may in fact be the queerest anthropology of them all, offering new understandings of the effects, personal and political, of these diverse border cuttings and crossings.⁴

Disidentified dividuals

In her influential 1991 book *Partial Connections*, Strathern reminds us that because "no analysis or description is complete," the fundamentally comparative character of anthropological accounts inevitably creates "relations through partition, through cutting out obvious connecting material" (2004: xxix). Perhaps because "the anthropologist's contexts and levels of analysis are themselves often at once both part and yet not part of the phenomena s/he hopes to organize with them" (2004: 75), such partial connections (which are always also disconnections) necessarily produce as artifacts structures of opposition that not only hierarchize the objects and subjects of anthropological comparison in relation to scales of time and space, creating boundaries of geotemporal similarity and difference, but also "textually fix" Others, delimiting particular relations of similarity and difference, affinity and alienation, across and within these borders (2004: 48, citing Kirsten Hastrup). The result, she argues, is an image of distinct difference (and similarity) which fatally flattens the more complex relationalities actually involved. Strathern's

analysis applies not only to anthropological comparison generally, but to the dominant assumptions of both scholars and activists about the foundational spatial and temporal distinctions of postsocialist sexual politics. Critically, among other things, such partial (dis)connections have resulted in widespread perceptions of inevitable disjunctures between “(hetero)Nation” and (anti-national) “queer,” (homophobic) East and (tolerant) West, and (straight) past and (queer) present (see, e.g., Kulpa and Mizielińska 2011; Moss 2016; Renkin 2009; 2015).

The poststructuralist (dis)structuring of Strathern’s project proposes that a solution (albeit partial) to this problem lies in what she terms the “merographic” recognition that “any part of one thing may also be a part of something else,” and in making the partial character of such connection-making and breaking visible (2004: xxix). Only in this way, she contends, can we effectively trace the myriad cross-cutting and overlapping connections in which people live (and which they make), and which render personhood and its positionality relational and multiple. Strathern’s writing thus helps us not only to see the epistemological, ontological, and political concomitants of our comparative distinctions, but to grasp more fully how persons (and their stances) are outcomes of complex patterns of relations that traverse and exceed their ostensible borders and boundaries – rather than stably located and locatable, pre-existing subjects which naturally and inevitably (re)create them – and how these transverse relations become manifest in and through particular moments, socialities, and politicalities. Such a perspective conceives of persons as “more than atomistic individuals but less than subscribers to a holistic community of shared meanings” (2004: 53), taking them instead to be constituted in the ways they straddle, shift, and oscillate between a multiplicity of possible, partial connections. Each person therefore becomes an effect of their embedded entanglements, “a performative microcosm of influences, relations, and views” (Strathern 1988: 15); in Strathern’s terms a “dividual” rather than an “individual.”⁵

For Strathern, such a perspective on personhood has profound political implications. “Partiality,” she asserts, following Haraway’s critique of “the view from nowhere,” “is the position of being heard and making claims, the view from a body rather than the view from above” (2004: 32).⁶ Developed as part of late 20th century Western anthropology’s “crisis of representation,” however, Strathern’s own political critique is in many respects primarily focused on the anthropological gaze and its place in and effects on a globally Orientalist politics of interpretation, representation, and governance. Her analysis thus leaves us only partially clear about how to characterize this multiple, relational “dividual” person, as well as its forms and consequences for personal and political agency, in other domains.⁷ In particular, despite its explicit emphasis on embodiment, it gives us no way of interrogating the specific significance of sexuality for such processes and their effects.

It is precisely in this complicating of the stable, fixed, and binary character of overlapping personal and political positionality, however, that Strathern’s

theoretical perspective resonates so deeply with queer theoretical approaches which foreground the multiple, contradictory, and shifting character of sexual subjectivities. Such queer concerns with the negotiations and implications of multiplicitous and mobile selfhood are addressed with particular cogency in Jose Esteban Muñoz's influential 1999 book *Disidentifications*. Muñoz's key contribution in the book was to elaborate a new vision of the concept of "disidentification" in the effort to render more partial our understanding of how (queer) subjects emerge and position themselves in relation to the simultaneously appealing and appalling systems of ideology, sexual and otherwise, that surround them. Citing Sedgwick's reminder that while identification

always includes multiple processes of identifying *with*. It also involves identification as *against*; but even did it not, the relations implicit in identifying with are, as psychoanalysis suggests, in themselves quite sufficiently fraught with intensities of incorporation, diminishment, inflation, threat, loss, reparation, and disavowal.

(Sedgwick cited in Muñoz 1999: 8, my emphasis)

Muñoz notes that as a result identification is necessarily always complex, multiple, and partial: "Identifying with an object, person, lifestyle, history, political ideology, religious orientation, and so on, means also simultaneously and *partially* counteridentifying, as well as only *partially identifying*, with different aspects of the social and psychic world" (Muñoz 1999: 8, my emphasis).

To grasp this process of partial identification, Muñoz draws upon French linguist Michel Pêcheux's tripartite model for how subjects are constituted in relation to ideology. Like Sedgwick, Pêcheux's schema contrasts opposed modes of compliant, assimilative "identification," and resistant "counter-identification." Yet it also offers a third partial, ambiguous subject modality which is neither and both: "disidentification." Muñoz uses this third mode of subjectivity to foreground the queer subject's fundamentally ambivalent positioning – always askance and awry in relation to the normative identificatory alignments of sexual and other worlds; like Derridean "undecidability" (Derrida 1988) revealing and remaining aware of the costs of both sides, and the consequences of decision. The necessarily awkward nature of this relationship, however, means that disidentification's political implications are as crucial as its significance for the experience of the self: such ambiguous/ambivalent positioning implies a unique relationship to the structure of heteronormative power. The partiality of this stance, he claims, thus

neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology. Instead of buckling under the pressures of dominant ideology (identification, assimilation) or attempting to break free of its inescapable

sphere (counteridentification, utopianism), this “working on and against” is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within.

(Muñoz 1999: 11)

For Muñoz, then, the disidentifications which result from queer subjects’ “instability, mobility, oscillation, and multiplicity” are powerfully productive. Indeed, it is precisely their multiplicity that gives them unusual potential for agency and the imagining of alternatives (Muñoz 1999: 27): “As a practice, disidentification does not dispel those ideological contradictory elements; rather, like a melancholic subject holding onto a lost object, a disidentifying subject works to hold on to this object and invest it with new life” (Muñoz 1999: 12).

Thus, such disidentificatory investments are for Muñoz not only about the “new life” of the *individual* subject: they are eminently social and political. Ultimately, he argues, they function “to make worlds – worlds of transformative politics and possibilities. Such performance engenders worlds of ideological potentiality that alter the present and map out a future” (Muñoz 1999: 195). Queer disidentifications, then, create social and political geotemporalities: maps of new worlds in which sexuality (dis)connects diverse borders and boundaries of time, space, being, and politics.

Strathern too sees the relationality of personhood to have fundamental implications for world-making – but in a critically different fashion. In her long-delayed and recently published *Before and After Gender* (2016), she proposes that gender should be seen as neither an essence nor merely a condition, but a means, a “device” (although necessarily a partial one: always also an element in other devices; as much shaped as shaping; a gear, at once moved and moving). Because, she argues, the world is composed of gender, gender composes the world (2016: 284–5), its distinctions functioning to “provide models of boundaries and relationships” both bodily and social (2016: 283). It is in this way, in fact, she suggests (channeling Émile Durkheim), that “Society creates the world in its own image. And having done that, like God, can use the world to talk about itself” (2016: 282). For Strathern, then, the very concept of gender, with its particular partialities of body, self, and society that cut and connect diverse stances and webs of social and political power and hierarchy, provides a fundamental structural pattern, a relational model “for mutual relationship and antagonism, for complementarity and opposition, for nearness and distance, for common interests and competition” (2016: 279) that mirrors across domains and scales; “a paradigm for social relationship” (2016: 284).

The two theoretical perspectives thus emphasize different scales of the same process. Each partial, it is in their mingled convergence and divergence that I see promise of a complementary conjuncture (a disvergence?). In grounding his view of the productive political potential of disidentification, Muñoz aligns himself with Butler rather than Žižek, noting that while the latter “understands disidentification as a breaking down of political possibility, ‘a

fictionalization to the point of political immobilization’,” the former highlights instead “the possibilities of politicizing disidentification, this experience of misrecognition, this uneasy sense of standing under a sign to which one does and does not belong,” and that “it may be that the affirmation of that slippage, that the failure of the identification, is itself the point of departure for a more democratizing affirmation of internal difference” (1999: 12, citing Butler 1993: 219). Although I would argue that Butler’s view of disidentification as “failure” is, in fact, fundamentally at odds with Muñoz’s interpretation (in his sense, only partially queer, because only partially a “failure”), what is revealing here is Muñoz and Butler’s disciplinarily-based focus on “psychic structures” (Muñoz 1999: 15) of “internal difference” to ground their understanding of relationality, and the (dis)connections of personal and political, in the primacy of the individual Self. Casting Muñoz’s queer vision of “the view from inside” in a more Strathernian light, however, with its resolutely anthropological emphasis on concrete social relations, helps us instead grasp such apparently personal “slippage” – and its social and political consequences – as *effects* of ever-shifting networks of broader communities of social actors, and their multiple and partial connections of practice and meaning. Similarly, as noted above, Strathern’s own emphasis on the (dis)connections/connections, cuts, and distancings that constitute the broader contexts informing such action-stances gives us little sense of the actual performative dynamics of the embedded dividual, or of sexuality’s particular significance for these. Viewing Strathern’s theory more queerly, however, through the lens of Muñoz’s work, allows us to grasp how the constant and cumulative negotiations of always already dividual persons within continually emerging patterns of relationality – partially accepting, partially rejecting; both approaching and retreating; at once avowing and denying – shape anew stances at once sexual, social, and political, and so in fact through such “slippage” itself potentially reconfigure those broader patterns as well. The conjuncture of these perspectives thus reveals sexual “selves,” particularly but not only through such moments of “slippage,” as dense transverse points (dis)connecting structure and agency, and such always partial slippages (and the always uneasy stances of sexuality) as neither failures nor successes, but instead as necessarily non/agentive moves: profoundly queer – and neither individual nor collective, but “dividual” – refusals of such cutting “choices”; troubled yet triumphant “(dis)stancings” (which are at the same time, like all distances – including the ethnographer’s – forms of closeness) from such boundaries and their making.

Together, then, these two theoretical perspectives offer us better ways of thinking about how sexuality’s alternative mappings, its (dis)orientations, hinge (or “gear”) together across different scales. They allow us to not only examine more effectively the specific ways in which complex patterns of connection and disconnection, identification and disidentification, are negotiated on such scales, from personal (sexual and political) orientations to the (post) colonial orientations of anthropological and queer analyses, but to grasp the

ways these negotiations also crystallize – in their very personal, agentic traversals of them – the borders and boundaries between them. (Dis)connecting Strathern and Muñoz, and anthropology and queer theory, thus creates new techniques for imagining sexuality as something that “itself assures a relationship”⁸ – like gender for Strathern, a particularly powerful device for reflecting and refracting between, translating from and transposing to, both “being” and “doing,” and diverse scales of positioning: personal, social, political, spatial, and temporal.

(Dis)connecting dissident-ification

In order to examine such partial connections and perverse positionings – which perhaps we could call here, provisionally, “dividual disidentifications” – and their effects more closely and concretely, I want to turn now to another story of discomfort, this time about the (dis)connections between sexual and political dissidence in Hungary under and after Socialism. It’s important to know here that a broad distinction between State and Society (particularly as embodied in the figure of dissident identity) has not only been central to much analysis of social and political identities and relations in Socialist regimes; it has also been foundational to narratives, East and West, of the personal and political relationships between both Socialist past and post-socialist present, and postsocialist East and the (not postsocialist?) West (Ekiert 1996; Gal 1991; Goldfarb 2006; Kalb 2014). This interpretive centrality has, of course, depended on the making of a number of fundamental conceptual and analytical “cuts” – in particular the severing of mutually constitutive links between State and Society, the obscuring of historical connections between sexuality and politics, and the erasure of longstanding social, political, economic, and symbolic bonds binding East and West. Most importantly for the purposes of my argument, the profoundly heteronormative assumptions at the heart of this distinction, and these relations, have largely been ignored by such narratives.⁹ Yet sexuality was critical to such (dis)connections.

One of Hungary’s earliest gay activists, Laci has been a central figure in the movement since before the *rendszerváltás*, or change of system, in 1989. One day as we sat in his elegant flat on the Danube embankment, talking about the old days over coffee and *moskauers*, Laci noted that many queer people in those days lived as if they had two lives. I asked him if this was the same thing as the well-known trope of people’s double lives under Socialism: supporting the regime in public, and only expressing their real opinions, their true selves, in private.¹⁰ Laci kindly but quickly set me straight about the partiality of my comparison, and the complicated relations of affinity and distance which in fact bound and divided sexuality and dissidence under socialism:

That was different. Everyone in the whole country knew about it; there was a kind of tacit agreement. Among ourselves we openly spoke about

what we thought, because we knew others thought the same. So the fact that the whole country felt that we lived under Russian oppression, this kind of “open secret,” made life much more bearable. To be homosexual, on the other hand, was a deep secret, which simply could not be revealed. It was more like how things were at the beginning of the 50s: then you couldn’t, even accidentally, allow it to come to light that you had made any kind of comments against the system. [In terms of politics] already after the 50s things had changed: people constantly told political jokes to one another; it was almost as if we were always winking at one another. So being in opposition to the system evoked deep sympathy. Even in the time of the harshest dictatorship, at the beginning of the 50s. There were huge numbers of political prisoners then; and even a concentration camp for them.¹¹ But if someone was freed from there and, say, got into a taxi to go home, people instantly saw that you had just come from prison, and the taxi driver would say – this happened countless times – if you’re coming from there, you don’t have to pay. “From there.” Everyone felt that you were fighting for us. Even in the darkest days of the dictatorship, if people found out you were a dissident, then you knew that even if they didn’t speak out, everyone was with you in spirit. But if they found out that you were *gay*, you were ostracized, you became a pariah, you found yourself in a vacuum where you could no longer count on basic human solidarity.

Laci’s story reveals connections and disconnections between sexual and political relations which confound the usual borders of postsocialist comparison and identification. Complex partialities of positioning, and their ironies, come through here: a good Hungarian, politically opposed to a foreign and oppressive System, Laci evidently saw himself as properly part of an oppositional system of solidarity and care, a dissident “we” defined by its counter-identification “from there” – the spaces, moments, and practices of the “harshest dictatorship” of Stalinist Hungary in the early 1950s; a national resistance and community marked out by the “open secret” of shared – and socially and spiritually binding – rituals of jokes and winking. Yet he also felt profoundly cut off from all this because of his sexuality. For if homosexuality was powerfully, and openly, instrumentalized by Hungary’s Socialist government (like others) in propaganda campaigns and show trials as an aberration of the decadent West (see, for example, Baer 2009; Healey 2001; Rév 1991; Takács, Kuhar and Tóth 2017), the ritualized solidarity of Hungarian dissidence’s oppositional “we” fundamentally depended on its sharing in, its connection to, that same (hetero)normativizing, sexual (dis)connection. Indeed, for Hungarian dissidents like George Konrád, it was in fact the specifically embodied, sexual character of the bonds of resistant national comradeship that gave them their essential power. Despite all the ideological power of Socialism, for Konrád, the State’s efforts “to swallow up the citizen body and soul” were rendered “impossible” precisely because

Man and wife still strolled at length, emptying their hearts to each other. Workmates leaned close in the taverns, illegal parties whispered in the cafés. What we didn't do from sheer mischief, so things wouldn't be the way they were supposed to be, so what was forbidden would happen anyway! An air of sweet deceit bound the whole city together. Women appeared in the workplace, and somehow that world of strict discipline became less strict. How much serious dedication there was in the girls who belonged to the communist youth movement! Yet their well-steeled souls became soft and sweet in the middle of a kiss. We slipped away from parades slyly and eagerly; we confessed to each other in forest clearings that we were not yet sufficiently hardened atheists; we held hands beside the Danube and gazed at the eternal stars. The trains that carried the workers were filled not only with exhausted state proletarians but also with young bodies hungry for love and less fearful than before of the priest and the gossip. Instead of going to Marxism-Leninism class you could accompany your sweetheart to the beauty parlor and make fun of the pimply "Party nuns"; you could slip out of the university ball, where Soviet dance music was playing, and go across to the *Pipacs Bár*, where the pianist played bebop numbers and the drummer sang in English.

(Konrád 1984: 204–5)

Faced with this simultaneously national and transnational, yet distinctly heteronormative, dissident resistance, Laci's own positioning, like that of his intimate circle of gay friends, was necessarily also complex. Trapped in the cross-cutting frictions between Society and State and political and sexual difference, Laci sought to escape the resulting "vacuum" by both trying to develop local queer community and discovering a sense of transnational queer affinity. Drawing on experiences shared by many queer men in Hungary in these times of cruising the streets, parks, and baths of Budapest, intimate parties on houseboats along the Danube and in the homes of friends, and encounters at nude beaches in other Socialist countries he also, like other men he knew, researched as best he could the gay and lesbian movements of the West and, through occasional meetings with foreign visitors and rare visits to the West, built affinities with transnational queer communities (Renkin 2007). As did many of these men, however, Laci found that these moves positioned him even more perilously. Rooted in the Socialist past yet yearning toward a postsocialist future, desirous of partaking in both local resistance and global sexual liberation, striving to be at once East and West, his attempts at border-crossing cut uncomfortably across the dominant political (and sexual) narratives of the time, in which even dissident recuperations of affinity to the West reinforced, by simply inverting, established spatial and temporal borders of difference and value. Poised across and between, in and out, Laci, like other gay and queer people in similar positions, became a "dividual" microcosm of socialism's sexual-political tensions, an embodiment of multiply dissonant (dis)(s)identification.¹²

Critically, as Muñoz suggests, for Laci this discomfiting (dis)position, far from being paralyzing, was productive of political agency: his (dis)connection from dissident and other solidarities drove him to develop a new form of sexual/political dissidence that centered on simultaneously refusing and confusing the borders between them. Based on their intimate, bodily experiences of queer community under Socialism, and what they knew of the aesthetic and erotics of Western gay movements, Laci and his intimate circle of friends developed a new vision of bodily politics. Explicitly celebrating the power of men's bodies and sexuality to reveal the hypocrisies of both Socialism and heteronormativity, imagined with, against, and through a range of (dis)connected sites – the bodily/sexual respectability of the Socialist system, the sexual politics of heteronational resistance, and the eroticism of Western gay liberation – this deeply personal politics strove to link Hungarian queerness in solidarity to both national and global queer communities. In the tumultuous conditions and new possibilities of Hungary's late Socialist moment, Laci's new political vision, borne of his "disidentified dividualism," soon made him a formative figure in Hungary's early queer movement, one of the founders of the country's first gay organization, *Lambda Homeros*, in the last years of Socialism. In the early 1990s Laci went further, attempting to realize his vision of queer body politics by forming its first gay magazine, *Mások* [Others]. Striving to awaken a new sense of queer identity and community in Hungary, *Mások* built upon Laci and his friends' earlier vision of gay bodily eroticism as a challenge to the repressions of the Socialist regime. Yet the magazine also linked past to present, posing the power of gay men's bodies and sexualities – iconically represented by the open display of the erect male penis – against what its editors saw as the combined dangers of both postsocialism's continuing political repression and its resurgent nationalist heteronormativity (Renkin 2007). Dissident and queer, East and West, past and future/present: such "hybridized identificatory positions [...] always in transit, shuttling between different identity vectors", as Muñoz (1999: 32) would describe them, then, were not only critically formative of the personal (dis)identificatory (di)stances of Laci and many others like him; they were politically foundational. Central vectors in the personal positioning of the members of Hungary's early queer movement, grounding a politics that embraced, rather than erasing, these partialities and their tensions, they were crucial to the production of Hungary's postsocialist queer world.¹³

Coda

I want to come back briefly to Péter and his perverse performance of Pride, with which this chapter began. Despite his youth, Péter had been instrumental to the founding of the *Szivárvány Társulás a Melegek Jogaiért* [Rainbow Association for Gay Rights], Hungary's first LGBT rights organization, in the early 1990s. He soon found, however, that in the period's increasing exposure to Western modes of (sexual and other) being and doing, many in

the group were determined to follow what they saw as a proper global model of sexual identity politics. Troubled, in the light of his reading of other Western feminist and queer theories, and his own of postsocialist experience of the complications of gendered and sexual life, by the cuts and connections this meant, and the rigid identity politics it inspired, Péter reacted by forming a new group called *NINCS*. An acronym for *Nemi identitatis nélküli csoport* [*Group of those without gender/sexual identities*], in Hungarian “*nincs*” means “there isn’t any.” For Péter, the group’s conceptual (and actual – as he himself admitted, not only did the group itself never exist in fact; none of its non-members actually felt they had no gender or sexual identity) absurdism was a multiple and transverse parodic commentary: inspired by both local and global contexts, it critiqued not only the Western models of sexual identity and politics – including “queer” ones – that he felt didn’t fit Hungarians, and those who so fervently believed they did, or should, but even the foundational myth that such models had ever fit the West itself. Yet, if satirical, it was also a deeply sincere attempt to open up a real conversation about the partialities and periodicities of sexual political activism, one dedicated to challenging dominant assumptions in and beyond Hungary’s emerging queer movement about the sexual and political borders between East and West, past and present. Ironically, however, Péter’s move only bewildered and irritated other Hungarian activists, who rejected *NINCS*’s anti-identitarianism as not only too Western, but also too advanced a politics for Hungary’s still “undeveloped” queer identity and movement (Borgos 2007; Renkin 2007). The conflict led to Péter’s distancing himself from the movement. Yet he still felt profoundly part of it; continuing to work as an activist as he had since its beginnings, and attending Pride and other events. It was, then, this personal, social, and political history of intersecting and overlapping cuts and connections that underlay Péter’s cynically over-enthusiastic “pride.” His parody of “proper” Pride was in fact an embodiment of the frictive and partial (dis)connections across and between these spatial and temporal boundaries, and the dividual disidentifications with which he had responded to these: a performative microcosm of his, and Hungary’s, sexual-relational history. Crucially, Peter’s dissident, frictive (dis)stance here, although of course arising from its own, unique contingencies, can perhaps be seen as illustrative of the deep, disidentificatory discomforts – the senses of pride and identification constantly mingled with doubt and disavowal – that have troubled the Hungarian queer movement since its beginning, and prevented its whole-hearted support by the broader queer community (Renkin 2007; 2015).

Conclusion: transversal transvestite transitions

The postsocialist anthropologist Daphne Berdahl ends one of her articles with the story of a woman from the former East Germany’s uncertainty about how to wear her shirt collar (2009). As a question of fashion, it’s a fitting tale to end a discussion of queer anthropology – it also turns out to be, for the

woman, Ingrid, a question of how to negotiate her own relationship to the complexly connecting meanings of East and West, national and transnational, and socialist past and postsocialist present. Ingrid knows, Berdahl says, that “now it’s modern to wear your collar up. That’s how women do it in the West. Here [in the former GDR] women wear their collars down” (2009: 46). Fashion thus becomes a question of simultaneously geotemporal and political – and, of course, gender – alignment. For weeks, consumed with this stylistic, yet profoundly orientational conundrum, Ingrid wears her collar up on some days, down on others. Then, Berdahl reports, “one night at a dinner party, I looked across the table and saw that her collar was askew – a rare occurrence for someone as concerned with her appearance as Ingrid: one corner of her collar was up, the other was down” (ibid.). Berdahl offers this as a metaphor for postsocialism, “symbolizing the interstitiality of the borderland, the way in which its residents are somehow betwixt and between East and West” (ibid.). But while she recognizes that, like many “Ossies”, Ingrid both “mimic[s] and resist[s]” Western standards, Berdahl presents the collar’s askewness as “fortuitous”, a result of “indecision” (ibid.).

What I have tried to suggest in this chapter is that, through the use of a hybrid Strathernian/queer lens, we could, perhaps, instead see this as a both queer and utterly ordinary postsocialist moment, in which Ingrid performs a deeply relational, yet powerfully agentive response to the discomfiting position of postsocialist dividuality, asserting a multiple stance which simultaneously “mimics and resists” (in a performance of spatial and temporal cross-dressing as campy in its own way as Péter’s ambi-valent “Pride drag”, and as profoundly political as Laci’s diversely rooted activism) both West and East, socialist past and postsocialist present, national and transnational style – and in doing so challenges the postsocialist imperative of the necessary choice between them, of the need to align one’s Self with one or the other, of the denial of the complexity of one’s own constitution in the very relation between them. In these examples, the practical, agentive deployment of fashion, on the one hand, and sexual politics, on the other, fundamentally troubles the dominant analytical-political imperative to “distinguish between”; to cut relations that in fact stitch things and people, and places and times, together. Such a bastard theoretical perspective, then, leads us not merely to the traditional anthropological blur of “betwixt and between”, but instead to a view of a personhood, positionality, and politics (and, indeed, time and space) that is at once both and neither; a kind of patchwork or motley mapping together of people, politics, places, and times, and their multiple and cross-cutting (dis)connections and (dis)positionings.¹⁴

In a parenthetical comment in *Disidentifications*, Muñoz notes that the word “queer” comes from the German “*quer*”, meaning “transverse” (Muñoz 1999: 31). Strathern’s own “transversal” analytic – looking askance and askew at the partial connections we make in our analyses,¹⁵ and in that disorienting glance uncovering other partial connections in order to challenge and enrich them – seems to me a profoundly queer analytic, revealing the

anthropological project – including its key comparative concepts like “post/socialist” and “Eastern/Europe” – as itself fundamentally perverse, part of a “social logic” that, in Strathern’s words, inevitably “makes half of a whole one of a pair” – up/down, East/West, national/transnational, past/present, queer/straight. In so doing, of course, this logic, and the anthropology that is part of it, “cuts” our ability to see not only how people are, necessary, always already part of both. They thus also cut our ability to grasp how, too, when faced with such “choices,” some people become instead “disidentified dividuals,” as well as the import of their actions – of what Muñoz (1999: 196) calls “the performative acts of conjuring that deform and reform the world” – for both that world and the anthropology that claims to describe yet instead so often divides it.

Notes

- 1 The Hungarian word most closely corresponding to the English “gay” is *meleg* (lit. “warm”), to “lesbian” *leszbikus*. Most of the people I have met during my research, activist or otherwise, identify by these terms. Since 2012, the organized activist community, and the Budapest Pride March and Festival, have officially used the term “LGBTQ,” yet queer remains a marginal sexual-political term: neither it, nor its rough Hungarian equivalent, *buzi*, are commonly used terms of identification. I nonetheless employ the term “queer” in this chapter as a purely heuristic category, in order to emphasize the multiplicity of sexual subjectivities and (dis)connections involved in these social, political, and movement relationships, and to intentionally put tension on the dissonances and (dis)connections necessarily accompanying the use of any such analytical categories – a move I associate with the critical project of queer theory and politics.
- 2 This is particularly true given their current centrality to both recent nationalist, anti-“Western” politics in Hungary and other postsocialist countries, and Euro-American responses to these (Fassin and Surkis 2010; Renkin 2016).
- 3 This is far too wide a scholarship to reference here. A few of the most pivotal texts include Berlant 1997; Butler 1993; 2008; Duggan 2002; Muñoz 1999; 2009; Puar 2007; Sedgwick 1990; Warner 1993.
- 4 As noted above, attempts to combine these perspectives have been surprisingly rare. One outstanding exception is anthropologist Aivita Putnina’s Strathernian analysis of the power of intimate social practices for the making of kinship, family, and their categorical meanings in, and in relation to, the families of same-sex partners (Putnina 2011). Yet while Putnina focuses on the production of new definitions of and relationships within the kinship structure of the immediate “family,” I am concerned with the disidentifications and disconnections of intersecting, imagined queer and other affinities on, and across, broader scales. I would also like to acknowledge the ground-breaking endeavors of the editors of the current volume, Paul Boyce, Elisabeth Engebretsen, EJ Gonzalez-Polledo, and Silvia Posocco to bridge these domains in order to develop more productive forms of queer anthropological analysis. It is their work and challenge which has pushed me to undertake this preliminary essay.
- 5 An important element in late 20th-century anthropological questioning of the concept of “culture,” such an analysis, of course, has profound consequences, on broader local, national, regional, and global scales, for how we see communities and cultures as well as persons. Strathernian perspectives thus also challenge the simplifications of relationship and agency central to current discourses of both “globalizing sexualities” and “NGOification,” which tend to privilege the global

- penetration of “Western” identities and identity politics (Altman 1997; Butterfield 2014; Massad 2002; see also Kulpa and Mizielinska 2011).
- 6 Critically, this is a “dividual” body, and thus one which is always the embodied effect of simultaneously multiple and incomplete partial entanglements.
 - 7 There has been substantial debate in anthropological circles about whether such notions of subjectivity were meant to apply to “Western” as well as Melanesian contexts (e.g., Smith 2012). While debate continues, in my view Strathern’s broadly theoretical formulation of the fundamental nature of the partiality of both analytical perspectives and personhood – as exemplified, perhaps, in her treatment of the relationality of gender, and the way she sees it to function to model a broad range of other critical social and symbolic relations – clearly suggests that her analysis was originally intended to have a much wider reach, and to offer a complication of Western representations of Western, as well as non-Western, selfhood. It is also evident that since Strathern’s own vision of global Orientalism takes as its primary problematic questions of the nature and consequences of classic anthropology’s founding distinction between European and non-European, it in fact requires careful reorientation if it is to be useful in understanding anthropology’s relationship to its internal, European Others as well. Critical though this task is, as my focus here is on the conjunction with sexuality, it will unfortunately have to be left for another occasion.
 - 8 As Sarah Franklin puts it in her Introduction to *Before and After Gender* (xvi).
 - 9 Even when the question is engaged with in Socialist/postsocialist scholarship, its importance is often diminished. In an analysis of Soviet-era film and literature, for example, Kevin Moss has argued (in contrast to queer theorists such as Sedgwick who identify the homosexual/heterosexual distinction as the constitutive binary organizing life in the West) that “in East European culture of the Soviet period the major axis of definition that structures thought is not sexual, but political: dissident/pro-Soviet” (1995: 229). Similarly, in Kurimay and Takacs’s (2017) analysis, the emergence of Hungary’s first lesbian and gay organization, *Lambda Homeros*, a primary political distinction between society and state is seen to transcend the specific significance of (homo)sexuality.
 - 10 This trope, in fact, is one of the dominant pivots of the “Society vs. the State” narratives mentioned above (e.g., Goldfarb 2006; Moss 1995; Figs 2008). Notably, in these readings, one of these lives is seen to be “true” and the other “false” – another critical “cut” I seek to question in this analysis.
 - 11 At Reck in Heves county, in northeastern Hungary.
 - 12 As the story of Laci’s and *Masok*’s vision of Hungarian gay body politics below makes clear, such new self and political positionings necessarily emerge from the surrounding normative narratives to which they respond. Crucially, however, they are not dependent on them in the same ways “counter-discourses” or “counter-identifications” are. As Muñoz argues (1999: 31): “Disidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the cultural message’s universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recruits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. Thus, disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionally that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture.”
 - 13 As disidentifications and the recognition of partial connections, and the politics that emerge from them often do, however, the very transitional and transversal character of their politics also resulted in eventual problems for Laci and *Mások* – as Paul Boyce has noted, “Queer forms of inclusion across these domains of action also effect queer exclusions. Connections effect cuts” (Boyce 2015). As the 1990s progressed, Laci and his fellow *Mások* editors’ determination to maintain their

- original vision of body politics as critically linked to the political lessons of the Socialist period, as well as the particularly hybrid relationship between consumerist entertainment and “politics” that this entailed for the magazine, became increasingly precarious, as younger queer people sought increasingly to distance themselves from the political stances of the past, and to express their own sense of connection to postsocialism’s increasingly depoliticized erotics. By the early 2000s, the magazine was having increasing trouble competing with other gay and queer venues; by 2008 it had ceased print publication, and become available only online. By 2009 the online version closed as well. (See Renkin 2007).
- 14 It should be noted that such a hybrid, “bastard” theory of multiply and perversely partial persons, politics, and places may, furthermore, offer us a useful set of tools for rethinking our current assumptions about the personal, social, and political divides, as well as the theoretical differences, that mark the borders between identitarian and anti-identitarian politics.
- 15 Thus like Muñoz’s own analytic angle (but perhaps more surprisingly) reminiscent of Michel Foucault’s famous “slantwise position” (see his 1981 “Friendship as a Way of Life” (Foucault 1997)).

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5 Properties, substance, queer effects

Ethnographic perspective and HIV in India

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Introduction: perspectives

In this chapter I consider ideas pertaining to persons and relations as they come to be inscribed within concepts and data. I take ethnographic work on HIV prevention in India, and aspects of Marilyn Strathern's theorising of anthropological knowledge, as connected and divergent domains via which to explore these concerns. Reflecting on engagements across relevant fields (global health, HIV work and academic anthropology) I think about shifting information contexts. I especially attend to such shifts as they shed light onto ways in which persons (as objects of enquiry) are constituted differently across diverse research projects, at varying scales of analysis – especially as ideas of the local and the global come to be evoked in the imagining of the sexual subjects of HIV prevention. In doing so the subjects of the information forms I study are witnessed as *incompletely* connected to public health and ethnographic knowledge making practices as opposed to being *wholly* constituted or represented by them. This connects to ways in which Strathern has proposed the organising of anthropological knowledge *not* out of global and local comparison but rather out of a heuristic focus on problems arising when the comparison of contexts operates as a form of analysis (Strathern 1995: 154). I take up such concerns in this chapter with a view to problematising ways in which same-sex sexual subjects have been conceived of after cultural and person focused constructs in (international) HIV prevention work. This leads me to consideration of 'dividual' sexed and gendered subjectivities in relation to substantive properties of HIV transmission and health promotion information. I explore these concerns with reference to ethnographic research in contexts of community-based HIV prevention for people conceived of as 'having' non-heteronormative gender and sexuality in the Indian state of West Bengal.²

The research perspective outlined necessarily encompasses reflexivity. Strathern has described the production of knowledge 'as the transformation of already existing awareness' (1995: 6). This implies the researcher as transformative agent. Ethnographic knowledge in particular might be conceived of as being extrapolated in reference to social worlds as already made present in

people's everyday sense makings; ethnographers might employ sociality and relatedness with others in order to produce information *about social relations* (although this is not the only conceptual and practical purpose of ethnography) (Strathern 2004: 16; 1995). This is as opposed to conceiving of researchers as simply producing information about already extant social worlds in which their social engagements are not instrumental to the knowledge that they produce. Here I want to consider some of my own experiences with regard to such competing research imperatives (the extant and the relational) based on experiences across fields of practice.

I currently work in an academic department of anthropology, partially (I am also attached to a department of international development). And I have also worked in other contexts – from gender studies and a policy-oriented academic research unit to employment in consultative capacities for national and international health and development agencies such as United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Department for International Development (DfID) and the Indian National AIDS Control Organization (NACO). This has most often been in the field of HIV prevention research with communities of people seen to be most affected by the epidemic. In invoking these different contexts I seek to open up questions about the application of knowledge across domains. An implication is to stress the shifting locations of ethnographers who find themselves engaged amidst different research communities. Such engagements might entail, for example, working from both *within and outside of* formally instituted academic anthropology. Doing so may bring about innovative viewpoints on knowledge along with altering (and alternating) senses of personhood (where the researching persona may differ in respect of divergent professional associations). Strathern, perhaps writing from a particular standpoint, has oft conceived of the *anthropologist* as the conceiving knower (whose endeavours are directed toward relevant disciplinary debates, at least in part). Such an outlook resonates with an anthropological standpoint where a key part of any epistemological conversation pertains to *academic* (re-)contextualisation. This is so even if the anthropologist is in conversation with other domains of study.

An alternative perspective may be to encompass multiple standpoints and personhoods of the researcher, for whom 'being an anthropologist' may be an inconstant experience. This is especially germane for those working on projects with queer orientations. Outside of North America, queer ethnographic projects of any kind have not been widely institutionalised in anthropology departments – some notable exceptions aside (Boyce et al. 2017; 2015).³ The working lives of many of us who have taken such queer projects forward have thus oft been subject to 'out contextualisation', finding homes in gender studies, psychosocial research, sociology, area studies, other disciplines and work beyond the academy – e.g. in HIV prevention or other spheres of applied engagement. This may be out of choice, ethical obligation and/or financial necessity. Not uniquely so, and not without cognisance of similar circumstances for others engaged in marginal disciplinary fields, but so nonetheless.

Amidst such experiences I draw on my involvements from across different engagements in this chapter as offering viewpoints on research as a form of world-making.

In doing so I call attention to varied relational qualities of knowledge making and being. This involves questions pertaining to how worlds enter into epistemologies through everyday acts of perception and conceptualisation (Strathern 1999). Such thought processes might be seen as central to the ontological turn in contemporary anthropology (Holbraad and Axel Pederson 2016), this having led to a querying of anthropological perspective beyond the relativity of *whose* worldview might enter the ethnographic lexicon. Rather focus has turned to the question of *what* counts as worldview amongst the multiplicity of possible perspectives in any given setting (Klumme 2008). This engenders further questions about how a researcher, such as an ethnographer, might relate to the idea of multiple social worlds analytically; allowing for many possible worlds brings about the problem of how to connect them.

For Strathern, ‘in the end these [worlds] 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*’ (Lebner 2017: 18). In a similar vein, in this chapter I explore ways in which different research and programme development strategies found in HIV prevention in India (and internationally) might constitute varied worlds of knowledge creation. However, although these forms of information making may be paradigmatically and contextually divergent I see them as also constituting worlds, and persons, *in relation*. By this I mean to evoke both the partial connections between the different methodologies employed in the field as well as the procedural qualities of data-production whereby people come to be involved as agents and subjects of information exchanges in HIV prevention research. I take up such convergences via a focus on how non-heteronormative life-worlds have come to be conceived of in health promotion actions in West Bengal. I consider ethnographic research as offering particular perspectives on the conceptual underpinnings of such knowledge making actions, especially in respect of their *incomplete* relation to the social and sexual life-worlds that they seek to contextualise. Against this background my engagements with Strathern in the chapter are in the order of connection and refraction; her work opens out already existing viewpoints within my research, revealing them in new meaning and consequence.

Knowledge and context

Conceiving anthropological knowledge after the concerns outlined offers perspectives on other research paradigms, especially those that envisage social life in more object terms. This includes the kinds of epidemiological and demographic research most often valued in global health work, such as HIV prevention. In such fields cumulative information is typically conceived of as

contributing toward the development of *factual metrics* for the measurement of health related indicators (Adams 2017). Such measures broadly entail a commitment to versions of social worlds as composed of discrete individuals, information about whom might be gathered and analysed. Knowledge produced in these terms *may* be culturally and contextually nuanced after the incorporation of additional ethnographic or qualitative findings. However, the overarching paradigms of health promotion research in most global contexts are nonetheless quantitatively and *externally* driven. Research is often funded and conceived by macro level organisations that seek to derive data on the effects of health interventions at community-levels to be amalgamated for the ultimate evaluation of health issues at national and international scales of analysis (Bell and Aggleton 2016).

Given the interaction of different kinds of knowledge in health promotion settings, how might or should an anthropologist (or other social researcher) intercede into such areas of work? Helen Lambert and Christopher McKeivitt (2002) have observed that while public health has become increasingly receptive to qualitative research over recent years such fields are often not welcoming of, or indeed cognisant of, anthropological theory. The potential for anthropologists to make more conceptually informed interventions into health work is consequently curtailed. Instead anthropologists may more often be employed for their imagined expertise in qualitative methodologies and/or for their contributing particular kinds of ‘cultural expertise’ rather than their critical perspectives on how epidemiological knowledge, for example, is produced (often in complex and indirect relation to the social worlds from which it derives – Lambert 2016). Noting this raises further questions about anthropologists’ intercessions into ‘other’ research areas; how, for example, they might offer critically innovative viewpoints on the networked nature of knowledge production while perhaps also being employed as actors making information for use by research communities.

Strathern’s *Property, Substance and Effect* extends consideration of such problems with knowledge making – for example with respect to issues arising when anthropologists write of people as if ‘artefacts’ in social contexts – as if already extant and awaiting description by social researchers (1999: 236). Such a perspective *could* give rise to a *pluralist* view, after which social worlds are understood to be composed of infinitely distinct outlooks, unique to each person or other conceiving entity (1999: 236). In refuting this idea Strathern does not fully reject it; her alternative conceptualisation of *postplurality* is not entirely disassociated from its pluralist conceptual antecedents. Rather she observes that *pluralist* perspective represents a modern Euro-American standpoint. This derives from a conceptual attachment to the *singular individual*, which Strathern sees as extending from a logic of infinite scaling. The total range of possible interpretations in research designed accordingly (the full number of *individually* possible and experienced worlds) may be conceivable but not methodologically achievable; the totality of all individual perspectives envisioned thusly could never be captured via any methodology.

And anyway what would such knowledge represent? The idea of infinite individuals populating social worlds emerges out of a conceptual commitment to persons as singular social actors. For Strathern this is a misapprehension. A *postplural* perspective looks beyond such an imaginary to think about the enmeshment of worlds, knowledge and perspective; each only conceivable *through* the other (Strathern 1999; Posocco, Chapter 7, this volume). The focus here is not on singular, individual perspectives but rather an emphasis on how seemingly individual attributes of persons are constituted through social and material relations. Thus, for example, Strathern has shown that gender is not simply constituted *within* social actors, but *without*, in connection to the exchange of objects that affect gendering relationally and materially (1990). This offers a specific analytical approach to the interleaving of concepts and object forms in the making of sexed and gendered persons. Here I seek to consider such conceptual and relational processes in the material production of knowledge about HIV. Thus, rather than simply taking HIV prevention knowledge as if *describing* sexualities and sexual risks (in India) I instead want to think about such knowledge as a material and conceptual form via which different social actors conceive of the sexual as an attribute of personhood.

Tensions pertaining amidst such different forms of description and conception have been a component of my work in health promotion fields, where the imperative has often been to produce useful 'cultural' and 'person-centred' knowledge for inclusion in the *objective* evaluation of health programmes; knowledge that might be purposively networked in relation to other information, such as demographic data. A particular aim of such 'qualitative' research has been to be cognisant of 'local realities' in any given setting – e.g. people's experiences of an HIV prevention initiative. Data arising tends to amalgamate what are treated as singular individuals' world-views – e.g. as based on interviews with X number of individual informants. When added to other data sets related to programme development and evaluation, this can engender problems of commensurability.

Stacy Leigh Pigg (2001) has explored such problems as they arose in the production of cultural and person focused information about HIV in the early days of the epidemic in Nepal. Community workers found that translating terms such as 'virus' or speaking of sexualities in Nepali required complex linguistic transpositions that could not produce 'exact' substitutions for meaning without sounding false, alien or highly Sanskritised (e.g. not everyday language). Attending to such concerns not only reveals problems of translation but also sheds light on askance discursive effects in research.

What is evident is that information does not exist 'out there' already packaged in forms that researchers may use, allowing for the ready enumeration of individually pre-existing conceptualisations, e.g. of a given health issue. Rather health promotion actions must also be conceived of in linguistic and cultural terms. Yet, such perspectives also engender other kinds of ontological and epistemological questions. The issue to hand, in these terms, is not

simply attending to culture and language. Rather a consequence too is to query effects and affects across practical and theoretical domains, in relation to how persons are constituted as objects of (health promotion) knowledge.

Knowledge effects

The issues I have outlined resonate with Strathern's (2006) discussion of anthropological utility. She has provocatively observed that the uselessness of anthropological knowledge may be one of its strengths (and core values). This may be so at least in terms of its not generating data that may be put to any immediately 'evidentiary' practical application. This is a provocation because to describe an academic discipline in these terms may be to incite rebuff, which is not Strathern's intent. Rather she has reflected on interdisciplinary, and cross-sector communications whereby mutual intelligibility inevitably entails compromises in theoretical commitment. This may occur in order to bring about productive research enterprises across theories and methods that might not otherwise be mutually intelligible. In these terms, much of the information that anthropologists produce may indeed have no evident purpose; e.g. for its not being readily relevant beyond the parameters of internal disciplinary discourse. In turn, this raises the question of whether such internal conversations produce 'better' knowledge as compared to cross-disciplinary engagements and the challenges these present to common comprehension (Lebner 2017); amidst such engagements instances of perceived 'utility deficit' or conceptual misalignment can be revealing.

As noted, knowledge produced by anthropologists in applied research is often commissioned for practical purposes (by definition, arguably). This can bring about tensions in that *not* supplying useful data may be to fail in one's contract. It is with respect to these terms that I have equivocated about the constancy of 'being an anthropologist' across all research contexts. Compromises in terms of research reference may be necessary in some situations, not out of acquiescence to other paradigms but in trying to *connect to and influence them*. This might entail a certain 'letting go' of an anthropological research identity.

In such circumstances anthropological knowledge might often *not* be produced for (immediate) practical application but rather may be conceived of as an 'out-contextualisation'; knowledge originating *from* application but re-developed elsewhere in respect of crucially different re-descriptive registers. Such divergences and connections reveal differing imaginaries of social worlds. In the particular case of this chapter this encompasses perspectives on how people are conceived of as 'gender and sexual minorities' for the purposes of HIV prevention actions, a key ethnographic focus of my work in West Bengal. I have been especially interested in how such 'target peoples' have also become involved recursively in community-based research practices. Such actions may bring about contextually derived information for the evaluation of HIV prevention from 'local' viewpoints. But from the perspective

advanced in this chapter the subjects of such data are seen as coming into being *with knowledge making practices* amidst complex epistemological interactions.

The idea that certain ‘population groups’ are more vulnerable to HIV because of behavioural and structural factors is well developed (e.g. Johnston et al. 2017; WHO 2014). Health promotion research actions are often motivated by intentions to better understand and intervene into such situations. Such objectives connect to ways in which persons conceived of as belonging to ‘at risk’ populations have been employed as active agents in advocating for their rights and needs within the epidemic. India has been one of the global contexts where such actions became especially internationally renowned from the early days of HIV onward. Work with ‘men who have sex with men’ and sex workers in a number of Indian cities became especially famed, often having been reified as models of community-based HIV rights advocacy (e.g. Evans, Jana and Lambert 2010; Thomas 2011; Boyce 2007).

One issue with community-based HIV prevention work is that despite its evident closeness to contexts of concern it can also be seen to run counter to life-worlds conceived of in such actions. This is so, for example, where the subjects of such endeavours might best be appreciated *outside* of attempts to locate them in context, as if simply empirically available or ‘groundable’ for purposes of evidence making. This is especially problematic in a post-colonial context such as India where objectifications of this kind are historically weighted with the politics of external gaze and surveillance. One effect of such external perspectives, as akshay khanna (2017) has argued, has been to produce the idea of sexuality as if a naturally given attribute of persons – whereas this has been bound up with ‘Western’ ideas of the self-proclaiming individuated ‘sexual-self’ (see also Boyce and khanna 2011). This is as opposed to a more socially distributed sense of what khanna describes as ‘sexualness’ – a quality of ‘sexual-being’ that is not isomorphic with singular socio-sexual actors (whose views may be extrapolated to effect ‘locally sensitive’ and ‘person centred’ data – e.g. for health programme evaluations).

Concerns about the relation between non-heteronormative gendered and sexual subjects and forms of formal recognition may be connected to legacies of sexualities and HIV activism in India. In the early days of the epidemic much of such action took shape around an appeal against Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC 377 – a law of colonial origin that nominally criminalises homosexuality). The appeal against this law was brought by one of the most nationally and internationally visible non-governmental organisations working in India – the Naz Foundation International. A central facet of the case was that health promotion with men who have sex with men – as supported by intentional donor agencies and NACO – was in effect illegal even while advocated as a desirable public health goal. An outcome of the appeal is that IPC 377 was ‘read down’ by the Delhi High Court in 2009, although the law was reinstated in 2013.

The processes and effects of IPC 377 – and the challenges to it – are complex (and on 6th September 2018 the Indian Supreme Court declared that the application of IPC 377 in cases of adult homosexual relations was unconstitutional). What I want to stress here is that the heightened focus of legal activism in this case established a relation to the State and legislature that anchored recognition of sexual and gender minority persons to forms of advocacy pointed toward formal infrastructures of governance. A number of queer researchers and activists in India have reflected on this as instituting terms for the constituting of non-heteronormative subjects in a manner that runs counter to the more ambiguous qualities of queer life-worlds, that do not cohere into obvious identify-based or singular forms (khanna 2017; Dave 2012; Dutta 2012a; 2012b; 2013). Conversely, it may be that the formal *naming* of queer subjects in state legislative actions (in any terms) that most curtails the affective properties that make sexually dissident social worlds meaningful or possible (because of not being readily identifiable – Boyce 2013a; 2013b). An ethnographic effect, to follow a Strathernian term, is to compel an untwining of the seeming ‘duplex’ relation between law and culture, whereby these might otherwise be taken to reflect and constitute one another directly (Strathern 2005). The non-heteronormative sexual and gendered subjects invoked in law and other state actions in India, for example, can be seen in more indeterminate terms – not as simply isomorphic with queer life-worlds. I extend these observations here to reflect on relations between infrastructures for the creation of HIV prevention information and the lived experiences out of which such knowledge is composed.

Substance, properties and data

Such observations have been germane while working in the fields of employment described in this chapter – ethnographic research in West Bengal and public health consultancies in HIV prevention. While engaged across such domains I have been especially interested in ways in which information-making about ‘non-heteronormative worldings’ has related to more ambivalent ways of socio-sexual being. Questions arising have involved attending to residues and traces from varied domains of work and research that I have been engaged in – reflections that might not have been immediately ‘useful’ for the direct exigencies of HIV prevention work, but which have resided in memory as ethnographically salient. Discordances between data and life-worlds have been emphasised in my reflections and interests over time, accordingly.

Research in the field of community-based HIV prevention in many global contexts, including India, have often involved employees from regional community based organisations (CBOs) in producing information about sexual practices of targeted communities. Such forms of knowledge have often been closely encompassed within social worlds. The CBOs involved in such activities have typically been advocacy and activist groups run by and for ‘sexual and gender minorities’ (to employ terms of reference typical in HIV

prevention fields). In West Bengal, for example, a range of CBOs were developed by ‘sexual and gender minority persons’ during the course of the HIV epidemic, partly as an effect of funding infrastructures that supported such groups in order that they might undertake HIV prevention work (Dasgupta and Dhall 2017). In these terms the objectification of such persons (e.g. as entities partly connected to the production of epidemiological data) has been enmeshed in the social worlds and material conditions of HIV information making and community organising.

Knowledge produced in these contexts may be experienced and described as divergent. By this I mean to say that HIV prevention research actions have oft been pointed toward the gathering of information to be put to objective assessments as pieced together by external experts. Data sets derived from community-based work are typically employed as a means to monitor and evaluate the impact of HIV prevention programmes at epidemiological scales of analysis. Such work involves contacting members of target populations, often in respect of externally assigned monthly targets and via stipulated interview and other data recording schedules. These often focus on enumerating respondent’s risk practices, their sexual partners over a given timeframe and so on. NACO has specific centralised guidelines for such work, to be followed in regional contexts by CBOs working in community-based HIV prevention.

At the same time data derived in this way are also put to the purpose of auditing the efficacy of any given programme (e.g. assessing community workers’ efficiency in reaching given numbers of ‘target population’). In India this has most often involved members of CBOs being involved in producing data about given target communities *of which they are too a part*. Community workers in these contexts thus often become subjects, objects and agents in the data sets that they produce. Even if such workers are not immediate informants to the surveys that they administer they are encompassed within the population-level risk entities that such research conceives of. Information derived in these terms is then passed to State AIDS Prevention and Control Societies – regional implementing functionaries of NACO. It can then be put to the purpose of comprising national and ultimately comparative transnational data about HIV prevalence and sexual risk amongst given population groups. The conceiving of sexualities, in these terms, emerges in complex synergy *with* audit cultures; sexual subjects take shape as objects that can be put to *use* (for evaluating health promotion efficacy and composing data about HIV). Conversely, as Strathern has argued, ethnography might emerge in response to the ever-widening institutionalisation of such forms of information making as a means to compose *other* kinds of reflections on the relation between knowledge and accountability (Strathern 2000: 285).

Thus, for example, my own ethnographic work has explored community-based HIV prevention knowledge production relations as also caught within multivalent and oft not readily ‘evidence-able’ connections and consequences. An effect is that public health data produced in such scenarios might not be

so germane in respect of their measurable results but rather for their engendering other kinds of questions about the meanings of knowledge production (Lambert 2016). For instance, it was quite common in discussions with workers from CBOs for sexual and gender minority peoples in West Bengal to hear divergent views on the evidence that they were involved in creating. The production of information about non-heteronormative sexualities and HIV brought about its own contextual and material connections and slippages (this being a focus of my ethnographic work). Certainly in West Bengal community workers often spoke of the dissonance between data and experience; that what they were involved in creating was a ‘tick-sheet’ version of socio-sexual worlds that rendered sexualities (and sexual risks) as nominally evident – as if context could be reduced to measurable ‘artefacts’.

Let me explore this issue in view of a salient example. One peculiarity of HIV prevention work with ‘men who have sex with men’ in many global contexts is that such modes of intervention often include peoples whom are gendered otherwise – *not as male*. It is especially common that ‘MSM-type interventions’ also target people of transgender or other non-gender normative experience. This might be read as an effect of the enumerative and conceptual qualities of a category such as ‘MSM.’ As a demographic device the rubric seeks to designate persons and sexual practices *at once*; men who-have-sex-with-men in this framing are designated as subjects *through* reference to a relational act (sex with another man) (Boellstorff 2011). Yet in many relational settings (and perhaps more so in some particular global contexts) the delineation of same-sex sexual practices between men and the secure fixing of male-gendering on the part of each protagonist is not common. Indeed same-sex attraction often effects a queering of gender such that erstwhile males whom may be involved in such relations and desires are not uniformly assigned, or self-appropriating of the category ‘male’. The relational qualities of gendering in these terms are such that ‘man’ (as it were) is evidently *not* simply inherent with and within male-bodied subjectivities.

An outcome of such circumstances has been to bring about the ‘inclusion’ of a range of non-gender– and non-hetero-normative persons within HIV prevention programmes and research aimed at ‘MSM’; an indicator of how the category exceeds its own constituting of gender. One effect of actions ensuing in West Bengal (as an example) has been attempts at culturally sensitive gender inclusivity in data collection about gender and sexual subjects in HIV prevention community work. This could bring about anomalies. When working in such contexts in the north of West Bengal, for example, I was struck by subtle differences in the information check-lists devised for community workers. These pertained to different areas within the region. In the Plains, in the foothills of the Himalaya, where Bengali is predominantly spoken, community workers’ information sheets included the subject designation *kothi* as a check-list option for the designation of some non-heteronormative persons. *Kothi* is a term used in the area – and elsewhere in India – to label feminine self-identifying person who might nonetheless be perceived as male

bodied. Hence they have often been included, sometimes in contested terms, under matrices of male-to-male HIV prevention programming. In the further north Darjeeling Hills areas of West Bengal check-lists retained other criteria to the Plains except that the term *kothi* was changed to *methi* – a Nepali term used to designate a similar female self-identifying but otherwise seen to be male-bodied subject (Nepali being the predominant language of the Hills region).

The contextual framing of *kothi* and *methi* as ‘cultural subjects’ in relation to HIV prevention and transgender experience in South Asia are especially complex and have been explored elsewhere in detail (Boyce 2007; Boyce and Coyle 2013; Cohen 2005). What I want to stress here is the transposition in terminology that took place between the Plains and the Hills; this appeared as an attempt at linguistic and cultural sensitivity. Yet I also want to consider that such a linguistic device reduced gendered and sexual context and meaning to categorical forms of ‘cultural-data’. People encountering the relevant health promotion projects in West Bengal may have self-identified as *methi* or *kothi*. Or as I often witnessed, and as some community workers discussed, they were *assigned* one such term in the context of outreach work. People had to be recorded by some specific categorical means; they could not be accounted for as subjects of data otherwise. More diffuse attributes of sexual life-worlds and their complex lived relation to sexual risks and the research protocols and categories of HIV knowledge production could not be readily rendered in such data sets (Boyce 2013a). This was so even as findings produced out of such research might be conceived of elsewhere as *contextually derived* – e.g. based on data from X number of ‘local informants’ as represented in other information settings ‘up’ the scale of analysis.

Such observations are a key conceptual problem for public health knowledge making. Lorway et al. (2009) have observed that global health actions, such as HIV prevention, typically imagine *individual* social actors as their objects of intervention:

Public health empowerment programs tend to privilege notions of a reflexive, independent, and bounded self (Lupton 1995: 58–59). To confront one’s HIV vulnerability, health promotion empowerment discourse directs citizens to recognize the potentialities of individuality and compels them to harness the resources of selfhood (choice, control, and responsibility).

(Lorway et al. 2009: 145)

In contrast, Lorway et al. have explored the experiences of male sex workers in Lucknow (in Southern India) for whom identification occurred out of what they describe as *hybridity*. Self-identification for the sex workers was not simply a singularly individual attribute but also an effect of HIV prevention programmes. Thus, for example, those who identified as *kothi* were seen to do so *after* encountering this term in HIV prevention information, a view that

extends from my own prior work on this effect (Boyce 2007). This does not mean that the sex workers whom Lorway et al. engaged with were simply passive vessels imbibing public health discourses. But nor too were they the 'authentic cultural persons' as conceived of in HIV prevention programmes. Rather they were *both* at the same time – subjects and agents enacting their sense of being-in-the-world in respect of multiple terms of reference.

Lorway and his co-authors remind us that Indian anthropology and sociology has particularly useful frames of reference for thinking about persons in this regard. The work of McKim Marriott (e.g. 1976; 1991) developed themes of substance as connected to ideas of the 'dividual' – a designation that evoked the person as always partial; substance of others and other things. This perspective derives from analysis of the Indian caste-system, most famously associated with the work of Louis Dumont (e.g. 1966), wherein caste-bound subjects have been understood as in a field of structurally unequal relations into which persons are born (into a given caste). This is as opposed to a Euro-American aspirational archetype of individualistic self-determination.

Marriott's work built on Dumont's to open question about the nature of personhood within such structural-caste theorisation. The 'dividual', in these terms, is understood as constituted by components that lie *outside of and beyond* the person through, for instance the exchange of food or drink (alcohol), money and knowledge. The exchange of each of these 'substances' is circumscribed by properties related to caste (e.g. what members of a given caste may eat or know, whom they may share food or information with etc.) These same substances (in Marriott's terms, 'substance-codes') also confer gender and other characteristics *internally*. Thereby certain foods might be associated with the production of masculinities socially through the giving and receiving of, for instance, meat. Or in cases of women's experience in marriage, her exchange in familial contract and property relations has been described as conferring substantive bodily changes to her being. In this way 'caste and personhood are absolutely dependent on transaction' (Fowler 2004: 25), not as a characteristic of a fixed hierarchical system. Such analyses have been latterly much derided for their orientalism and their writing of women and person's of lower caste especially with little regard for agency. But, taken beyond their proffering a peculiarly *South Asian* dividual they open other analytical possibilities.

Strathern has borrowed the concept of the dividual from Marriott as a means to conceive of gender as an effect of exchange relations. In a footnote in *The Gender of the Gift* she iterates the wider significance of his perspective for stressing the experiential mixing of what goes on amongst social actors and other (object) entities (Strathern 1990: 346). Gender, in such terms, is not an attribute of singularly sexed or structurally defined subjects but emerges out of object relations – with things exchanged *between* persons that effect consequences *within*. This concept can extend beyond the special relevance that Strathern found for it as means to comprehend exchange relations that

effect gender in Melanesia. For Strathern the dividual Melanesian subject is not a literal ‘cultural-type’ of person but rather a contextually conceived subject in relation to whom ideas about personhood and gender can be expounded. Dividualism, in analytical relation, helps to query more seemingly Western imaginaries of the individuated self. The material fetishism of contemporary Euro-American life-worlds, for example, may be read via the hold that object entities bear within a sense of being. If persons are constituted by things, in such ways, ‘we’ are not closed, or singular, but open, indeterminate – not simply ‘individuals.’ Such a view connects to queer ontologies for their repudiation of identity-oriented categorisations of ‘non-normative’ sexualities and gender, which instead are also revealed as multiply constituted in relation to many attributes and entities (Graham 2010).

What this alerts us to in respect of a (queer) anthropological perspective on knowledge production is that the sexual subjects of research are not simply singularly evident social actors. This is so even as demographic and epidemiological kinds of research, for example, may represent same-sex socialites and sexual risks after such imaginaries, as attributes of measurable and ‘categorisable’ behaviours in data sets derived from ‘person-centred’ accounts by ‘local informants’. Rather, I have sought to convey that the subjects of such information are differentiated – within and without, across contested claims, and in respect of connections to the object/audit forms of public health knowledge. In respect of my focus here this includes object/audit forms such as the papers on which HIV prevention outreach-workers record their contacts; the cupboards within which these sheets are kept in local CBOs’ offices; the material processes whereby such information are turned into electronic data for sharing at different scales of analysis and action; and reports and published papers via which such data are circulated and ultimately potentially fed back into the self-understandings of the represented persons (e.g. the ‘key populations’ such as *kothis*).⁴ In these terms sexualities and gender can be understood as domain terms for the conceiving of worldly experiencing that become *dividuated* across internal and exterior subject/object interactions. Ethnography of such processes reveals the subjects of such information in partial relation to knowledge making forms that might be interpreted in other research registers as effecting accounts that are *wholly* congruent with sexual cultures, categories or contexts.

HIV prevention, ethnographic perspective and queer effects

The observations I have developed in this chapter are complicated by an ethnographic interest in HIV prevention. Queer subjects have been especially associated with HIV and AIDS since what went on to be called Human Immuno Deficiency Virus (HIV) was first isolated in the 1980s. This was perhaps most initially associated with gay men’s sexual practices in some (Western) contexts such as North America. This gave rise to the initially observed immune-problems emerging within such communities via the

designation GRID (Gay Related Immune-Deficiency – Boyce et al. 2007). This acts as an important reminder that the relation between viral entities – such as HIV – and their naming in relation to human practices and scientific knowledge is contingent and provisional yet co-constitutive. An immune-deficiency was conflated with a given sexual identification – as if existing in a mutually constituting relation at the point of definition and diagnosis. Extending out of these associations male-to-male (and to some extent other non-heteronormative) sexual subjects have occupied a distinct necropolitical space in relation to the epidemic, adjunct to ways in which sexual risk and AIDS morbidity have come to be understood ever since (Haritaworn et al. 2014).

Such connections are becoming ever more accented, for example, as the material affects of new HIV prevention protocols are increasingly involving sexual risk subjects in new material relations with HIV medications. This includes, for instance, the promotion of Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) as a biomedical regimen aimed at HIV negative persons who are judged likely to acquire HIV (the erstwhile ‘key populations’ of existing policy paradigms). Trial studies of PrEP use among given populations in different global contexts are seeing dramatic decreases in HIV infection rates (Avert 2017). WHO recommendations made in 2015 back PrEP as an HIV prevention measure among those seen as more likely to acquire HIV (e.g. the already established ‘key populations’ – WHO 2015). Yet, even as such recommendations stress the importance of parallel health promotion measures (see also UNAIDS 2015), the ‘turn to PrEP’, and to ‘biomedical solutions’ more widely in global HIV prevention, has been noted by some as a concerning trend. This is especially so with respect to a concomitant redirection of health promotion resources away from sensitive engagements *with communities and people*, for example aimed at improving communicative capacities with respect to sexual risk decision-making (Aggleton and Parker 2015). Indian state health agencies (including NACO) are as yet undecided about the roll-out of PrEP. However, some formative research studies have been undertaken concerning the potentialities for PrEP use among key affected populations, such as sex workers and men who have sex with men (e.g. Chakrapani et al. 2015; UNAIDS 2015).⁵

Looking back to a slightly earlier era of HIV prevention actions, pre-figurative factors in the relation between ‘key-populations’ and HIV prevention knowledge making can be explored. To take a personal instance, from 2010–11 I became involved as a research consultant to NACO – via employment with a research agency, The Futures Group, who were in turn funded by DFID. This particular project involved undertaking and overseeing research activities aimed at amassing data on male-to-male sexual practices and risks in India. Research – mostly comprising interviews and focus groups – was undertaken by different community-based research teams in approximately 14 different sites in India. The aim was to inform NACO’s next five-year plan for HIV intervention with ‘MSM’ – from 2012 onwards.

One particular aspect of this work was concerned with better developing services for same-sex desiring men seen to be difficult to contact for the purposes of HIV prevention. Such men were designated as ‘Hard-to-Reach-MSM’, this being a rubric not uncommon in other global health settings. Indeed, there is some divergence in the use of the ‘hard-to-reach’ concept in different research and health programme designs. While the project I describe emphasised ‘being-hard-to-reach’ as a quality of *particular* ‘MSM’ in other programmes and literature it is not uncommon to find ‘MSM’ in *general* defined as a hard-to-reach population (e.g. Barros et al. 2015; Ross 2016; Boyce et al. 2011). In either term such figurations pertain to what I conceived of here as pluralist terms of reference; ‘MSM’ are conceived of as individual subjects whom researchers need to know more about by acquiring more and more (quantifiable) knowledge about their life-worlds. What was especially interesting to me in discussions that took place around the particular research project I am referring to was the utilisation of the subject term – ‘Hard-to-Reach MSM’ – for its presumed object qualities, as if broadly describing distinct psychosocial attributes and structural circumstances of such men.

Running counter to this conceptualisation some of my research colleagues and I proposed the problem of ‘being-hard-to-reach’ as instead one of perspective. Strathern’s views on perspectivism were a personal influence on my thinking in this regard: not a thought process that could be put to immediate use in HIV prevention programming but which helped me to apprehend such actions otherwise. Returning to *Property, Substance and Effect* for inspiration, Strathern offers a salient metaphor. She describes Renaissance theories of perspective as they would ‘map paintings as co-ordinates of the viewer’s capacity to see’ (1999: 234) – in the case of fifteenth century art this being the depiction of princely power. Drawing on Randolph Starn’s work on ‘seeing’ in Renaissance culture, Strathern has described how the prince became actively imagined as the active viewer in ceiling paintings. This revealed allegorical references that could only be perceived by those who had relevant knowledge, such as the prince, as he moved around the room, looking up from different viewpoints. Certain painted figures would look down at the viewer such that the recursive act of ‘looking’ would complete the image. ‘The seeing person, in short, is painted in’ (1999: 234).

Strathern has developed this idea as an allegory for social scientific knowledge. Starn admits in his writing that he cannot completely bring about the completeness of the imagery that he seeks to convey. Strathern notes, however, that Starn’s task is quite different from the Renaissance painter. This is because contemporary writing can be read in many contexts and hence is open to different interpretations. The forms of creating knowledge – the ceiling painting versus text – are different; one cannot produce the other exactly. Similarly, Strathern describes societies as always occupied by worlds in ways that demand their re-writing, but in forms that cannot evoke their multiply perceived possibilities. Strathern offers this as a particularly important insight whereby the purpose of anthropological research can be to gain insight into

the varied ways in which people view worlds (and how worlds view them). Such knowledge is never complete – in the manner of the recursive feedback of the Renaissance ceiling painting. Rather it arises from, and effects, multiplicity through the act of becoming (partially) described.

Stimulated by this ethnographic figuration, my thoughts about the depiction of the ‘Hard-to-Reach MSM’ was that he was a subject already recursively written into discourse from a particular programmatic standpoint. His ‘hard-to-reachness’ had a certain gaze prefigured into the imaginary of his being. He could not be seen or obtained for the practical purposes of health promotion and hence was conceived of as bearing intrinsic personal and social qualities of elusiveness. Conversely I sought to conceive of this as a problem involved in the act of looking. The ‘Hard-to-Reach-MSM’ was always already dis-located as a singularly imagined person in terms that wrote of him as being *elsewhere*; a subject who could not be evidenced or realised in a world imagined as populated by other HIV target groups who were more accessible (or auditable). From an ethnographic viewpoint on knowledge making he emerges recursively *with* ontology and epistemology; who and what he might constitute as a person and object of information being dependent on paradigmatic standpoints and the partial relations between. Thus, for instance, while I was involved in producing knowledge about ‘Hard-to-Reach MSM’ for HIV prevention programmes I also *saw* that knowledge differently too, for its enmeshments *with* the subjects that it derived as an effect. This comprised an ethnographic perspective, *not* on the sexual subject of interest per se, but rather on ‘his’ (in this instance) constitution as an abstract knowledge form – imagined as an object who is always already somewhere else (defined as empirically absent from the perspective via which he was brought into view).

I extend this idea as a concept metaphor for a *postplural* understanding. This displaces the conceptualisation of singularly imagined sexual subjects as evident artefacts (of research) in favour of a focus on recursive and refracted knowledge making effects. This in turn opens an outlook on how information about persons comes to be written and embodied in data sets and life-worlds. This is often in ways that are not well understood from any singular research angle, but which comprise a focus for an ethnographic viewpoint on knowledge making relations. Against the background of such observations, in this chapter I have sought to draw attention to how (sexual) subjects come to be bound up in the production of information about their own subject conditions – in this instance as researchers or informants for HIV prevention interventions. In doing so I have wanted to indicate that it is the very qualities of *fixing* sexual subjects in data that engenders incomplete connections between sexual life-worlds and knowledge (about sexual life-worlds). Ethnographic description of such dissonances can help to prise accounts of sexual subjects away from any assumptions of isomorphic correspondence with putatively extant sexual subject categories.

Such observations emerge as ever more programmatically imperative in the present moment as ‘key populations’ are being increasingly conceived of as

targets for the promotion of PrEP in HIV prevention guidelines globally. This is a case in point that further iterates a dividual understanding of sexual subjects. Amidst the promotion of such HIV prevention medicines to ‘key populations’ the gender and sexualities of targeted persons are becoming ever more defined through relations to particular *external and material* substances and information properties (e.g. the medications that make up the daily PrEP regimen and the policy protocols that especially accent the promotion of this to ‘most at risk populations’). Such connections can be seen to build on prior knowledge whereby, as noted, ‘key populations’ have come to be defined *after* HIV prevention paradigms and protocols in terms that are bound up with pharmaceutical markets, models of individualistic consumption and ‘empowered health choices’ (Lorway et al. 2009). Against this background, the present undecided roll-out of PrEP in India might represent a moment of suspension; a potentially new connection between medicines and ‘at risk subjects’ as yet unresolved at the level of policy. This is so albeit that any decision in this regard might in part be influenced by results from studies conducted in other country contexts, where connections between key populations and PrEP promotion have oft been already well established as a normative outcome. Such findings are typically based on prior years of research that have cumulatively defined such subjects in relation to the production of knowledge about HIV and sexualities – as if forming an already complete ontology.

Conversely, by making HIV prevention knowledge production (about sexual subjects) the focus of enquiry I have sought to convey varied substantiations of sexualities amidst health promotion practices and their different material iterations (such as data, documents and drugs). After this viewpoint, queer and ethnographic analytical viewpoints emerge more evidently for their transformative potential in countering prevailing health promotion norms. This is not necessarily to reject such norms wholly, or to discount gains to (public) health to be made from community-based HIV research or the promotion of HIV prevention medications. However, it is to pose questions from standpoints whereby the subjects of intervention might be ‘painted-in’ differently via an ethnographic perspective on more orthodox, or biomedically oriented, health promotion paradigms.

Taking inspiration from Strathern’s views on issues arising as knowledge connects and digresses across domains, I have especially reflected on my involvements in diverse forms of information production about non-heteronormative lives, HIV, and sexual risk in India – for related but dissimilar purposes. This perspective has been an effect of my partial, and queer, academic engagements. Re-contextualisations of information arising reflect multiple imaginings of sexual subjects and subjectivities as they both cohere and dissipate as possible entities, and objects of knowledge, in relation to varying research registers. An outcome has been to extend a postplural perspective on dividual experiences of gender and sexualness. In so doing I have sought to re-contextualise such experiences in their incomplete connections to both health promotion practices and ethnographic epistemologies amidst different worlds conceived of in HIV prevention actions.

Notes

- 1 I would like to thank my co-editors, EJ Gonzalez-Polledo and Silvia Posocco for their support with the development of this chapter. I am also grateful for comments made by Matt Clark, Jane Cowan, Rohit K. Dasgupta, Pawan Dhall, akshay khanna, Alvaro Lakabe, Antu Sorainen and Maya Unnithan – the chapter gained considerably from their insights.
- 2 This chapter derives from research projects conducted over a number of years. Doctoral and Post-Doctoral work in West Bengal was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council. The chapter draws too on reflections from other research projects mentioned in the text – principally in the field of HIV prevention in India and internationally. A recent small grant from the Wellcome Trust (held with Rohit K. Dasgupta) aided further research engagements in West Bengal.
- 3 The recently established European Network for Queer Anthropology – as affiliated to the European Association for Social Anthropologists – is one key context in which connections between anthropologists working from queer perspectives in Europe is taking shape.
- 4 akshay khanna has also observed some of the material means via which sexualities and gender are recorded in the registers of HIV prevention work in West Bengal/India (2009). We each develop these observations to related by different analytical effect (we dialogue about our work sometimes).
- 5 A book project I am currently working on, 'Sexualities, HIV and Ethnography: Sexual Worldings and Queer Misrecognitions in India', involves a retrospective analysis of HIV prevention actions in India, in part against the background of a global turn to the promotion of PrEP in international policy and programming contexts: Routledge Press (forthcoming 2020) 'Sexuality, Culture and Health' series.

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6 Prefigured “defection” in Korea

Hoon Song

What if two Koreas are “prefigured” rather than “unified”? This chapter discusses an exiled North Korean poet whose work seems to exercise this thought-experiment through Marilyn Strathern’s said concept. The term unification perforce calls up “re-unification.” If this slide seems automatic, it is because the idea of re/unification posits a closed “whole” that is given or givable. This “whole,” furthermore, blurs “spatial” horizon with time/history – the reason “re-” habitually inserts itself. Its effect is alike whether in the idea of the People or of the Global World. Both are posited as a neutral “ground” of sorts on/in which illusory differences may be overcome and original states of homogeneity recovered. “We have the ground,” Strathern writes, “when ... unmarked value can be expressed in terms of an *appropriateness of quantity* – neither too much nor too little.” “And excess ... in either direction,” she continues, “becomes ... figure against the ground” (2002: 188; emphasis added). By “closed whole,” I mean a whole with the guise of an “appropriateness of quantity.” Pluralism and multiculturalism, the characteristic ethos of the time which calls itself “post-socialist,” are conceits of such “appropriateness of quantity.” From their “grounded” point of view, Cold War’s bipolar (North/South or East/West) oppositions cannot but appear as “mere” figures made of arbitrarily limiting “two terms.” Bipolarity is “two few” a count, as it were, for the irreducible “multiplicity” of global relatedness, thus eminently and imminently subsumable (“unifiable”) in the Real of the pluralist (post-socialist) world. Amid the hold of such a doxa, how may we even broach the subject of North Korea (or, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea), this seeming relic of Cold War’s bipolarity and the living “undead” of state socialism? How may we capture the apparent fact of its historicity – that it has lived and is still living, and so neither “relic” nor “undead”?¹ Our obstacle is both “spatial” and “temporal,” both “pluralist” and “post-socialist.” The concept of prefiguration radically rethinks both axes of the problem.

What is prefiguration?

(Francis) Bacon's scream ... is the operation through which the entire body escapes through the mouth (T)he body attempts to escape from itself through one of its organs.

Gilles Deleuze, Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation

Bipolarity is at the heart of how Strathern conceptualizes prefiguration, and its name is gender. My intent here is to transpose the formalistic rigor in her reflection on gender bipolarity to two Koreas' Cold War-informed bipolarity. The bipolar rigor in her thinking is that of feminism. Feminism confronts the patriarchal inclination to subsume gender difference under larger-scale collectivities such as "the society" (1988: Chs. 2 & 3). Feminist criticisms focus on how gender difference cuts across all forms of socially and politically posited "whole." Strathern's version adds an algorithmic rigor to how exactly bipolarity crosscuts a whole. But let us wait a little for this abstract discussion. Instead, suppose a girl growing up to become a woman ...

How do we constitute something like "growth" – a ceaseless changing – as an object of sensation? Something like growth, Strathern would say, we "pre-figure," not just figure. To prefigure is to organize sensation in a "recursive" fashion, with a "pre-" in mind. Given a figure, it is to bring into relevance in the present sensing of it the "could have been" of "possible worlds" that had transpired the present state.² For the simple reason that our perception of what is ceaselessly changing cannot be derived from the slice of a present "state"; just as historicity cannot be understood within a closed temporal "whole" (without duration). Given a girl who we now sense as a woman, to prefigure her growth is to wonder (with a sense of disbelief): "What was in her that she grew like that?"³ Prefiguration as a technique of sensation captures the "magic" of metamorphosis in all changing things. The Melanesian prefiguration, as relayed by Strathern, is as lyrical in its aesthetic as its logic demanding. Its lyricism owes to a highly cultivated sense of wonderment about the inner measure of metamorphosing things. This "inner measure," we may call the "capacity" to grow. "Inner" because something's capacity to grow is separate from the externally observable phenomenon of growth. It is still an "object" of our sensation, for sure, but no more solely in the register of the seen or the factual. Strathern tells us that Melanesians have a general penchant for events that refuse to become spectacles, theaters that elude all spectators. Non-spectacle, a girl's growth provokes a sense of "disbelief" – things don't "add up." Something like "rightness of quantity" is unthinkable here. There is no common scale of perception that may circumscribe it externally, "objectively." This is to say that to grow is to self-scale, the growing body hosting this operation as its inner measure.

How might one give a *sense* to such a partially masked, internally self-scaling, and externally "unmeasurable" event? Prefiguration is the Melanesian solution given to that task with a keen awareness that such a partial

phenomenon cannot be "represented" or "explained." One can only *affirm* it by letting an image directly "stand for the object." The image, to borrow Strathern's expression, if not definition, is "an entity momentarily precluded from further explanation and thus self-representing" (2002: 111). The image of growth installs a provisional stoppage, as it were, to what is constantly changing. If representation or explanation recovers causes (for the present state) that are within the "same" temporal frame as itself, a prefiguring image involves the "Other time" of "possible worlds" (Bergson 1965: 52, 67; Viveiros de Castro 2011). Such would be the kind of time that cannot be "lived" by organisms, but that which must be *pre*-supposed by them nonetheless. Prefiguration's "pre-" refers to such a temporal "out-of-field" (*hors-champ*), to borrow a cinema lingo.

But how does it work? Perhaps much like Francis Bacon's paintings mentioned above: the entirety of the growing girl's body transforms itself "through" one of its parts. This is to say that the capacity for self-transformation is intuited to have been, as Strathern often writes, "already there." Already there within herself in a "completed form" – as a "state." "Completed" as bodily organs are, no matter how immature the hosting body. Body parts are "adults." Logic (after Kant) confirms this: a growth cannot be made sense by another growth, as one change cannot be explained by another change (see Kant 1933). To give a *sense* to a constant change, one needs a "form of change," which itself does not change at the phenomenal level. Instead, the form "participates" in, as philosophers say, the "Idea" of all changing things. If the Melanesian idea of growth is a "re-" of sorts – for every transformation is a repetition "through" what had already transformed – it is very different from that in "re/unification." Its issuer is not "whole" but "part."

Now, suppose the grown girl is becoming "one of pair" in a gendering relation to a "man." Prefiguring, one would wonder again: "What was in her that she became one-of-pair?" The answer would be: a completed pair-form already there in her. A manifest bipolarity, the "prefigurer" posits, must have a parallel bipolarity within as its "cause."⁴ For one's capacity to enter a relation generally is because she is herself already made of relations. The reason is *not* because, as the Moderns would think, the girl was a pre-relational, incomplete "term" – a "raw material" – which came to complete itself in a "relation." Any notion of "unification" assumes as much. In prefiguration, a gendered relation only comes from another gendered relation, a manifest bipolar relation from an inner bipolarity, a twoness from another twoness. If a girl grows up to become "one of pair" – that is, one-half of a pair-whole – it is because she herself is already a(n) (androgynous) "whole" made of elements with the characteristic of "half-a-whole" (Strathern 1988: 112). The process of gendering, according to prefiguration, covers this inscrutable span between an inner *half-a-whole* and its externalized manifestation as *one-of-pair*.

Such an "inscrutable span" can only be analogized, not represented. Analogy in prefiguration is an immediate relating. One "complete form" is

analogized to another “complete form.” Analogy “substitutes,” not “replicates.” It is a paradoxical kind of relating which “communicates” precisely by “preclude(ing) (something) from further explanation” (2002: 111). How one-of-pair results from half-a-whole cannot be further figured, analyzed, or historicized. Things don’t “add up.” But precisely for that reason, analogical substitution may nourish “events that refuse to become a spectacle.” It creates the *sensation* of/for a self-scaling, non-spectacle kind of event while at the same time “erasing” it as the referent.

I contended that bipolarity has a privileged place in how Strathern conceptualizes prefiguration. The reason, needless to say, is not because she “essentializes” two sexes. The reason is, I argued, algorithmic. Two is an “appropriate quantity” to express an entity which self-grounds or self-scales. For the series of two is the minimum which maximally effects the slippage between the ground and figure, between the whole and part. A set containing only two elements is susceptible to one of the “terms” beginning to act like a set itself. It is precisely the set’s extreme limitedness which turns it into an “open whole.” And it is this set-within-set or whole-within-whole setup which Strathern’s gender designator half-a-whole/one-of-pair chiasmus captures.⁵ No wonder, Melanesians regard gender as a privileged aesthetic and semiotic form with which to upstage the “whole” of sociality. Here, the “count” of gender difference would not suffer the paternalistic caution that duality is “too few” a number to configure the “whole” of Society. Neither does the “feminist” charge of the “essentialization of sex” apply here.⁶ For twoness here is “deterritorialized,” distributed between half-a-whole and one-of-pair.

In that “deterritorialized” gender designator half-a-whole/one-of-pair lies Strathern’s singular contribution to feminism. She not only disputes and critiques the point about how gender difference cuts across all rhetoricized forms of a global-Whole. She shows the *crosscut* graphically and affirmatively as a positive object of sensation – i.e., the image.⁷

Queering/prefiguring the nation

The crossing of the borders and the excitement it arouses in me were to enable me to apprehend directly the essence of the nation I was entering. I would penetrate less into a country than to the interior of an image.

Jean Genet, *The Thief’s Journal*

The queering genius of Jean Genet allows him to make the “crosscut” of a nation-state directly available to his senses. He calls it the “image” – the mage with an “interior.” He schemes to concoct that voluminous thing for himself and “penetrate” a nation through it. The image which captures his attention in this occasion is of a certain “Stilitano,” the customs officer in charge of Genet’s imminent deportation. As well as of the many shining objects adorning Stilitano’s “military attire.” Genet shudders with delight at each of these objects: a “total figuration” (Strathern 2004) of Stilitano.⁸ And

Stilitano, in turn, a total figuration of his "country." If such a queering evocation seems perversely fetishistic, it is surely because his "scales" are all wrong. Stilitano's "blue woolen cape" cannot possibly substitute for Stilitano the person, nor an officer, no matter how magnificently uniformed, for the whole nation-state. But Genet's figuration proceeds as if each object of his association is equipped with the power to self-scale and metamorphose itself into the other on its own. As if this power is coursing through each object wholly and without reserve, from the smallest to the biggest, back-to-back. His doting promotes the objects to the status of a pageantry of disjunctive juxtapositions. This promotion makes the body of these objects seem "substituting" for something else, making this something else invisible but insistent. The invisibility "appears" precisely because Genet dotes on the brilliant visibility of these objects. "All the more present because less visible; all the fewer because more favored by grace," as Pascal says (cited in de Certeau 1984: 84).

What does he *see* that his vision of the Nation-State power is so affirmative than negative, wondering than critical?⁹ Hasn't Michel Foucault, the skeptical reader thinks to oneself, lectured enough not to do that? Genet here teaches us how to ask the kind of question never taught in those lectures: "What was in it that it inflated itself like that?" It is a prefiguring kind of question, which catches the State "before" it assumed the characteristic stiff image of grandstanding "spectacle" of intimidation. He wonders about the differential calculus – it doesn't "add up" – of the State's phallic power. By the "interior" of the image, he seems to mean that hollow interval of differential on which power subsists. With it, he intends to "apprehend ... the essence of the nation." And "penetrate" it too, through this hinge/crack where a nation-state organizes its sensation. His provocation to the students of Strathern is whether one could take this Strathernian arsenal of the prefigured image to a fight with the State.

Allow me to introduce an exiled North Korean poet who has done that. And "penetration" has Zini Choi done, as she titles her memoir *The Woman Who Crossed the Border Thrice, Zini Choi*.¹⁰ The book chronicles her harrowing journey through one of the world's deadliest borders surrounding North Korea. She saunters her feats of border penetration. Such a sauntering is unusual in the popular "defector memoir" genre.¹¹ The genre largely trades in the retrospective, reminiscences on the travails of the Southward journey in the security of the journey's terminal. This is not to say that Choi's memoir is without its share in the drama of death-dealing ordeals and narrow escapes. On this account, her book reads just like any other defector memoir. What makes hers unusual is the absence of the journey's terminal. When the narrative arrives at her exiled life in South Korea (two-thirds into the book), the plot fragments. Teleology befitting a sentimental retrospective gets replaced by fragmented montages, which injects an ellipsis in the overall narration. But the "unusualness" culminates when she, in the final pages, rejects the "defector memoir" genre altogether. That is, precisely the genre she seemed to have

just instantiated (Choi 2005: 349). This paradoxical pronouncement, however, retrospectively confirms a sense of discomfort the connoisseurs of the genre are likely to have experienced even in her defector memoir-as-usual parts: a shade of callousness with which Choi effortlessly give words to the grotesque brutalities inflicted on herself.¹² What is she trying to show by “callously” instantiating the genre she is only to reject? By “impersonalizing” precisely a genre which is indulged for its sentimental personalization? She “cuts” her own biographical self, as I will argue, in order to make something appear at the crosscut. It is much as headhunters behead in order to extract what Strathern calls “life-force” (1999: 31). Writing-beheading, as we shall see, she does not distinguish the work of writing from the work of survival. Her memoir’s unusual title, which redundantly repeats the author’s name, reflects this extreme gesture of self-objectification or self-beheading.

In disavowing the genre called the “defector memoir,” Choi disavows both the humanist/humanitarian biographical self and the category of “defection” (hereafter, without quotation) which it supports. And both, needless to say, are much about the categories of the Nation-State and the citizenship. In the memoir, her disavowal of the genre immediately follows her mentioning of South Korea’s feverish desire for it. For the journal Choi had kept during her ordeal, the memoir tells us, has arrived in the South before she herself did, smuggled out without her consent by a South Korean refugee aid. This “national(ist)” imperative to “alienate” defector’s words from the defector is the backdrop against which she stages the space for the “paradox.” What positive “image” do we see appear from that space – between a feigned execution of a genre and its disavowal? For that, it helps to read her paradoxical pronouncement in the future-anterior tense: “No matter what I write, I will not have written a defector memoir.” She reserves for herself the right to name all she has written and will be writing. Reserved thus is the enunciating position of all her writings in the present self, whenever that “present” might be. This ruse is not a proverbial “critique,” let alone “resistance.” Her memoir constitutes neither “yes” nor “no” to the pressure to author a defector memoir – much like *Bartleby’s* famous formula, “I’d rather not” (Agamben 1999; Deleuze 1997: Ch. 10).¹³

What is the relation between the defector and her words? The act called “defection” is destined towards a discourse about it. As in confession, at stake in the discourse of defection is an obligation towards “manifestation of truth” (Foucault 2014: 1–21). For the defector is a suspect, much as the confessor is. Her being has been given over to suspicion always already, much as for the “sinful” confessor. And the words must bear the burden of proving otherwise. Choi seems to intuit power inhering in this reflexive interval, in this task of making something “appear” via self-objectification or, shall we say, self-scaling. As Foucault advocated, the State power nourishes itself on such a discursively made appearing. This is also to say that power skips a breath in suspension at such a hinge/crack occasion of self-objectification, forcing it to obsessively ask, “Does the defector/confessor mean what s/he says?” It is

inherently ambiguous as to from what subject-position one can meaningfully utter "I am/was a defector." Certainly not as one whose act of defection is in progress. But only as one whose defection has come to a rest, a completed "state." And that "state" becomes recognizable as a state when the act comes to rest in the custody of one State – *the* State. As such, the defector is never a nomad; his/her movement in space and time is but a teleological and instrumental transport between one State to another. The enunciating subject of the defector discourse can never be a "mobile instance of representation" (Deleuze 1990: 56), in motion within the historical time. Rather, the subject of enunciation has to remain under the custody of the State, *excepted* from the historical time in which the subject of statement belongs (Benveniste 1971).

In that context, as we will return to in concluding sections, Choi "reserves" for herself a "mobile" point of (the writer's/defector's) enunciative position *within the historical time*. What positive image would result from such "multiplied" enunciative positions? It may look like the "impossible" surface of the Cubist painting or one seen by the insect's eye. In any case, the enunciative "mobility" she saunters, as much as Genet's sauntered ability to "penetrate," is much more than something like "freedom of movement." The idea of "free movement" separates that which moves from movement itself, as if the former originally belonged to a mono-spatiotemporal plane devoid of movement and change. More fitting for the "impossible" mobility of Choi and Genet would be to speak of "capacity" – the "capacity to move." Both produce images of not just movement but of "form of movement." As we saw, a "capacity," as in the "capacity to grow," requires a temporal horizon other than the one liveable by the biographical self. It requires the time of the "could have been," which must be, and can only be, presupposed or prefigured (see note 3). We may as well call such a time of "completed form" a "state" too. As to what Choi makes it do vis-à-vis the State, we will see in concluding sections.

A passage through the Cold War's crosscut

The "freedom of movement" is a major trope in the "post-socialist" ethos. Within the parameter configured by the trope, to "move" is also to, so to speak, "re-move" – a nullification of movement. It is just as how, as I mentioned at the outset, to "unify" is also to "re-unify" within the parameter of the global "whole" posited by the ethos. Movement and "re-movement" are considered mutually cancellable equivalents within the bounds of that posited "whole." There, "defection" is a one-way ticket of a movement which cancels out the Other State in preference for the State. "Re-defection" is not a meaningful category there; "thrice" is a meaningless count in the discourse of border-crossing.

Daphne Berdahl's ethnography *Where the World Ended: Re-Unification and Identity in the German Border Land* offers a compelling image of such a category-less movement. The border at issue here being awash with the scopic

bipolarity installed by the Cold War, Berdahl's image serves as our interlude to the specificity of the border(s) of Choi's concern. The image of our concern is composed by a certain "Thorsten."

One of the first things I did after the border opened ... was to go to Braunrode. I looked for the exact spot where my western relatives would have stood when they came to look at Kella. And when I found it, I couldn't fight back the tears.

(Berdahl 1999: 160)

Thorsten's narrated scopic double-take is meant to commemorate the event of unification. How does one commemorate a historical *change*? A historical rupture? As one does with growth: one gives a "form of change," the form installing a "provisional stoppage." So commemorating or monumentalizing, Thorsten lets his "tears" punctuate the narrative as if to preserve. The tears render his testimony an image: by the tears, the narrative gets "momentarily precluded from further explanation" (Strathern 2002: 111). An exercise in the "freedom of movement" the narrated reflexive back-and-forth certainly is not. Monumentalizing, the ellipsis of his back-and-forth introduces a "cut" to this so-called freedom of movement. His going and coming, movement and re-movement meet a "stop" (see Lévi-Strauss 1963: 98). "Tears" mark that stoppage, a voluntary "preclusion" of further movement. To what effect? He thus gives an expression to the inner measure of History's "capacity" to change, move, and rupture; to the pathos-overfilled remembrance of all those "could have beens" that never came or came too late.

Berdahl intimates that such tears would not have been available to Thorsten's "western relatives," who used to spectate Kella from the tourist station at Braunrode. They, I conjecture, would have taken his tears as a sign of joy, the joy at the newly acquired "freedom of movement." They would not have seen his move as black-and-forth, an inscription of a certain impossibility of further movement, even "unfreedom." But why this "unavailability" (to the Westerners), we may ask, when the border is a binary divider equally for the West as well as for the East?

The tourist, Strathern tells us, is a presumed locus of integrated experience. "Perspectives" sampled during the tourist's travel are presumed to integrate "within the single entity" (Strathern 2004: 25). Integrate because the sampled perspectives for the tourist belong neither to "someone" nor are from "somewhere" (Ibid.: 26, 40). They are interchangeable, "empathizable" equivalents. Thorsten's western relatives would have taken his "trying out" of the tourist perspective from Braunrode as an exercise in such an "empathy." And tears as a sign for the realization of what was so "tried out." But the meaning of his tears changes once we see a hysterical back-and-forth instead. Does not the scuttling rather hint at the failure of this try-out? And his tears a non-realization of this "humanist" empathy (with its promised cancellation of East/West differences)? If failure, however, it would

not be that in inter-changing perspectives. But a failure in ascertaining the existence of interchangeable perspectives in the first place. He ascertains instead that the Other perspective is not where the Other is; the Other does not “have” it. Thorsten’s back-and-forth traces this fretful search of the hysteric – the search for what seems incomprehensibly always-there yet always-delayed. And his tears the pathos for this never-ending scuttle of a search which the Cold War was/is. In this tracing, comings and goings, movement and “re-movement” are not mutually cancellable directionality, but configure an excessive presence of the hysteric’s “place” (where the already-there and always-delayed incomprehensibly collapse). This paradoxical “place” installs an “impossible” “painting surface” of a form to the Cold War legacy, a *crosscut* whereby a historical *rupture* might be engraved. But *the* rupture too, as every change – as with every growth – bears witness to History’s “fate-dealing power,” participating in the Idea of all changing things (Rancière 2014: 79–81). Every change, in a way, affirms, or is prefigured by, this universal resemblance among all changing things. The universal resemblance, however, which cannot be represented by resemblance.

My attempt here is to adept the so-called “perspectivism” in Strathern’s theory of relation (Viveiros de Castro 2014). Perspectivism takes into consideration the aforementioned “enunciative position.” A girl’s growth is more than a phenomenon externally observable on her body, for her enunciative position “moves along” with her growing body. It is on account of the mobile points of enunciation that Strathern writes: “The view from the periphery is another view from the center” (2004: 38). The “inscrutable” crosscut we saw in-between “half-a-whole” and “one-of-pair” is none other than the “impossible surface” rising in-between mobile points of enunciation and the metamorphosing body. It is this schema I used to capture the “perspectivism” operative in the Cold War bipolarity generally and Thorsten’s monumentalizing of it more specifically. To put in commonsensical terms, Thorsten is “one of pair” as an East German, but also “half a whole” in that the one-of-pair divide is repeated within himself, as he has already “internalized” his western counterpart’s “look at Kella.” The “post-socialist” thesis of unification as the inaugurating point of “freedom of movement” is possible only by obfuscating the fact of active trafficking prior to unification (see Berdahl 1999: Ch. 5).

The image as the symptom of the border

Genet is enthralled by the self-inflating image or form of the State power. The enthrallment is also a form of knowledge, which enables him to “apprehend directly the essence of the nation.” And the “essence” would be the fact that things don’t “add up” in the “interior” of such an image. So when he boasts about “penetrating” a nation through its image, he is calling nothing less than History’s fate-dealing power to his side. The aim would be to unlock the historicity which the nation’s image masks, “substitutes” for, and

monumentalizes. One only has to dwell on the passport ceremony to appreciate how the State image-trick works to which Genet's image is a response.

At the ceremony, one finds oneself "present(ing) oneself representing something" (Marin 1988: 5). That is, one presents what is already a representation that is the passport. A re-representation conjures what used to be present and now "elsewhere" in the modalities of both time and space. Then, *presenting a re-representation* is an odd act indeed. The act of showing or exhibiting in person what is but a representation places this very "person" in an instrumental position. Rather than being authenticated, the in-person presenter is oneself put in question. The presenter-in-the-flesh becomes an "other" to that re-presented other, placed more "elsewhere" than the re-presented elsewhere.

Let us consider the text of such a representation in the case at hand – the passport. First, the passport photo. It is a random *image* of oneself which happens to carry the state seal of legitimacy. Random because the passport photo-image, according to the Euro-American convention of portraiture, is a snapshot inscription of an instant in biographical history (Strathern 1999: Ch. 2). Mere "copy," the photo-image is pregnant with the implications of mechanical duplicity and temporal distance. The genre of the portrait further defers authenticity – the "inner individuality," the "soul" – while rendering the features of the modeled body as but a "medium" (Ibid.: 39). Then imagine the passport presenter once again. To present a passport photo in person is to beg for a recognition of the presenter's resemblance to such a "random" image. "Beg" because the presenter here is merely a passive model to and an instrument for the representation's presentation. To present here is not to, say, demonstrate one's capacity to produce the photo-image at hand. Here, one merely "models" one's individuality, not "enacts" it (Ibid.: 33).

Next, the accompanying state narrative seal of legitimization in writing. An image is thus supplemented by a narrative, as if being captioned. But, as in any captioning, the relation between the two regimes of expression – the image and narrative – is never certain. Captioning merely attempts to "re-invent" that which is "given" and "found" (Rancière 2011: 66). Given and found because when it comes to a photo, "it is impossible for us to know whether the camera has simply recorded (it) in passing or whether the photographer has consciously framed and highlighted (it)" (Ibid.: 118). Hence, the outcome of such an attempted image-narrative mimetic complementarity, forced only by the shared textual space, is far from clear (Ibid.: 121). The passport lends a common "surface" without decoding the forced mimetic relation. The "lending" simulates narrative "explanation" of the image only to exhibit the resulting interpretive gap. This "gap" becomes the passport holder's accountability, and the passport ceremony, an endless attempt at remunerating this "debt" (see Choudhury 2013: Ch. 1). The State's authority organizes itself in the hollow interval of this "gap," in this delegated interpretive responsibility. The passport-holder, in turn, is likely to experience this

"responsibility" as one owed to oneself – thus enlisted in the service of naturalizing the State authority. This is so because of the work of the nature of a photo: what one experiences as demanding an "explanation" is none other than one's own past self, an instance of which is inscribed in the passport photo. What is mobilized here is no less than the pathos of one's constitutively lost biographical past, and the impossible task of representing it.

Many a writer has commented on this antinomical relation between the State and its history, of which the passport text's "forced" mimetic complementarity is but a reflection. Étienne Balibar's oft-cited piece on this topic is titled "The Nation Form: History and Ideology" (1991; also see Balibar 2004: Ch. 2). The conjunction in the subtitle announces the analogous "forced" relation, this time between "history" and "ideology." For a nation to acquire a "form," Balibar seems to be saying, ideological founding of a community alone would not do, for it cannot automatically give itself a historical dimension. It is because the founding moment, as he cites Jacques Derrida, is "a 'past' that has never been present, and which never will be" (Balibar 1991: 86). The founding moment, in other words, cannot be lived or inhabited as a "present." Why? It is because to found or to create is to rupture (historical) continuity. Its "moment" is a *state*. And insofar as a political community organizes itself on a foundationalist ideology, the purity of this "stateness" must be safeguarded as an *exception* – as "essence" is to "appearance." The founding moment has to stay unavailable in, or absented from, the historical time. The State power inheres in holding this "gap" open, so that the foundational "state" is constitutively absented from all historical presents as a "sovereign exception" (Agamben 1999). "What is already open" as an exception, we find impossible to enter (Agamben 1999: 49).¹⁴

This makes the border an interesting place. Surely, one reaches the border in one's own lived, historical time, on foot if need be. But the border is also where the reach of one sovereignty's ideology ends and that of another begins. There, ideologically drawn boundaries appear as what they actually are: relative constructs. Whatever has to be "excepted" from the lived, historical time for an ideology to function can no more be in reserve and stay excepted at the border. As such, every foundationalist myth cries out for repair at the border. The passport ceremony is one of those repairs.

Enunciating "form of power"

We may characterize Foucault's approach to the State power "perspectivist." For "discourse," one of the main focuses of his attention, we may call a "perspective" that "moves along with the body." In this, his concerns align with what we have been calling the "image." And what anchors discourse with the body, for him, is the point of enunciation. Power inheres in managing the scale of "anchoring" between discourse and the body. And its aim is also to "hold open" the aforementioned interpretive "gap."¹⁵ On this, his analysis of confession is exemplary.

For Foucault, the act of enunciating confession was one of the privileged areas in the West whereby otherwise diffuse and general power could acquire a concrete appearance – as a “form of power” (as in “form of change”). This was because centrally at stake in confession, as it became the birthplace of institutionalization generally, was *conversion* – a transformation of one’s “nature” itself in historical time. How does one *become* a (true) Christian, for instance, in one’s own biographical and historical time (Foucault 2014)? That is to say, how does one negotiate the *state* of “salvation” (as a bearer of the “image of God”) with the imperative of “perfection”? Or, on the reverse side, how does one intervene in the given *state* of the “original sin”? “Institutionalization” was the Church’s answer to this theological aporia. What the Church institution enabled was the theologically irreconcilable task of “unrepeatable repetition” (Ibid.: 196). Enabled, that is to say, was the possibility of redressing *foundational states* – the conditions determined in the divine or ritual time – in historical time. Confession was the key means of that redressing. If sinfulness was a state of “death,” the (institutionalized) act of confession allowed the theretofore impossible act of “dying to death” – towards the effect of “rebirth” (Ibid.: 214). How? It was through “discourse”; through verbalizing one’s sinful acts daily, repeatedly, endlessly. By enunciating such statements, Foucault writes, one could “detach” oneself from the stated sin (Ibid.: 214). For the element of *enunciation* in discourse-making afforded one *not* to be equal to the stated sinfulness.

But this operation worked under one condition, says Foucault. The element of enunciation has to be *excepted* (my word) from the statements issued from it. “Sovereignly” excepted, if you will. Otherwise, confession slides into the so-called “liar’s paradox” (2014: 224). Paradox because the statement attesting to the speaker’s status of being a liar – such as “I lie” – immediately raises the unanswerable question: Is the speaker lying *now*? “Now,” that is, at the moment of enunciation. Insofar as the element of enunciation is not excepted, and so possibly immanent to any moment of the statement, the liar can say neither truth nor falsity. This is a matter of “scale”: in order to avoid the paradox, the scale of enunciation must “encompass” that of the statement. To put in Strathernian terms, the element of enunciation should be able to “ground” the statement as its “figure.” The paradox holds under an immanent or imminent threat of the “figure-ground reversal” (Strathern 2004: 113).¹⁶

Can we not say the same about defection? As a kind of conversion, defection also requires a discourse about it. The defector-writer, especially, has to author a “defector memoir.” With this imperative of verbalization also creeps up a “defector’s paradox.” The State must stop the slide towards this paradox, just as the institution of confession stops the slide towards the liar’s paradox. This is to say that much is at stake for the State when its subject self-objectifies and self-scales. When, that is, its subject is given a chance to produce one’s own self-inflating image with the hollow interval of an “interior.”

The head of the defector

Zini Choi holds on to an enigmatic piece of article among her already-minimal possession throughout her death-defying journey: three volumes of a Korean language dictionary (see 2005: 179). A tool-kit for an anticipated description, this exorbitant cargo travels alongside her person as a sure thing that will survive her own tenuous hold on life. She survives herself like an addendum to this symbol of will-towards-description. And the first crop of the “description” – this “life force” itself – gets swiftly harvested by the South Korean State. Thus arriving in the South bare, she is tasked with a “memoir” on what remains of that “bare life.” Such is the context for her callous treatment of her own sufferings and the “stutter” of fragmented montages in her memoir.

Yet, the montages are full of vigor, as if suddenly recalling the cannibalistic ferocity of her will-towards-description. As if the more “cuts” she inflicts on herself and her text, the stronger this “will” becomes. This economy, I compared earlier to the headhunting as described by Strathern. The headhunter “cuts” in order to extract the victim’s “life-force,” she writes (Strathern 1999: 31). A life-force that can be appropriated wholesale, ready-made, and prefigured for being already that of an “adult.” The head, this completed body part, registers a dynamism much bigger than itself even as it was dismembered and rendered immobile. Why? The head was itself once an enunciating point of a “perspective,” a point-of-view which opened onto other possible worlds. A perspective which, in its turn, appropriated other perspectives, *ad infinitum*. The headhunter seeks to access this “pre-” world of infinite “could-have-beens” – instantly. Instantly by its “emblematic name” (Lyotard 1989: 57), if not empathetically. That is to say, by its “provisional stop,” which is simultaneously Real and Imaginary. Headhunting realizes precisely that which is prohibited by the State: access the point of exception in historical time.

An emblematic registering point of perspective-of-perspectives or relation-of-relations, the head, then, individuates without a face. It contours without features. Because it is the “impossible” surface of a pure point of enunciation wiped clean of the victim’s biographical features. Features which include the scars of illnesses, misfortunes, not to speak of the misfortune of the present death-by-headhunter. This is to say that the head’s surface is “impossible” to the point of recursively wiping off the trace of its own birth – the fact that it was engendered by death-by-headhunting. In this sense, the head is a pre-figure at its most crystallized: a magical “bind” both spatially and temporally, as it self-contours and self-engenders (see Cassin 2014: Ch. 5).

To the fretful South Koreans clamoring for yet one more truth-telling about the North, Choi instead serves up the head of a memoir. To the State’s demand (as at the border) that one endlessly “explain” the debt of one’s being, Choi installs a Strathernian image which “preclude(s) ... further explanation.” As if to “preclude,” Choi’s narrative fragments into montages upon arrival in the South. A couple of those fragments are explicitly on

the topic of defection. With them, the present narrative also tries to bind itself to a stop.

In one of the fragments, Choi controversially avows “never to return” to the North (302). This, despite her being a vocal proponent of improving lives in the North. The reason for this vow, she cites as “never to forget.” She does not explain the relation between the two “nevers.” Instead, she illustrates the relation by enlisting the service of two fellow defectors from, significantly, different times and places. One is a certain (unnamed) former East German scholar who, after his exile to the West, refused to return to the East even after unification (303). “Never to forget” were his words given to the memory of the brutal regime. Let us for now make note of the “count” of the travel declined by the East German. The second case she enlists is perhaps the best-known defector in the Korean history: Kwang-Su Yi, the patron-saint “collaborator writer” branded so for his collusion with the Japanese colonial regime (in the 1930s) (see Workman 2015: Ch. 2). Yi had the uncommon honor of being called by that dishonorable name by both Koreas. As with the East German, Choi’s relishing isolates Yi’s one-liner – an image: “Dare I defect twice?” This line, which cost his life, Yi reportedly uttered as a rejoinder to the North’s invitation to redeem his name in exchange for supporting the regime (326).

Let us now count the travels. Both defectors of Choi’s admiration vow “never to return,” in verbatim for the East German and effectively for Yi. What both reject is a retracting “travel” expected of them, the travel which would have rendered their past moves of defection undone, cancelled, and directionless. The vow gives “stoppage” a presence. To what effect? To commemorate and monumentalize. The present vow recursively elevates the past act of defection. It elevates it to the status of, what one might call, “form of defection” – and the avower to that of “permanent defector.” As with the “form of change” and the “form of growth,” their avowed stoppage affirmatively bestows a certain “capacity” to the avower. It is the “count” of this nomadic *state* of permanent defection that is Choi’s *thrice*.

But this “thrice” is not a count that comes *after* “twice.” The thirdness here does not represent a “reconciliation” *after* a polar opposition; as the proverbial “dialectics” would have it, or the ideas such as “unification” imply. Both defectors’ vows are retrospective, not prospective. The vows recursively render past deeds of defection already completed. “Never to return” is to “double-take” the past, much in the fashion of Thorsten’s back-and-forth. Where there was (Thorsten’s) tears, we now have the vows. In short, the vows prefigure. Prefiguration, as I hope the foregone has established, has nothing to do with a (dialectical) “overcoming” of “fewer terms” by “plural terms.” It is rather about “double-taking” what is already there; about squeezing the “plural” through the “fewer,” as it were – as, to bring back Francis Bacon’s scream above, the “entire body escapes through the mouth.” Or about an androgynous “whole” girl outwardly assuming the position of her internal half-a-whole part. Once again, bipolarity is irreducible here because it provides the maximal algorithmic economy. Maximal economy because

whether in gender relation or in the Cold War relation, a schema consisting only of bipolar “parts” interrupts both series of the “empirical” and the “unempirical,” both dimensions of the Real and the Imaginary. The result is a chiasmic bind, a self-contouring and self-engendering “object” of *sensation* that can neither be “further explained” nor externally observed.

How might one give an expression to a permanent change, a permanent growth, or a permanent defecting? How to give a form to the Idea of all changing things, growing things, or defecting things? Only by the “bind” that crosscuts space and time, “part” and “whole,” and so on. That is how a monument to historicity and change is made: by Strathern’s *image*. The gravestone to the Cold War can only be made with bipolarizing “parts.” It is so that it stays decomposable and recomposable – as a constant reminder to the “could have been” of History’s fate-dealing power.

Notes

- 1 North Korea has been continuously studied under the prognostic sign of “imminent collapse” at least since the 1980s (see Song 2013).
- 2 What I mean here is well captured by the painter Francis Bacon: “If I go into a butcher shop I always think it’s surprising that I wasn’t there instead of the animal” (cited in Deleuze 2004: 24). The “could have been” entertained here is that without which one cannot be properly a “human.” “Possible worlds,” as formulated by the philosophical “perspectivism,” are far from an imaginary construct of idle, hypothetical speculation. They are necessary presuppositions for us *not* to fall into the absurd conviction in the absolute necessity of a historical outcome (see Smith 1997).
- 3 “Grew” in the past tense seems more appropriate here in order to convey the element of “disbelief.”
- 4 As will be elaborated, “cause” is not quite accurate. For rather than “explaining,” prefiguration posits the “could have been” of what the so-called perspectivism calls “possible world” (see Viveiros de Castro 2011).
- 5 To wit, the schema half-whole/one-pair imparts an alternating relation between “part” and “whole.” What was “half” becomes a “whole” as the female element in the androgynous state becomes a “same sex” in the one-pair relation. But that “whole” (qua “same sex”) is, needless to say, itself a part (in the couple relation). The crucial point is that this final “whole” is not a “moment” in a dialectical synthesis. But an analog of what was “before”: the androgynous half-whole.
- 6 I have in mind Judith Butler’s “performative theory of gender” (1999 [1990]). Her pitting gender’s “multiplicity” against bipolar “essentialism” faithfully reflects the pluralist/multiculturalist doxa I complained about at the outset. Which is the reason why I turn to Strathern’s bipolarity-centered theory of gender in order to bring back the Cold War bipolarity from historical obsolescence.
- 7 The “crosscut” that appears in-between half-a-whole and one-of-pair is a precise graphic representation of Strathern’s “dividuality,” the concept almost reliably misinterpreted and made interchangeable with the “divisible” (e.g., Kwon 2010: 34). The dividual (*dividuel* in French), according to Gilles Deleuze, is “neither divisible nor indivisible” (1986: 14). Rather, the term applies when the “set cannot divide into parts without qualitatively changing each time” (Ibid.).
- 8 Strathern uses the expression “total figuration” interchangeably with “prefiguration.”

- 9 In Michael Taussig's captivating words, Genet thus "outfetishizes the state fetishism" (1993: 247). The present chapter's reading of Genet is very much inspired by Taussig but with one minor difference. This chapter diverges with Taussig's use of the Marxian concept of fetishism in interpreting Genet. According to him, the power of Genet's objects consist in the function of "concealment," much as Marx's commodity does. Genet's objects, he writes, "embody and erase that embodiment" (230), just as "the fetish absorbs into itself that which it represents, leaving no trace of the represented" (246). And so "the state exists as a hollow core, a meticulously shielded emptiness ... (as) a concealed truth" (240). In contrast, my reading of Genet is through Strathern. Elsewhere, I have attempted, what one might call, a Strathernian reading of Marx's (later) concept of commodity fetishism (without naming her) precisely as a corrective to Taussig's kind of reading of Marx (Song 2016).
- 10 This translation by Shine Choi is from the original *Gukgyung-eul Sae-bon Gut-neun Yeoja Chae Zini*. Shine Choi herself offers an excellent interpretation of this memoir to which my own is indebted (2015: 196–202). But her translation leaves out the author's own name included as a part of the title itself, which I correct here. I conjecture on this curious feature below.
- 11 In Korean, among other names, *talbuk-ja sugi*. I thank the anthropologist Hyang Jin Jung for this suggestion.
- 12 Shine Choi echoes this observation, characterizing Zini Choi's depiction of suffering as one intended to preempt "empathy" (2015: 199).
- 13 I thank Khashayar Beigi and William Stafford, Jr. for bringing my attention to Deleuze's piece.
- 14 I use the expression "hold open" in order to suggest a continuity between modern sovereignty and the monarchical sovereignty, as the latter bore the classical theologico-political role of *kathēkon*, the one who "holds back" the apocalypse (Balibar 2004: 139).
- 15 Needless to say, I am implying here, without having the space to explain, that Foucault's project is a continuation of scholarly discussions on the state/history antinomy. This, despite his self-professed radical break with the traditional scholarship on sovereignty. For "biopolitics" is where "nature" conflates with "history" (Esposito 2008: 24–32). Foucault's nature/history is Balibar's ideology/history.
- 16 "Figure-ground reversal" is an accurate descriptor for the confessor's speech suspected of being commanded by the Devil. Likened to the "false coin," the devilish quality of such a speech consisted in the self-issued nature of its "value," unmoored from the sovereign's treasury "cabinet," the measure of the "appropriateness of quantity" (Foucault 2004; Marin 1988).

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7 Postplurality

An ethnographic tableau¹

Silvia Posocco

Signatures, documents, archives

Signatures, documents and archives are ethnographic objects that, in recent years, have gradually become central to my research on transnational adoption circuits in Guatemala.² Through ethnography, they have emerged as conceptual and affective devices that conjure up relations connecting fragments of social experience – a declaration made in a notary’s office, the action of a body marking a piece of paper with a thumbprint or the movements that accompany the filing or retrieval of a document – to the domains of identity, sociality, memory, belonging, kinning and the law. There is a lot at stake: quests for origins, kin, bodies, truth and justice. Rather than straightforward truth-telling devices, however, these ethnographic objects are held together precariously by multiple epistemologies pertaining to, inter alia, legal apparatuses, governmental taxonomic logics, forensic techniques and community practices of memorialisation in the aftermath of genocide. They appear to temporarily crystallise and make explicit knowledge formations, but their contours shift and change, as they transverse multiple domains of knowledge and expertise. More fundamentally, they are infused with ‘epistemic anxieties’³ about the status of claims to identity, kinning and sociality. They appear to be opaque, contested, undecidable and aporetic, as they emerge out of the domain of forgetting and tentatively move towards the centre of struggles over historical memory and the interpretation of Guatemala’s violent past and present. They seem to precipitate socially embedded demands for understanding their own genesis and function, raising questions as to the exact conditions of their production, but their movements in and out of oblivion should be figured as slow and intermittent, full of stops, starts and retrocessions. On occasions, these movements are forceful jolts (Strathern 2014) that shake up the social field and cut through layers of humdrum allusion, rumour and indirect referencing and propel ethnography towards a redirection of knowledge and the analogic flow. Jolts radically reconfigure the scene the ethnographer is concerned with and entangled in: from making family to committing a crime; from acquiring kin to losing kin; from kinning to child abduction; from child abduction to murder; from murder to arbitrary

execution; from child to adult; from child to forensic remain; from adoption file to exhumation file; from child to adoptee; from kin to stranger; from stranger to kin; from subject to object; from subject to forensic remain; from personhood to the inorganic; from body to fingerprint; from body, to earth, to paper and back; from word to paper; from an archive replete with papers, subjects and relations to an empty building. These are some of the domain shifts that my ethnographic engagement has conjured up and become entangled in. Partial connections, disconnections and cuts in the network (Strathern 1991; 1996) incite multiple redirections of the analogic flow. In this shifting context, it is not always clear what one is looking at, or to move beyond and circumvent the straightjackets of ocularcentrism (Haraway 1991; Jay 1991) and representationalism (Stewart 2007), what one may be experiencing, producing, worlding. One's situatedness (Haraway 1991) is also called to account and reconfigured in the process.

Ethnographic scenes are tableaux that elicit relations. The jolts that refigure them have elicitory power (Strathern 1990) with queering effects, in so far as persons and things are not quite what they appear to be and are also always already something else. Against this background, categorical thinking about gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, age, location, dislocation, direction of travel, biography, purpose, life and death is, to some degree and at different junctures, called into question. Existential doubt and self-questioning; politically and institutionally produced censorship and related absence of information; discrepant and conflicting interpretations of historical events all play a part, but the instability and evanescence of categories are more fundamental. In the face of demands for clarity, knowledge and truth, categories systematically work against 'a certain literalism of the referent' (Povinelli 2007: 575) that tends to qualify them and lend them coherence. In this chapter, I dwell on some epistemological, ontological and political moves against this literalism of the referent. I explore how signatures, documents and archives – as affective and conceptual devices that conjure up relations – queer scale. I am interested in exploring a series of ethnographic tableaux as scenes in which jolts engender shifts in scale. Jolts have queering effects that refocus ethnographic attention and reveal a redistribution and rearrangement of relations, substance and meaning. I dwell on the proximity and distance between making kin and losing kin, kinning and unkinning, resemblance and incongruity, to focus on the ethnographic tableau and the queering effects engendered by the progressive emergence of a recurrent double scene: a slow motion split frame featuring a disappearing archive and the simultaneous coming into view of a mass grave. As I grapple with the intimately related terms of this juxtaposition, I am interested in thinking through 'queering' as an 'ethnographic effect' (Strathern 1999) that operates through scale, and more specifically, through a postplural scale. This, it should be stated unambiguously, is no generic postplurality.⁴ Rather, it is a deeply historically situated postplurality tied to the condition of finding oneself in the wake of genocide.⁵

In *After Nature* (1992), Marilyn Strathern examines English kinship in the late 20th century, that is, at a time when new reproductive technologies were generating novel questions about the status of kin relations, against a background where the then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher could announce ‘There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families’ (Margaret Thatcher, quoted in Strathern 1992: 144). In this context, Strathern shows how plurality hinges on knowledge practices which assume persons are born into coherent identities, be them biological or social,⁶ so that ‘identity, like time and obligation, flows downward from parent to child’ (1992: 52). Genetics provides new idioms for figuring the naturalness of biological kinship, though this cultural effort at producing the naturalness of biological ties is shown to be not new at all, but rather, to have also been important in the past. In English kinship, a pluralising capacity or potential, then, inheres in persons conceived as individuals, to the effect that ‘individuals reproduce individuals’ (Strathern 1992: 53). In contrast, Strathern points to how, in some Melanesian societies, babies are not considered to be new persons (1992: 55). Furthermore, drawing on Nancy Munn’s work in the Melanesian island of Gawa, Strathern shows how in Gawa canoes are the ethnographic objects through which relatedness is figured. These wooden objects are analogically related to the kin group – a group that contains many members – as well as to the body – and the maternal body whose cavity contains the person-to-be, more specifically. Canoes are at once the collectivity of kin contained within, and a single person, or mother, containing futural mothers and futural children (Strathern 1996: 66–67; 1992: 56). In turn, the form of the canoe is analogised with the child’s facial features, so that the carving and decorating of the vessel carried out by men is associated with men’s efforts at shaping the foetus. In this matrilineal system where it is assumed nothing is transmitted by the father during conception, fathers have to carve the vessel to be able to carry out any transmission to their offspring. In other words, transmission has to occur through an explicit social act. In turn, ‘[e]ach clan member in Gawa may be regarded as an icon of the clan; but each individual *person* is an icon of a *relationship*, and a microcosm of diverse relations’ (Strathern 1992: 62). By focusing on knowledge practices in Gawa, Strathern shows how plurality and singularity are differently figured, thus rendering the assumptions inherent in English figurations of relatedness as dependent on individuals reproducing individuals, newly unfamiliar.⁷ The nexus between pluralisation and novelty is also thrown into question in the analysis of Melanesian ethnography, as in the Trobriands newborns are not, strictly speaking, new people: ‘Trobriand babies are old people, not new ones. That is, they are ancestors re-appearing as spirit-children’ (Strathern 1992: 59).

Knowledge practices of composition and decomposition make explicit the relations that constitute persons and things. Strathern’s dazzling analysis skilfully produces the effect of a progressive distancing from the knowledge practices for rendering plurality, diversity, individuality and collectivity

proper of English kinship, through a juxtaposition with conceptual and aesthetic practices concerned with the reproduction of relations in Melanesia. Knowledge practices for figuring difference and complexity are shown to be relational devices through which descriptions of social wholes and identity are produced. In a postplural world, by contrast, '[w]e move from the unique amalgam of elements drawn from different domains to a literal assemblage of parts perceived as substitutable or replaceable for one another' (Strathern 1992: 183). As Jensen and Winthereik (2017: 166–167) point out, post-plurality entails, for Strathern, a loss of the mathematics of epistemological pluralism and a simultaneous proliferation of fragmentation. The contrast is between the plurality of the modern epoch and a postplural world where 'persons can [...] be imagined as simply composed of elements of other persons – whether in terms of organ transplants, or the borrowing of cultural forms or the imitation of other individual lifestyles, or even the transmission of genetic particles' (Strathern 1992: 183). Partial connections presuppose not only relations between (presumably bounded) entities, but more fundamentally, a fractal modelling of pluralisation and replication in the composition of entities, hence the felicitous deployment of the term 'assemblage' to figure this relational domain for the composition and decomposition of subjects and worlds. Holbraad and Pedersen sum up this postplural model as follows:

If of every thing one can ask not only to what other things it relates (the pluralist project of comparison) but also of what other things it is composed, then the very metaphysic of 'many things' emerges as incoherent. Everything, one would conclude, is both more and less than itself. 'More' because what looks like a 'thing' in the pluralist metaphysic turns out, postplurally, to be composed of further things – infinity inward – and 'less' because at the same time it too contributes to the composition of further things – infinity outward.

(Holbraad and Pedersen 2009: 374)

One way of figuring this contrast would be to juxtapose a modernist montage and a postplural assemblage, bearing in mind that the loss of 'the merographic amalgam of pluralism' where social life can be figured as a 'plurality of "countless" (i.e. potentially countable) discrete logics and "separate realms"' (Strathern 1992: 215 footnote 41) need not entail regret (1992: 184).

In my discussion, I grapple with a sense of postplurality in the aftermath of genocide in Guatemala, to foreground some epistemological, ontological and political dimensions inherent in scale. I explore how scale functions as a key device that refers to the making of different orders of relations. I explore how this meaning of scale and related knowledge practices of 'scale switching' might be considered closer to Wittgenstein's notion of 'family resemblances' in *Philosophical Investigations* (2009), than to disciplinary specific understandings of scale, as, for example, a spatial category. In this Wittgenstenian sense, scale and scale shifting refer to the making of connections between domains of

knowledge and are analytical devices with great critical potential. Connecting these reflections to ‘queer’ as understood by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1993), in this chapter, I explore the queering effects of scale and scale shifting. I aim to foreground postplural framings of context and scale and show how these fundamentally problematise assumptions regarding the assumed self-evidence of distinctions between notions of bounded, organic or integrated social wholes or individual subjects, as well as the assumed transparency of analytics of gender, sexuality and desire – and the idea of ‘proper objects’ of queer anthropology. I track the emergence of queer postpluralities and partial connections between and across Strathern’s oeuvre and queer theory.

Genocide kinning, public secrets, family resemblances

It is common knowledge, at least in certain circles in urban Guatemala, that some of the children who were forcefully removed from their families and communities in the course of military offensives against civilians during the Guatemalan conflict (1960–1996) were not killed, but, rather, were adopted by high-ranking military officers. This is a public secret (Taussig 1999) in wide circulation in the country, and one frequently transmitted through allusion. It surfaces among those who were directly affected by the conflict, in the tales such as the one about a woman in her early forties, who, having been adopted by US citizens, searched for the sister she vividly remembered having before being adopted, only to claim to have found her in Guatemala City, the daughter of a prominent, though long-retired, general of the Guatemalan Army. The tale recounts how this woman, having approached the former high-ranking military officer in the hope to arrange a meeting with her sister, is said to have been refused contact. The retired general and his wife resolutely maintained that their daughter was unequivocally their ‘natural daughter’, not an adopted offspring. These rumours, insinuations and dismissals articulate a sense of social proximity among subjects whose location is usually posited to be incommensurate, due to the chasm carved by history, lineage and racism (Casaús Arzú 2007) between oligarchic families and everyone else in contemporary Guatemala.⁸ Claims and counter-claims concerning one’s relations to others produce a sense of proximity and distance across the (neo)colonial racist logics and practices of violent appropriation and dispossession that tie those who devised and operationalised the infliction of genocidal violence during the scorched earth campaigns of the Guatemalan conflict in the early 1980s, to those who suffered – and resisted – the onslaught. More fundamentally, such claims and counter-claims produce a sense of subjects being in *some* relation to one another and suggest that, in some instances, proximity might have been produced *through* genocidal violence: making kin out of genocide.⁹ In these accounts, high ranking military officers are figures that embody the sovereign power to ‘let live and make die’ alongside the biopolitical capacity to take life to manage it and foster it (Foucault [1976] 1990: 138). Quite literally, they are said to have taken

children as spoils of war, moved by some ethical impulse to manage them by rescuing them. In the case noted above, however, the retired general never acknowledged that his daughter might be an adopted offspring, or conceded that she may have a sibling. He also refused the woman's request to take a DNA test, whilst also preventing his daughter from taking the test to ascertain if the two women might indeed be related. The woman searching for her long-lost sister resigned herself to perusing the striking family resemblance she saw in the photos of the woman she regarded to be her sister on social media.¹⁰

There are other cases whose details have been meticulously researched and publicly disseminated in the press, and most recently, turned into the subject of documentaries such as *Finding Oscar*, released in 2016 to wide acclaim. *Finding Oscar* tells the story of Oscar Alfredo Ramírez Castañeda, a man in his early forties living near Boston, Massachusetts. It recounts how Oscar Ramírez was unexpectedly approached by the Assistant Prosecutor of the Unit of Special Cases of the Internal Armed Conflict of the Human Rights Office of the Ministerio Público – the Office of the Public Prosecutor – in Guatemala. The Assistant Prosecutor was working on the case of a massacre known as Dos Erres that took place in the northern region of Petén in 1982.¹¹ The villagers of Dos Erres were slaughtered by special military units known as Kaibiles, who suspected the village to be supporting the guerrillas active in the area.¹² In this well-documented case in which 251 people were brutally killed by Kaibiles forces – an unusual case in Guatemala, because it has since led to a prosecution and a conviction – the Assistant Prosecutor found that following the massacre, some Kaibiles soldiers took children with them. These children were the only survivors. The same Assistant Prosecutor had previously handled the case of Ramiro Osorio,¹³ now based in Canada, who, having been traced and identified as a survivor of the Dos Erres massacre, subsequently received a compensation payment from the government of Guatemala following the judgement from the Inter-American Court for Human Rights filed in his favour. Oscar Alfredo Ramírez Castañeda's early life seemed to have followed a similar path. The question for him now was to imagine a new family resemblance and reconsider the status of the family resemblances he had known all his life. As Rotella notes in the report on the case:

[Oscar Alfredo Ramírez Castañeda] had never known his mother. He did not remember his father, who had never married. Lt. Oscar Ovidio Ramírez Ramos had died in an accident when he was just four. Oscar's grandmother and aunts had raised him to revere his father. As the family told it, the lieutenant was a hero. He graduated at the top of his academy class, became an elite commando and won medals in combat. Oscar treasured the soldier's red beret, his aging photo album. He liked to leaf through the pictures showing an officer with a bantam build and youthful smile, riding in a tank, carrying the flag. The lieutenant's nickname, a

diminutive of Oscar, was Cocorico. Oscar called himself Cocorico the Second. ‘You don’t know me.’ [the Assistant Prosecutor stated in her letter] If the prosecutor’s suspicions were correct, Oscar didn’t know himself. He was not the son of an honorable soldier. He was a kidnapping victim, a battlefield trophy, living proof of mass murder.¹⁴

Family resemblances have something to do with common knowledge. For Ramírez Castañeda, they hinged on sharing a nickname with his father, ‘Cocorico’, a figuring of relatedness that was challenged and radically reoriented by the Assistant Prosecutor’s intervention. Jolts shake up the social field and realign domains of knowledge. They reconfigure connections, shift categories and perspectives – including understandings about the fate of individuals whose lives were marked by the experience of genocidal violence during the Guatemalan conflict. Jolts in the organisation of knowledge not only reconfigure relations, they slide across scales through scale-hopping and scale-switching, in a context where there is a very fine line between figuring and experiencing family, and figuring and experiencing political violence and genocide. In the case of Ramírez Castañeda, the scales in questions were precisely those of kinning and violence. Knowledge practices tied to determining family resemblances through names had to be suspended and substituted with other scales in an effort to learn to see violence. This, in turn, entailed a process of familiarisation with the events in Dos Erres that, it now transpired, had so radically marked his life course. In parallel, the effect of defamiliarisation from those who had been family all his life also ensued. Violence emerged as tied to scales of kinning and dekinning through which identity and belonging had to shift and be reimagined. Thirty-five years after the events, violence yielded a new set of relatives. More surprisingly still, it yielded a father. In the reconstructions of events offered in the documentary *Finding Oscar*, the question of family resemblances, and the resemblances tying Ramírez Castañeda to an elderly man in Petén, is no longer in the domain of names, but rather, is returned to the body. The reports in the press stressed the capacity of the DNA test to tease apart child abductor from kin, and connect the survivor of a massacre to kin and community anew. The narrative of the film, however, asks Ramírez Castañeda – and by extension, the spectator – to see the likeness between Ramírez Castañeda’s blue eyes and the blue eyes of this elderly man, whose gait and frame uncannily are also said to mirror his own. Blue eyes and whiteness elicit and make explicit the genocidal imaginary that sets Ramírez Castañeda apart. They reveal the racialised gaze that made the child worth saving and the racialising desire that oriented the action of the soldiers who, invested with the capacity of letting live and making die, resolved to take him.¹⁵ Ramírez Castañeda’s process of reckoning with his personal odyssey in the film mirrors the spectator’s reckoning with the scale of mass violence and genocide (cf. Nelson 2009). Queering relations, adjoining and distancing, learning and unlearning to see family resemblances are knowledge practices tied to the violent histories in

which identity, sociality, life and death are all thrown into question. Persons and things entail an excess, in that they exceed the domains of identity and belonging and point to other possibilities and relations. In turn, they are inherently epistemological anxious, in that little is ever self-evident, and that which appear to be so entails the possibility of dissimulation and doubt. Paradoxically, in the case of Oscar Ramírez Castañeda, there had been no documents, signatures or archives. The transnational movement of the former Kaibil soldier and the child from Dos Erres had unravelled though an undocumented trajectory. Indeed, it now transpired, Ramírez Castañeda still lived an ostensibly undocumented existence in Boston, Massachusetts. There had been no signatures, no papers, no archive. Jolts and relations had appeared through other means, through other persons and things.

The revelations about Edmond Mulet are a further case in point. Edmond Mulet, a prominent Guatemalan diplomat whose career included prestigious appointments in the United Nations, also came to public attention in a case of children adopted transnationally at the time of the conflict. In early 2015, *Plaza Pública* – an electronic magazine dedicated to political analysis and investigative journalism in Guatemala – released a detailed report about transnational adoptions during the years of harshest political repression in the country. The report named Mulet as a key attorney (*notario*) who was instrumental in orchestrating the movement of children through transnational adoption circuits during the 1980s, primarily to Quebec, Canada (Escalón 2015). The report carefully traced the operations of *Les Enfants du Soleil*, a network connecting prospective adoptive parents in Montreal to children held in the state orphanage Hogar Elisa Martínez in Guatemala. The involvement of state orphanages in these adoptions meant that the adoptions themselves, unlike the majority of transnational adoptions from Guatemala up to 2006 (Posocco 2011), would not be literally extra-judicial. Rather, the involvement of social workers, notaries and the attorney general produced a copious flow of signatures and documents through which kinning and dekinning would be instantiated, and identity and belonging redirected and redefined. The archive, however, remained elusive.

When I first read the account in *Plaza Pública*, I thought the narrative was both familiar and revelatory. The account was familiar because it detailed the process of transnational adoption in the same way I had described it in my own analysis (Posocco 2011; 2015), thus confirming that I seemed to have understood and represented the process correctly. However, I was simultaneously incredibly surprised. I had worked extensively on adoption files in the archives of the Guatemalan Judiciary. Through this detailed reading of the files, I was able to build what seemed to be a solid account, albeit a fragmentary one, of the transnational adoption process. I was also able to identify the names of legal practitioners who appeared to have been central to the processing of adoption applications in different decades. They recurred, in the paperwork, as did the names of social workers. From the files I had been given access to by the relevant civil servants, it was possible to build a picture,

albeit a partial one, of the working practices of legal practitioners and adoption agencies that had acted on behalf of adoptive parents from different countries – the United States, Canada, France, Italy, northern Europe – and the social workers who had written reports to inform decisions on individual adoptions. I had, however, completely failed to see Edmond Mulet in the paperwork. My fieldnotes recorded that I had identified some key players, but not Edmond Mulet. The revelations about Mulet elicited and made explicit the fundamentally fragmentary character of the archive. As it turned out, Mulet responded to the *Plaza Pública* revelations publicly (Mulet 2015), arguing that he had indeed assisted the movement of children abroad during the conflict, so the presence or absence of his name from the records was not really the question, but had done so to rescue the offspring of individuals who were active in the guerrilla organisations and therefore in danger. Responding to his critics who accused him of having facilitated adoptions of children who were not in fact orphans for his personal gain, Mulet pointed to the inherent ambiguity of the relevant legal definition of ‘orphan’: ‘the law says an orphan is one who has lost his father or mother, or both’ (Mulet 2015: 2). Losing kin, acquiring kin, this seemed to be an open-ended affair governed by loose definitions – even in legal terms, Mulet admitted. One should not be too confident when aiming to pin down family resemblances or kin ties. These difficulties with family resemblance and kin ties were similar to those I encountered in my work on the adoption files. Through ethnography, signatures, documents and archives appeared to be devices with scaling capacities that anxiously shifted across domains of knowledge – in a context where their production was widely held to have entailed forgery, coercion and censorship. It was impossible to ascertain the veracity of signatures and of the formulaic declarations of birth mothers redacted by notaries. Birth certificates attached to the files often had no referent in local birth registers offices. The archives seemed to be repositories of counterfeit files and were increasingly difficult to access, making information appear at once spurious, sparse or unattainable. The image of a disappearing archive emerged alongside the unreliability and fictitiousness of the paperwork that could actually be traced, located, retrieved and examined.

Persons and things were not quite what they seemed to be; they were – or could potentially be – always already something else. They were less than themselves and more than themselves simultaneously. Postplurality emerged to connote relationality and saturated the ethnographic tableau. The ethnographic tableau also continuously shifted. On occasions, when seeking to trace individuals who may have been put up for adoption, I was confronted not with an adoption file, but with the prospect of searching for an exhumation file. The movement from adoption file to exhumation file was engendered by the conditions in which individuals appeared and disappeared. Whilst some individuals could be traced as having been moved abroad through transnational adoption, others might be found in a mass grave in a military zone in the vicinity of the place where it could be shown some transnational

adoptees were originally abducted. The simultaneous proximity and distance between life and death was produced by the kinning and dekinning capacities of genocidal violence. As reports emerged that the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation (FAFG) team was working on mass graves within the precinct of the military zone in Cobán, Alta Verapaz, and the graves were found to contain the bodies of many children, the ethnographic tableau shifted yet again. Through this jolt, the image of the vanishing archive appeared alongside the progressive coming into focus of a mass grave. This split tableau simultaneously captures the kinning and dekinning capacities of genocidal violence and the shift in scales thus engendered. It elicits new reckonings that emerge through juxtaposition. Shifts in scale engender a queering of subjects, objects and relations and a redirection of the analogic flow. When seeking to locate children forcefully removed from a community in Alta Verapaz whom I knew to have Maya Q'eqchi' and Maya Poqomchi' relatives, I found adult adoptees living in provincial Italy. Ethnography, then, is also reconfigured as a result. It appears as a series of jolts and a succession of postplural tableaus. It emerges as the ever shifting reconfiguring of subjects, objects and relations. Persons and things are not quite what they seem to be, and are (also) always already relationally, intermittently, something else.

Postplurality, queering scale

The difficulty in pinning down the question of family resemblances and the precise status of one's ethnographic objects dramatises and makes explicit a fundamental analytically and ethnographically resonant problem: a problem with categories. Signatures, documents and archives – in their alternating presence and absence, appearance and disappearance – are ethnographic objects that have scaling capacities with queering effects. Scale and scale switching transitively and agentially queer categories of knowledge and being. In common parlance and in academic analysis, the notion of 'scale' relates to knowledge practices of spatialisation and contextualisation. Scale has to do with the figuring of spatial categories such as, for example, 'the regional', 'the global' and 'the transnational' – or inversely, 'the local', 'the vernacular', 'the molecular'. These are important terms in contemporary queer studies and in queer anthropology.¹⁶ Indeed, there exists a significant archive of regional literature which engages with scale as a spatial category from a number of perspectives. This important archive includes critical and reflexive positions.¹⁷ Conversely, Valverde (2015) conceives of scale through the notion of the 'chronotope' and reconfigures scalar analysis as concerning 'space, time, and affect and mood' (Valverde 2015: 57). One way of figuring the project of analysis of scale for Valverde is to exceed the confines of both geographical critical spatial analysis and of the interdisciplinary critical legal studies' deployment of mapping analogies 'to reflect the open-endedness and dynamism of all networks' (Valverde 2015: 67). Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2015) has also suggested that a complex scalar composition of space and time might

be in play in the constitution of research objects. The ‘rush of stories’ that emerges and is sensed through ethnographic attention posits a problem with scale, as ‘[i]ts scales do not nest neatly; they draw attention to interrupting geographies and tempos’ (2015: 37). Scalability can occur neatly, without engendering a shift in the ethnographic tableau. However, for Tsing, and arguably, for Strathern too, it is at the point of *nonscalability* – or incommensurability – where ethnographic insight lies. For Tsing, ‘[i]t is time to turn our attention to the nonscalable, not only as objects of description but also as incitements to theory’ (Tsing 2015: 38).

Valverde’s critical chronotopic re-imagining of scale and Tsing’s emphasis on nonscalability are important for a theoretical account of the shifts in scale I have been concerned with here. Scale and knowledge practices of scale shifting, I have argued following Strathern, foreground the complex project of grappling with scale’s epistemological dimension (Strathern 1996; 1999; 2005) and ontological properties and consequences. Scales refer to different ‘orders of knowledge’ and relational shifts in modes of being. Corsín Jiménez (2005) partially captures this problematic, placing emphasis specifically on the epistemological implications. Corsín Jiménez states that scales as ‘orders of knowledge’ refer to instances

where particular orders of relations (of economy, or religion, or kinship, etc.) [and here I should add, gender, race, and sexuality] are mobilised and measured up against other scales, e.g. what image of ‘the family’ is conjured up when thinking about ‘the miner’ as the emblem of ‘modernity’.

(Corsín Jiménez 2005: 158)

The shifts in orders of knowledge I have been concerned with here have similarly entailed juxtapositions between images of family resemblances, kinning and dekinning, on the one hand, and genocidal violence. The ethnographic tableau pointed to the postplural figuring of family resemblances in play in the proximity and distance between figuring family and figuring genocide. In turn, the postplural emergence of a shifting diptych containing a disappearing archive and the progressive coming into focus of a mass grave radically reconfigured and reoriented the ethnographic tableau. These are concrete relational figurations through which multiple and shifting connections and disconnections brought on by violence are imagined, experienced, embodied and enacted. In this context of fragmentation, parts have ontological valence, as it is through them that a relational redistribution of substance is enacted. Fragments emerge as relational material figurations of histories and experiences of violence, conflict and genocide. Concurrently, the ethnographer’s analytical attention shifts onto the place of such fragments in the making of relational shifts in scale, form and ontological status. Fragments progressively appear entangled in performative, worlding and transformative reconfigurations (Kockelman 2013) such as those connected to shifts from

adoption file to exhumation file, body to paper, personhood to the inorganic, and from archive replete with files, subjects and relations to empty building. A range of postplural shifts in scale, form and image comes into view, and new questions emerge as to the place of ethnography's commitment to tracking, figuring and conjuring up relations in these complex dynamics.

This meaning of scale and scale switching, and the shifts in composition engendered in the domains of knowledge and being, evoke, in part, Wittgenstein's notion of 'family resemblances' found in *Philosophical Investigations* (2009). In this Wittgensteinian sense, scale and scale-switching refer to the making of connections between domains of knowledge, where 'things which may be thought to be connected by one essential common feature may in fact be connected by a series of overlapping similarities, where no one feature is common to all' (Wittgenstein 2009: 64). These types of connections and constituencies seem, *prima facie*, rather queer. They are relations between persons and things that may intermittently share a commonality, but have no features in common.¹⁸ Rapport has argued that this modelling of connection, similarity and difference corresponds to Wittgenstein's polythetic category, whose key characteristic is that 'members of the category need to share no single feature in common' (Rapport 2012: 158). Rapport points out that no single feature has to be shared by all; rather, common traits may be partially shared and randomly – or merographically – distributed. For Rapport, what really matters is the making of the individual that takes place through this partial and discontinuous sharing of features and traits: '[t]here is no necessary limit or closure to these traits (no alphabet) and their particular possession and also their ordering is unique to each member, making each individual' (Rapport 2012: 158). From this perspective, Oscar Ramírez Castañeda's individuality and uniqueness are paramount, over and above the names and embodied traits which might have come into view through the rescaling of family resemblances engendered in the wake of genocide. The individual, as a unique assemblage of traits across multiple scales of family resemblances and violence, is, for Rapport, a modelling of a 'universal relationship between individual and human totality' (Rapport 2012: 159). In other words, shifts in scale are for Rapport all conducive to modellings of generality and individuality which ultimately and fundamentally constitute each individual subject in the irreducible generality of human individuality, or 'anyone' (Rapport 2012).

In my analysis, I have stressed the aptness of multiple ways of figuring connections beyond mimesis, and emphasised instead connections marked by partiality (Strathern 1991b), incommensurability (Posocco 2014a), non-equivalence (Povinelli 2007), nonscalability (Tsing 2015), discontinuity and rupture (Posocco 2014b), as productive starting points for reconsidering relations. In 'Queer and Now', Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1993: 8) took 'queer' to refer to 'the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances, and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning' when elements do not signify monolithically. In this context, 'queer' extends to work that

spins the term outward along dimensions that can't be subsumed under gender and sexuality at all: all the ways that race, ethnicity, postcolonial nationality criss-cross with these and other identity-constituting, identity-fracturing discourses ... To do a new kind of justice to the fractal intricacies of language, skin, migration, state ... [where] the centre of the term queer deepens and shifts.

(Sedgwick 1993: 9)

Partial connections point to such fractal intricacies, and to how, through the work of jolts in knowledge and being, 'context', 'subjects' and 'objects' are also queerly figured and rescaled as a result. They deepen and shift. Such fractal intricacies are, for Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, replete with queer cross-identificatory potential that is constitutively fragmenting as it is world-making. Strathernian fractality, in turn, as an abstract modelling of relations through repetition and replication in juxtapositions, continuously fragments and reassembles (partial) subjects, objects and worlds. In my analysis, I have argued that queering effects can be discerned in the shifts in scale which engender a reorientation and reorganisation of ethnographic tableaux and the categories which underpin them. Such jolts have epistemological and ontological valence.¹⁹ Partial connections, and the relations and entities relationally engendered, are assembled and disassembled in the orders of knowledge *and* in the distribution of substance that ensues from socially and historically situated practices and figurations. Here, then, I have been concerned with grappling with and thinking through postplural understandings of scale. Scales of postplurality, I have argued, have formal qualities – like the 'strathernogram' conjured up in Gell's reading ([1999] 2006) of Strathern's *The Gender of the Gift* – and are therefore concerned, one might say, with 'picturing the facts of the world' – in Wittgenstein's terms – as 'a thought expressed perceptibly through the senses' (Wittgenstein 2009: Proposition 3.1). Such formal qualities are most apparent in the reorganisation and recomposition of the ethnographic tableaux and in the movement from figuring a disappearing archive and the coming into view of a mass grave. In turn, the scale of postplurality is always already 'worlded' – qua *knowledge practice*. Postplurality's worlding effects are most conspicuous when figured at the point of scale shifting, where relations are not stated but shown – to follow Wittgenstein – or conjured up through the 'ethnographic effect' – to follow Strathern. Further, shifts in scale always already entail breaks with context – and a merographic postplural conjuring up of objects and subjects, parts and wholes, fragments and worlds (see Posocco 2014a). Such an understanding of scale and scale shifting has queering effects and could be figured as a form of queer analysis, a queer analytic. Postplural queering is a knowledge practice, an operation, a figurative conjuring up. It is not a domain, subject or object category, though it refers to processes through which domains, subjects and objects are assembled and disassembled, and substance is intermittently distributed and rearranged. Always already historically situated, postplural

scaling and scale shifting queerly dislodge the assumed transparency of the categories that underpin ethnographic tableaux, as well as the idea of ‘proper objects’ of queer anthropology.²⁰

Notes

- 1 Acknowledgements: I am grateful to EJ Gonzalez-Polledo and Paul Boyce for sharing readings of the work of Marilyn Strathern in person and through intermittently online messaging over the course of three years, as the idea of a book project developed. An early draft of this chapter was presented at the American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting in 2015. I thank my fellow panelists, EJ, Paul, Hadley Renkin and Thomas Hendriks, as well as our discussant, Sarah Green, and the audience, for their feedback. I also thank the organisers and audience at the research seminar ‘Queering Knowledge: Analytics, Devices and Investments after Marilyn Strathern’ held at the University of Sussex in February 2016 for their comments and suggestions.
- 2 See Posocco 2011; 2014; 2015.
- 3 See Stoler 2009; 2016.
- 4 I am grateful to Sarah Green for her critical engagement with a very preliminary draft of this chapter I presented at the American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting in Denver in 2015. This point of clarification is in direct response to her comments raised then. On situated postplurality, see Posocco 2014a.
- 5 I borrow the expression ‘in the wake’ from Sharpe (2016) to refer to the complex aftermath of genocide and to signal that genocide is an ongoing event.
- 6 With reference to this model of pluralisation, Strathern states: ‘I refer to as the sense of infinity given by the Euro-American view of society, as made up of a plurality of persons, would correspond to the pre-nineteenth-century assumption that the infinite was present “as a more or less tacit horizon of numbers”’ (1988: 107). This is the potential as opposed to the actual and absolute infinite, which exists as a totality, given all at once’ (Strathern 1999: 302, footnote #9).
- 7 Strathern writes that ‘But to write society, as anthropologists do, is another matter altogether. Persons are involved, yet what completes them seems to be society itself, whether through “socialisation” or through the analytical strategy of putting people’s acts and artefacts into their “social context”. they are supplemented by society, persons are being-supplemented by an entity of a different order of abstraction, with its own properties, its own presence. These include the necessity that persons represent society to themselves, which generates an incompleteness of a particular kind: a demand for interpretation. The EuroAmerican vision of society further presumes a plurality of persons; insofar as their interpretations are held relative to one another, so too may interpretations of societies seemingly supplement and relativise one another’ (Strathern 1999: 236).
- 8 See also Nelson 1999; 2015.
- 9 See also Posocco 2014a, chapter 4, ‘Secrecy, Sociality, Merographic Analogy’.
- 10 DNA tests are part of new idioms of relatedness and kinning tied to forensic technologies and forensic aesthetics deployed in the search of victims of forced disappearance. Their potency and efficacy are said to rest on the truth-making capacities that are attributed to genetic substance (TallBear 2013). In practice, forensic techniques appear to be rather blunt instruments and matches and identifications are rare, when set against the number of forced disappearances and the samples individuals are willing to donate in order to trace the whereabouts of their relatives. A sense of incongruence and lack of proportion permeates the scene.
- 11 See also CEH 1999.

- 12 See CEH 1999. See also Posocco 2014a: Chapter 4.
- 13 The full judgement for the case of Ramiro Osorio is available online, http://www.corteidh.or.cr/docs/casos/articulos/seriec_211_ing.pdf (last accessed 8 November 2017).
- 14 See Rotella 2012, <http://www.propublica.org/article/finding-oscar-massacre-memory-and-justice-in-guatemala> (last accessed 8 November 2017).
- 15 The residents of Dos Erres were not Maya but, rather, poor Ladinos, that is, of mixed ancestry. Whilst the massacre of Dos Erres does not fall within definition of genocide in the terms and protocols of international law, these cases of child abduction clearly show the workings of the racist and genocidal imaginary which made some children rescuable and other dispensable.
- 16 For critical engagements with these framings see Allen (2011), Manalansan (2015; 2016), Morgensen (2011), Weiss (2016). See also the special issue on 'Queer/ing Regions' edited by Cüneyt Çakırlar (2016).
- 17 I have reviewed some of this literature in the context of a discussion of Povinelli's book *The Empire of Love* (Posocco 2008). I stand by the distinctions between diffusionist, translational and critically translational perspectives as useful heuristic devices to map and orient the extensive literature.
- 18 There is an opportunity here to queer Wittgenstein more abrasively and ask what exactly amounts to a 'family', not to mention a 'resemblance', in Wittgenstein's own oeuvre.
- 19 See Gonzalez-Polledo (2017).
- 20 It could be argued that the challenge here lies in the fact that the point should not be stated, but shown. The question has to do with the relation between meta-theoretical reflection and (ethnographic) analysis and theorising. For this purpose, it is useful to return to Alfred Gell's chapter on the strathernogram, as he so explicitly and persuasively notes the different registers Marilyn Strathern's work engages with and operates in. The arguments and figurations of Strathern as a meta-anthropologist of anthropology and meta-gender theorist are very clear to me – they animate the page.

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8 On feminist critique and how the ontological turn is queering anthropology

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Our contribution to this volume on the queering of knowledge after Strathern is a specific focus on one such investment, namely what has been called the ‘ontological turn’. Our aim is threefold: we will give an outline of what we see as the feminist genealogy of the ontological turn, we will then locate the core methodology of the ontological turn in Strathern’s *The Gender of the Gift*, and then compare this methodology with queer perspectives as developed especially by Butler. Arguing that there are key parallels in these projects, we suggest that the ontological turn is queering anthropology. This chapter thus stages a comparison between queer perspectives on the one hand, and what we call a ‘relational methodology’, as it was outlined by Strathern (1988) and developed further in the ontological turn, on the other hand. We are aware that by privileging this specific relation we ignore nuances and disagreements within both approaches.

We will claim that in many ways Strathern has redefined what anthropology is, as a kind of alter-anthropology. Moreover, she has set in operation a concrete methodology for its realization, what we outline below as a ‘relational methodology’ (see Strathern 1991). Anthropology, after Strathern, is a post-representation, post-plural anthropology (Holbraad and Pedersen 2009; Strathern 1991).¹ This is an anthropology that seeks to turn the Euro-American tradition of anthropology upside down, to interrogate anthropology itself rather than describing the world through its categories. The Cambridge version of what has been called the ontological turn in anthropology (see for instance Holbraad 2012; Holbraad and Pedersen 2009; 2017; Henare, Holbraad and Wastell 2007; Viveiros de Castro 1992; 2004), which is the version we deal with in this chapter, was developed in many ways as a direct consequence of Strathern’s contribution (see Holbraad and Pedersen 2009; 2017).² This part of the ontological turn, thus, arguably has a feminist genealogy that deserves more attention than it has received so far.

In the recently published *Before and After Gender* (Strathern 2016), originally written in the late 1960s, but never published as planned, we can see the kinds of questions and analytical problems Strathern was grappling with, how categories in many ways become obstacles for thinking, in particular the categories ‘men and women’. These reflections are further developed in a

much-quoted article, where Strathern (1987) characterized the relationship between anthropology and feminism as an awkward one. Feminists, she pointed out, can never really achieve liberation from the patriarchal structures they are part of. This is due to the convergence and mutual identification between subject and object in feminist studies, which seemed necessary for political solidarity (see Weiss 2016). However, this prevented a critical point of view from which to question the very categories that underpin patriarchy (such as the individual and nature/culture). Anthropologists, on the other hand, Strathern argues, can realize a critical point of view: 'from their vantage point outside their own culture, anthropologists see that the very basis for the separation rests on common cultural suppositions about the nature of personhood and of relationships' (1987: 290). The separation Strathern refers to here is not only the separation between men and women (which is very often taken for granted), but also the separation between subject and object in the analysis. Establishing a critical vantage point, she argues, implies a distinction between anthropology/anthropologists (subject) and ethnography (object). As we will return to in this chapter, for this relationship to be the generator of critique, it also needs to be reversed so that anthropology is understood, recursively, in terms of the ethnography (Holbraad 2012). This is not just a different way of saying that ethnography is anthropology. Rather, Holbraad's point is to, in a sense, constitute the ethnographic terms, positions and modalities of being as anthropologically real – not as representative of something other than what it is. For now, we want to emphasize a common core shared by the Strathernian argument and the ontological turn; that finding a vantage point from which we can question the taken for granted is the very point of anthropology.³

We will claim that it is exactly the limitations of feminism, as she outlined it in the passage above, that encouraged Strathern to develop the potential in anthropology for finding a point of alterity that can trigger us to think differently – what Holbraad has later called 'recursivity' (Holbraad 2012; Holbraad and Pedersen 2009). There is an interesting kinship between 'recursivity' and queer perspectives. To put it rhetorically, the ontological turn initiated by the work of Strathern is queering anthropology. We see a parallel in the call to move beyond representationalism (Strathern 1991; Holbraad 2014) and the need to queer established perspectives.⁴ Thus, perhaps we can see the ontological turn as a new and redefined phase of feminist anthropology in which queering allows for a less awkward and more beneficent relationship than the one noted by Strathern.⁵

It is a key impulse in queering to challenge not only the relationship between subject and object in representation, but also the ontological assumptions in this relationship. Moving into an anti-representationalist paradigm for our understanding is thus a key issue in both the ontological turn and in queer perspectives. Realizing this kinship and genealogy of the ontological turn can also help us overcome the 'for or against' understanding of it, that Bertelsen and Bendixsen (2016), and especially Reed (2016), have

pointed to, and move beyond it by actually exploring the turn. Here we want to argue that a focus on the feminist genealogy can help us understand how this is not so much a ‘turn’ as a queer continuation of feminist critique in anthropology. Furthermore, we also want to show how queer studies can benefit from a relationship with anthropology, and specifically, the theoretical developments within what has become known as the ontological turn.

Our main argument is that the ontological turn in anthropology offers a specific technology, or methodology, of finding the point of alterity (of ‘queering’), that avoids reproducing established categories. This goes both for the sexual and gendered identity categories that tend to be reproduced in the identity-politics version of queer studies (see Fraser 1997), and for the categories underpinning queer theory that seeks to push past such identitarian frames. The turn to ontology is useful, we argue, because, while attempting to radically challenge categories, queer theories nevertheless assume an understanding of ‘power’ and ‘norms’ as the productive force that creates the subject and object of ethnography as well as relations between them. Recursive thinking, and the reversal of the relationship between subject and object (anthropology and ethnography), can push towards a more radical ‘queering’ which does not depend on such a preconception. On the other hand, queer theory offers an important reminder to the ontological turn, that research also needs to address issues that are heavily politicized in anthropologists’ own society – issues that largely remain, until now, untouched by the Cambridge version of the ontological turn.

Let us backtrack and start the argument from the beginning: we will first give a short description of Strathern’s ideas in *The Gender of the Gift* and in *Partial Connections*, and how this has been developed by Holbraad in his *Truth in Motion*. We focus in particular on what we call the ‘relational methodology’ which we see as the core of Strathern’s project and the foundation for what Holbraad has called ‘recursivity’.⁶ This ‘relational methodology’ (or the relation as a method⁷) is our conceptualization of the common ground between Strathern and proponents of the ontological turn, especially Holbraad (2012). We realize, of course, that there also are key differences between these approaches, and we will discuss them towards the end of the chapter, but for now it is the genealogical connection between them we want to highlight. We end this section by outlining this methodology as a potentially new paradigm of queering knowledge in anthropology. In the next section we turn to queer studies, looking at how it has been developed as a critical positionality vis-à-vis the normal, the legitimate, the dominant – in a way which has a certain kinship with the relational methodology in the tradition from Strathern. To better bring out the convergences and divergences between these perspectives, we stage a comparison of Strathern’s re-analysis of male initiation cults in Papua New Guinea and Butler’s analysis of the French debate on gay marriage. We end by discussing some challenges related to politics and critique, and a call for a stronger conversation between the ontological turn and queer anthropology.

The new feminist anthropology

In feminist thinking generally, and in particular in the difference-oriented feminism, reaching for a point of alterity from which we can critically look back at ourselves is vital. It is the only option for breaking with patriarchal, objective science (Haraway 1991). There are different sources, of course, to reach this point of alterity; in language itself and the *écriture féminine* (Irigaray 1985; Cixous 1976), in psychoanalysis and in dreaming (Kristeva 1982), in the establishment of other figurations, such as the cyborg (Haraway 1991) or the ‘companion species’ (Haraway 2008), but for anthropology this point of alterity is to be found in ethnography.⁸ However, this is not straightforward and self-evident. In the history of anthropology, ethnography has played quite a different role, the ‘masculine’ role if you will, of objective representation, description and documentation. In more recent anthropology however the idea of ‘ethnographic theory’, or ethnography as not only an object for analysis, but a source for alternative analyses, has gained prominence. In this development, Strathern has been crucial. Let us now look at how ethnography became the source of alterity for anthropology.

In her new book *Before and After Gender* (which we mentioned above) we can detect a certain discontent with feminist critique as it is being formulated in the late 1960s. She points out, for instance, that ideas of feminine liberation, in its rhetoric and its goal, seem to mirror masculine oppression. She is looking for expressions that resist turning our gaze in the opposite direction, and rather push us to look in a different direction altogether. She wants to move beyond mere negation. This is exactly what she seeks to do in *The Gender of the Gift* (GoG). Here, Strathern shows us the way in which key concepts and models in western social science, as ‘groups’, ‘domains’, ‘identity’ and ‘power’, are ‘naturalized’ and founded on a prior notion of the gendered individual as the starting point for social relations. She presents ethnography from different places in Melanesia (island and coastal areas as well as from the highlands in Papua New Guinea) and points out how common and almost agreed upon conclusions about gender relations fail to acknowledge the perspective from which they are performed. In chapter 3, for instance, she presents key ethnographic accounts and shows how anthropologists’ understanding of gender relations are based on an implicit understanding of gender as a matter of individual identity, and male cults as a matter of solidifying masculine solidarity. In dominant understandings of Melanesian ethnography of gender relations, for instance in analyses of male subtribes exchanging women in a marriage, or in concepts as ‘gender segregation’, ‘sexual antagonism’, ‘male cults’ or ‘male domination’, gender as individual identity is taken for granted. In deconstructing the models on which past analyses are based, one key question is at the forefront – what if the notion of the individual as the basis for social relations is not the starting point? In other words, Strathern suggests that the most widespread understanding of gender relations in Melanesia generally, and in the highlands of

Papua New Guinea specifically, is based on an asymmetry of perspectives between Western anthropologists' social scientific categories (in the tradition from Durkheim, Weber, Marx and others) and the categories and perspective in accounts and observations from Melanesia. In other words, in these analyses ethnography is not seen as a source for challenging or critiquing western ideas and concepts, but as raw-material to be translated into these concepts and understood within these terms. The radical methodology implied in Strathern's re-analysis of Melanesian ethnography in GoG is a result of her effort to challenge this asymmetry. Strathern levels ethnography with analysis, making the ethnography the subject and herself (and anthropology) the object of the analysis. In her ethnography she finds an analysis which privileges the concept of the relation, and she, in turn, privileges this concept by making her analysis a comparison of anthropology and Melanesia in GoG.

Let us look more closely at this analytical manoeuvre. She points out that 'Melanesians make considerable imagistic use of gender. But we cannot assume that individual identity is at the heart of what is going on. Concern with identity as an attribute of the individual person is a Western phenomenon' (Strathern 1988: 59). In her encounter with gender imagery from Mount Hagen she is dissatisfied with what she perceives as a limited understanding, and she points out: 'it is important to be clear about the extent to which we do or do not wish to make their preoccupation ours.' (1988: 59). In other words, do we want to approach another way of seeing the world, or do we want an immediate translation into established models and concepts? This is an almost simple but also highly crucial point – what do we do with our ethnography? As Ingold (2014) has pointed out, ethnography is of course not 'objective' or 'pure data', but an already digested form of understanding. Thus, ethnography is always already analytical. Nevertheless, our understanding of ethnography can always be pushed in a relational direction where focus, explicitly, is on how our concepts stand in relation to what we see, observe and hear. This, we claim, is one key contribution Strathern has given anthropology: to be aware of the relationship between the subject and object of analyses, and turning this relation around.⁹ This is the crucial point in the 'levelling' of anthropology and ethnography pointed to above, or what we, with Holbraad (2012), can call their recursive relationship. If we are to understand anthropological concepts (as gender) recursively, we need to focus on the preoccupations of our interlocutors, we need to be critical of the taken for granted translatability of ethnography into anthropological analysis (see also Viveiros de Castro 2004). In ethnography, we can find access to a form of critique, to a different way of understanding. With Strathern, ethnography becomes an explicit source for another perspective as she leaves 'room for' ethnography to speak differently. Holbraad (2012) has called this process 'ontography': the process whereby we use ethnography to question established concepts. In the process of recording observations and conversations, we find, sometimes, that our understanding is un-harmonious, because there is something lacking or something which triggers doubt. Looking back on this, and

questioning the concepts that trigger this doubt, is the core of the recursive method. As Strathern points out in the quote above, it is the idea that gender might not be a matter of individual identity, which is the trigger point for her 1988 analysis of gender relations in Melanesia.

Let us look more concretely at the way she reasons by examining her reading of anthropological analyses of male cults in the Highlands. Read (1971) was the first to give anthropological readership an understanding of what was to be called 'the sexual antagonism of the New Guinea Highlands'. He described the secret flute cult, the *nama* cult of the Gahuku-Gama in the Eastern Highlands, as 'a community of interests among men' (Read 1971: 223, 225, in Strathern 1988: 54). As Strathern points out, it is self-evident in Read's analysis of the male cults that the sexes should be segregated (and thus that the cult is 'proof' of the need for separation). It is equally self-evident that the male cult, which is at once both sexual and social, is a matter of strengthening male solidarity, creating the male sub-tribe. Men needed the flute cult to establish a sense of masculine supremacy, in the face of, according to Read, their sense of being biologically inferior to women (especially at puberty, when girls mature more quickly than the young boys). As Strathern points out, Read's reading of the male cult is his reading of the Gahuka-Gama society: the male cult *is* the society.

Strathern also examines Herdt's (1987) analysis of Sambia initiation rituals. Instead of explaining the normative homosexual cults as an effort at dominating women (by establishing exclusive cults where biological inferiority in relation to women is handled), Herdt suggest that the cult is an artefact of men's fundamental insecurity and doubt about their masculinity. Thus, the cults are not created as a way of dominating or excluding women. Rather, these cults are created as a way of securing masculine identities. According to Strathern, this is not a different argument or analysis, but rather a refinement of the same line of thinking, where the key is the masculine identity as an individual one. She points out: 'The antagonism model, in so far as it endures, promotes a self-contained approach to gender that pushes the problem of individual identity to the fore' (1988: 58). Instead, Strathern opens up new questions: what if the male cults are not about establishing sexual identities? What if all the ceremonial activity and gender imageries not only in the male cults of the Highlands, but also elsewhere in Melanesia, are not reflecting sexual identities? What if gender is not primarily an attribute of the individual? Strathern points out: 'individual sexual identity is a cultural issue in Western society' (1988: 59). Thus, gender, understood as sexual identity, is a western preconception, also in the social sciences. What if it is possible to see gender differently? What if gender is a matter of relations, and that gender does not, (even ultimately) feedback into a sexual identity? As Strathern points out: 'to assimilate Melanesian understanding of initiation and puberty rituals to sex-role socialization, supposes that the actors hold a similar model of society' (1988: 59). Here we can see how Strathern challenges what we above called the asymmetry between anthropology as subject and

ethnography as object. It might be unproblematic for established anthropology (at least at the time) that 'the natives' model' did not fit one's own model of the social. After all, in anthropology, (or social science, or science, in general) one can find analytical perspectives and understandings that are, somehow, 'above', or has a different truth-claim than the native's perspective. From this point of view, whether or not 'the natives' see the world through these specific concepts (as for instance men and women, power and domination) is really not so interesting. Thus, to ask this question, was/is in itself a radical move in anthropology.

Strathern looks to ethnography as a source to challenge anthropological understanding. In her own and the other ethnographic descriptions she analyses in *GoG*, Strathern finds a different understanding, one that questions the key idea of the individual in our conceptual models of society. In accounts of different kinds of ceremonial gift exchanges, Strathern develops another language for gendered relations, concepts that do not assume that the starting point, and endpoint, of gender is identity, such as the concepts of mediated and unmediated exchanges. In a mediated exchange, the point of departure is that which is being given in, for example, a ceremonial exchange. The object (which might also be a person) is extracted from one (the giver) and absorbed by the other (the receiver), as parts of their person. Thus, the object (a valuable of some kind) is always already part of a person, but can be exchanged and attached to others. This model requires us to challenge the idea of an individual as a given, and of an object as a separate entity. Things are parts of persons, and persons are parts of things. In an unmediated exchange, people do not detach parts of themselves to give. Rather, the relation is one of direct influence, such as ideas about pollution. However, the crucial point Strathern makes is that notions of unmediated exchanges are modelled on the idea of gift exchange as the primary social dynamic, one that establishes persons rather than between pre-established persons.

In much of the critique of *GoG*, Strathern's division between 'us' and 'them' (Melanesia and the West) or commodity economy versus gift economy was highlighted as a key heuristic (Biersack 1991; Josephides 1991). This not only created an analytical binary but also relied on a level of generality that was problematized. Strathern explicitly talks about people in Melanesia as if these are the same (or similar) across vast geographical, linguistic and cultural variation (Highland vs coastal, Papua New Guinea vs Islands Melanesia). However, this critique misses the target, as Strathern is not searching for a more representative description of Melanesia. Rather, she is using ethnography from Melanesia to critique, or re-define, anthropology. She is explicitly setting up the contrast between gift and commodity as a way of doing this analysis. This argument is perhaps more explicit in her book *Partial Connections* published just a couple of years after *GoG*. Here we can see even more clearly how anthropology for Strathern has moved into a post-representational paradigm. By setting up the 'relation' as a key analytic device she turns towards anthropology as a technology for developing concepts. Anthropology

enables, through engagement with ethnography, the possibility of questioning the dominant social scientific models, from a point of critique which is not always already within the established frames of understanding. This is, in our view, the queering move she makes and on which the ontological ‘turn’ in anthropology is built. We now turn to the way in which the relation as an analytic device with Strathern has been developed by the ontological turn and Holbraad in particular as a methodology, what we call ‘the relation as a method’.

In *Truth in Motion* Holbraad (2012) presents his project as building on and extending Strathern’s methodology, emphasizing it as a recursive method. Anthropology’s central task – according to Holbraad – is to ‘make sense of others’ (2012: xv). Making sense of others involves a particular challenge to Holbraad because what makes other people ‘other’ is precisely the fact that they cannot be represented. ‘Alterity’, he writes, ‘is the challenge to which representation cannot rise: it is just when we are *unable* even to describe (let alone interpret, explain, translate, or analyse) aspects of people’s lives that they become other to us’ (Holbraad 2012: xvi). In *Scoping Recursivity* Holbraad (2013) explains that construing Others as a source rather than merely an object of ethnographic knowledge implies rendering relations between the two internal, in the philosophical sense. The ‘native’s’ and the analyst’s point of view stand in a relationship of mutual constitution, he argues. This implies that the ‘native’s’ perspective is constituted as an artefact of ethnographic knowledge, and recursively provides the terms with which that knowledge itself is composed. According to Holbraad (2013), this internal relationship also implies a reversal of the flow of knowledge, where instead of subjecting native beliefs to ethnographic analysis, the native’s point of view provides the basis on which the very infrastructure of ethnographic understanding and theorization is transformed. Holbraad writes:

If what anthropology strives to ‘grasp’ is itself *another* way of grasping (taking a point of view on a ‘native’ point of view), then the anthropologists’ attempts can only take the form of a *shift of perspective*: to grasp the native’s point of view involves allowing it to change one’s own.¹⁰
(2013: 124)

And then:

In such a case, note, grasping the native’s point of view must involve a loss rather than an extension of the analyst’s epistemic sovereignty, since here alterity features not just as an object of anthropological knowledge, but also as its irreducible *source*.
(2013: 126)

We can see here how Holbraad extends the relation as an analytic device, as developed by Strathern in *GoG* and *Partial Connections*, into the recursive

methodology. The common ground between these approaches is exactly the relation as a method, but whereas for Strathern this is a specific case (she has never argued that it is a general method), for Holbraad it is exactly what should constitute anthropological methodology, what he calls recursive thinking. For us, what we call the relational methodology is at the core of the ontological turn, and it clearly builds on Strathern but extends into a generalized approach with Holbraad.

Queer positionalities

Let us now move onto the other critical tradition we are examining in this chapter: queer theory, and its relationship to anthropology. In *A Coincidence of Desires: Anthropology, Queer Studies, Indonesia*, Tom Boellstorff (2007) calls for anthropologizing queer studies. Boellstorff writes that ‘anthropology’s greatest potential contribution to queer studies is not to ethnographize it or transnationalize it, but to anthropologize it’ (loc. 131 Kindle version) and ‘the synergistic potential run both ways: anthropology can certainly benefit from a closer interchange with queer studies’ (loc. 131 Kindle version). Our aim here is quite similar, but with a particular focus on the relationship and synergistic potential in the relationship between the ontological turn in anthropology and queer theory, a strand of critical theory that emerged in the early 1990s out of the fields of queer and women’s studies.¹¹ Weiss (2016) notes that there is as of now a very limited archive of what could be called queer ontological theorizations. She mentions Karen Barad’s (2007) queer, feminist notion of ‘agential realism’ in physics, Annemarie Mol’s (2002) work on how medicine enacts its objects through practices, and S. Lochlann Jain’s (2013) approach to cancer as a creative force that can powerfully organize relationships. These are all examples of theorization which seeks to trouble the boundaries between human and non-human, nature and culture, yielding a queer analysis of ensembles/assemblages and non-humans as political actors. These queer ontological interventions are mainly located in what Bertelsen and Bendixsen (2016) call the materialities strand of the ontological turn. What Weiss does not consider, however, is the feminist genealogy and queer affinities in a different part of ontological theorizations in anthropology, which are not self-consciously queer – namely what we have called Strathern’s relational perspective and Holbraad’s recursivity.

Our interest in queering moves beyond both ethnographic studies of non-normative sexual subjects and objects and the deconstruction of sexual categories as such, which have been crucial to the development of queer perspectives in anthropology. Rather, we are interested in the queer impulse to recontextualize and question categories in a more general sense. As Siobhan Somerville (2002: 787) has noted, ‘anchoring queer approaches exclusively or primarily to sexual orientation does not do justice to the potential reach of queer critique, which would destabilize the ground upon which any particular claim to identity can be made’. Several authors have elaborated on the

conceptual potential of queer as a necessarily unfixed site of engagement and contestation for destabilizing what appear as natural and taken for granted. Queer has been conceptualized as ‘a resistance to regimes of the normal’ (Warner 1993: xxvi) a ‘kind of activism that attacks the dominant notion of the natural’ (Case 1991: 3), and ‘a non-identity-based critical cultural and political practice’ (Freccero 2006: 15), destabilizing those realms of being that are conceived of as normal. To Halperin (1995), “‘queer’ is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. [...] ‘Queer’, then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative’ (1995: 62). Halperin argues that through what he calls a ‘calculated encounter with otherness’ we can accede an altered understanding of the present and ‘a horizon of possibility whose precise extent and heterogeneous scope cannot in principle be delimited in advance’ (Halperin 1995: 62). Foucault’s genealogical historicism provides to Halperin precisely a methodology for such a ‘calculated encounter’. It is in this latter sense of queering, as the effort to establish a positionality in relation to what is perceived as the normal and the natural, that our suggestion that the ontological turn is queering anthropology should be understood, and it is also to ‘queering’ thus conceived that the ontological turn in anthropology can contribute. We will now highlight these points by looking at a key analysis within queer theory: Butler’s analysis of the debate on gay marriage in France. We will compare her queer-methodology to what we call ‘the relation as a method’.

Queering kinship analysis

In ‘Is Kinship always already heterosexual’, Judith Butler (2002) demonstrates how the notion of heterosexual kinship underpins a certain conception of ‘culture’ as a whole, a unity, which has a stake in reproducing itself. Butler engages with the French legal debates around civil unions (PACS) in 1998/99, a debate that explicitly targeted ‘certain U.S. views on the social construction and variability of gender relations as portending a perilous Americanization of kinship relations (filiation)’.¹² Now, what methodology does Butler offer us? Butler starts by noting the ambiguity in the demand from gay couples for state recognition of their relationship. By demanding such recognition from the state, one risks an intensification of normalization. The normalizing powers of the state, Butler argues, are particularly clear if one looks to how the marriage debate is conditioned and limited by questions of kinship and filiation: ‘Variations on kinship that depart from normative, dyadic heterosexually based family forms secured through the marriage vow are figured not only as dangerous to the child, but perilous to the putative natural and cultural laws said to sustain human intelligibility’ (2002: 16). Butler argues that seeking state recognition of gay marriage may enforce a distinction between legitimate and illegitimate queer lives, thus foreclosing and making unthinkable forms of sexuality outside the purview of marriage. This creates sexual possibilities that are unrepresentable in the current lexicon of

legitimacy. The challenge that emerges to Butler is how one can think politics from such a site of unrepresentability. It is here that Butler launches her call for criticality, not as an alternative to being political, but in keeping alive the tension between making a politically legible claim and maintaining a critical perspective. Butler thus recommends that ‘we become critical, that we risk criticality, in thinking about how the sexual field is constituted’ (2002: 19). Criticality, to Butler, is not a position per se, not a site or a place that might be located within an already delimitable field. Rather, one critical function is to scrutinize how sites, fields and domains are delimited in particular ways (such as the nature – culture distinction). This notion of critique owes importantly to Foucault. Commenting on his seminal essay ‘What is critique’, Butler (2000: 5) writes that ‘critique will be that perspective on established and ordering ways of knowing which is not immediately assimilated into that ordering function’. Critique then, is a practice that constitutes an interrogatory relation to the field of categorization itself (2000: 7).

By refusing to occupy a pre-defined position, Butler does not mean to suggest that we could or should occupy an a-topical elsewhere, which is ‘undelimited’ and radically free. Questioning the taken-for-granted becomes possible on occasion, she argues, but, as it were, not as a simple act of will, but through suffering the dehiscence, the breakup, of the ground itself. It is available in the ‘hybrid regions of legitimacy and illegitimacy that have no clear names and where nomination itself falls into a crisis produced by the variable, sometimes violent boundaries of legitimating practices that come into uneasy and sometimes conflictual contact with one another’ (2002: 20). The point of queer criticality is not simply to celebrate sites of uncertain ontology and difficult nomination as positions of criticality. Rather, Butler’s concern is with the foreclosure of the possible that takes place through naturalization of certain positions. Butler’s move, then, is to use new kinship and sexual arrangements of those who live outside of normative kinship to interrogate the naturalized conceptions of sexuality that underpin the debates on the gay marriage and adoption. This questioning of the taken-for-granted also entails an opening towards that which cannot be represented (‘radical alterity’ in the ontographic vocabulary).

The limit that the proposal to institute civil unions (PACS) as an alternative to marriage ran up against was not the thought of expanding marriage to include non-heterosexual couples as such, but rather attendant questions of reproduction and adoption. Concerns over reproduction, Butler argues, work in tandem with concerns of an identifiably French culture. The universalist understanding of culture that was mobilized in the marriage debate, she contends, relies on a notion of kinship as always already heterosexual. She traces this understanding of culture through anthropological kinship analysis in the Lévi-Straussian tradition as well as through psychoanalytic theory. One argument against the PACS was that the ‘double origin’ of the child is both a natural fact and a cultural and symbolic foundation. This argument, argues Butler, resonates with the position in *The Elementary Structure of Kinship* in

1949 – a work which despite having received much criticism retains a foundational status in the anthropology of kinship. For Lévi-Strauss, the Oedipal drama and the incest taboo work in the inception of language and facilitates the transition from nature to culture for all emerging subjects. The exchange of women is thus elevated into a precondition of culture and the mandate for exogamy identified with the incest taboo operating within the Oedipal drama (compare Rubin 1975 for a critique of Lévi-Strauss, and Strong 2002 for a critique of Butler's reading of Lévi-Strauss). Both in the debate on civil union and in certain anthropological and psychoanalytical readings Oedipus is thus conjured up to establish a certain conception of culture that has rather narrow consequences for both formations of gender and sexual arrangements. This conception of culture implicitly figures culture as a whole, a unity, one that has a stake in reproducing itself and its singular wholeness through the reproduction of the child. What Butler does is thus to confront anthropology and psychoanalysis with their heteronormative underpinnings. Instead of analysing the marriage debate through the concepts provided by these theoretical positions, Butler takes a position of criticality which brings these ideas into contact with the new kinship and sexual arrangements of those who cannot be represented within these frames. This compels us to rethink the problem of exchange altogether, no longer as the gift of women, which assumes and produces the self-identity of the patrilineal clan, but as a set of potentially unpredictable and contested practices of self-definition that are not reducible to a primary and culture-founding heterosexuality. According to Butler, this approach can occasion a rethinking of culture itself, and the way it allows the French to identify their own nationalist project with a universalist one. What interests us here is the way in which certain concepts and categories remain undisturbed, despite Butler's effort to establish a critical viewpoint in sites of 'uncertain ontology' and 'difficult nomination' (practices that do not appear immediately as coherent within the available lexicon of legitimation). As we will argue below, 'power' seems to be a blind spot in Butler's criticality.

On the breakup of the ground: queer ontologists and the question of politics and critique

Now, what are the resonances between this critical methodology and 'the relational methodology'? Both methodologies aim for a position outside of the established: a position from which a critique, and a reversal of representation, is possible. In Butler's queer approach, the notion of power and the possibility of unravelling its 'naturalness', for instance the 'naturalness' of heterosexual marriage and the heteronormative categories underpinning kinship, is the key. Thus, power is that which always already exists. For alternatives to open up, power must always be challenged, which in a sense means that Butler is consequently always already confirming power. As pointed out above, Strathern's approach foregrounds the notion of 'difference', rather than

power, as that which is always already there. Difference creates distance, which creates the position from which we can question the taken for granted. Strathern's work is an effort at distancing the analysis from the idea that power is always already there, defining relations between the sexes as antagonism or domination for instance. Strathern's analysis of male-cults in Papua New Guinea, discussed above, is precisely an effort to interrogate the idea that power is defining relations between the sexes as antagonism or domination. Although Strathern targets a different understanding of power than the one we find in Butler's analysis, her prioritizing of 'difference', rather than 'power', is instructive also in relation to queer understandings of power.

What is the significance of these different heuristics? Perhaps the question we need to ask is this: if the very point of queer analysis on the one hand, and the relational method, on the other, is to find a vantage point from which we can question the taken for granted, what kind of critique is it? At this point, we will make a distinction between what we have called 'the relational methodology', as it was performed by Strathern and developed further by the ontological turn, and the more fully fledged recursivity that Holbraad (2012) calls for. The move made by Holbraad is to extend the heuristic construction of a difference (between the West and Melanesia, or gift economies and commodity economies), that Strathern develops in *GoG*, to a more general 'recursive methodology'. This move, which in Strathern's case was a heuristic emerging from a particular situatedness and struggle to think anthropologically about feminism, is, with the ontological turn, made 'the very point' of anthropology and a methodological procedure (which Holbraad 2012 brands the ontographic method). This difference between the two are crucial, in particular for the potential to be political, which we will turn to soon, but for now we want to look more closely at the relation between the fully-fledged relational method in the form of recursivity and the criticality as methodology offered by Butler.

In the article *Critique, risqué: A comment on Didier Fassin*, Holbraad (2017), in a way reminiscent of Butler, argues for the need to 'risk' critique. To Fassin's (2017) discussion of the productive imbrications in anthropology between critique as critical theory and critique as genealogy, Holbraad wants to add a third form of critique which he sees as

peculiarly anthropological in that it draws its strengths from the possibility that the encounter with ethnographic contingency may be powerful enough to call into question the very resources we bring to bear in our attempt to describe, understand and in that sense 'know'.

(Holbraad 2017: 276)

To Holbraad, each encounter between the anthropologist's analytical resources (e.g. concepts, distinctions, methods) and the ethnographic material that these resources are meant analytically to elucidate has a critical potential. Like Butler, Holbraad acknowledges the *risk* one takes when engaging in

critique (of the particular kinds they discuss). Engaging in critique, the anthropologist, Holbraad (2017: 275) writes, must be prepared to reconfigure analytical concepts, distinctions, methods and so on ‘as and when these come up short in his or her attempt to describe a given body of ethnographic material’.¹³

At this point we need to unpack three further dimensions in which Holbraad’s and Butler’s accounts of critique interrogate each other. Firstly, where Holbraad focuses on the risk for the anthropologist/anthropological thinking, Butler is concerned with the political risk of criticality. Criticality, to Butler, may involve having to revise those very concepts, distinction, categories etc. through which the political struggles and claims of e.g. women and homosexuals are currently fought. To Butler, keeping alive the tension between making a politically legible claim and maintaining a critical perspective is necessary. In contrast to the explicit engagement with the politics of critique that we find in queer theory, ‘the ontological turn’ in anthropology has often been taken to charge for being apolitical. While Holbraad does not address the politics of ‘ethnographic critique’ explicitly in his response paper to Fassin, he does argue, with reference to Viveiros de Castro (2013), that the kind of critique he furthers would have to ‘risk “taking seriously” critical stances we may otherwise detest as preposterous’ (Holbraad 2017: 277) – gesturing towards Trump and his supports as one example. This remark is interesting in that so far as there is a lack of recursive-based analysis that deals with contested political issues such as right-wing extremism or nationalism. So, with Butler, we could ask what keeping alive the tension between critique and politics would mean to the ontological turn?

In an effort to clarify what they mean by ontology and what the political implication of the ontological turn are, Holbraad, Pedersen and Viveiros de Castro (2014) distinguish between ‘(1) the traditional philosophical concept of ontology, in which ‘politics’ takes the implicit form of an injunction to discover and disseminate a single absolute truth about how things are; (2) the sociological critique of this and other ‘essentialisms’, which, in sceptically debunking all ontological projects to reveal their insidiously political nature, ends up affirming the critical politics of debunking as its own version of how things should be; and (3) the anthropological concept of ontology as the multiplicity of forms of existence enacted in concrete practices, where politics becomes the non-sceptical elicitation of this manifold of potentials for how things could be what Povinelli (2014), as we understand her, calls ‘the otherwise’.¹⁴ Contrary to constructivism, anti-essentialism and deconstructive methodologies, the aim of ontography and recursivity is not to problematize existing representations of the other, nor to represent the other in a more accurate or even responsible way. Recursivity implies that rather than representing the other, ethnography may instead act to transform the very activity of analysis.

One may object here to Holbraad, Pedersen and Viveiros de Castro’s reading of what they variously term constructivism, anti-essentialism and

deconstructive methodologies, and their assumptions about the representational logic that underpin them. Butler and queer theory does not seem to fit either of the three categories. Butler's criticality is neither about more accurate or responsible representation of the Other, nor about affirming the critical politics of debunking essentialisms as such. Rather, it is concerned with queer positioning as a tool for interrogating the taken for granted, creating thus an opening towards the possible, that which cannot be represented in the field of the intelligible and the speakable.

Whereas the recursive method provides us with an 'otherwise' that is given full ontological status, Butler discusses the sexualities that cannot be represented within the framework of gay marriage and (heterosexual) kinship only in relation to the norm that violently produces them as 'other' and forecloses the kinds of sexual arrangements and forms of kinship that can be admitted to exist or deemed to be possible. Butler seems to imply that exposing the heteronormative underpinnings of kinship (debunking the ontological project of French filiation) is necessary for there not to be a foreclosing of the possible. The anthropological ontologists, on the other hand, imply that the 'how things could be' is accessible without this move of debunking. In other words, opening for a new understanding for new possibilities, with the recursive methodology as outlined by Holbraad (2012), does not need to challenge anything beforehand. Rather, through the recursive methodology and controlled equivocation, the 'otherwise' is lent full ontological weight so as to render it viable as a real alternative, which in this reading, is also the politics of ontology. So, to put it bluntly, whereas Butler insists (with the political struggle over gay marriage as the immediate context of her argument) on criticality in the sense of bringing into view the norm that forecloses a multiplicity of being, Holbraad, Pedersen and Viveiros de Castro suggest a politics of ontological elicitation.

If we read Butler through the ontological turn and recursive method, however, there is a different problem with the queer criticality she suggests. In Holbraad's discussion of 'critique' in anthropology, he argues that a problem with both the notion of critical theory and genealogical critique is that the idea of critique in itself is not challenged. He argues that if we want to introduce a third form of critique, where the critical potential is in the ethnographic encounter, we need also to be open to the idea that encounter may change our very intuitions about what can count as critique in the first place.¹⁵ This argument could also be made about Butler's use of 'power' as that in which the practice of critique is always taking place. In her critique of heteronormative kinship, discussed above, Butler (2002: 34) calls for an understanding that 'cultures are not self standing entities or unities, that the exchanges between them, their very modes of delimiting themselves in distinction, constitute their provisional ontology and are, as a result, fraught with power'. If, as Holbraad argues, the most powerful critique is the one in which everything is 'up for grabs', this also has to include the ideas we have about what 'power' is, how it works and how we come to know it.

As we have seen, both the recursive approach of the ‘ontological turn’ and Butler’s criticality destabilize the relationship between self and other. While parts of queer theory have sometimes been criticized for ending up in a form of identity politics (see Fraser 1997), Butler refuses to identify with a pre-defined position as the point of departure for her critical analysis. It is thus not a queer identity or subjectivity that provides the point of view from which to critically interrogate kinship, but a politics of location in sites of ‘uncertain ontology’ and ‘difficult nomination’, for instance in ‘new kinship and sexual arrangements’. Butler at the same times cautions against the idea that it is possible to ‘occupy an atypical elsewhere, [which is] undelimited [and] radically free’ (Butler 2002: 19). This cautioning is, we believe, pertinent to the ways in which ‘the ontological turn’ has developed the work of Strathern into a general recursive methodology. While it may well be true that Strathern has a particular way of absenting herself from the analysis, as suggested by Holbraad and Pedersen (2009), Strathern does locate her analysis in GoG clearly within the feminist debates of her times. This is even more clear in the newly published *Before and After Gender*, where, as we already mentioned, Strathern is grappling with the categories that seem to prevent feminism from developing a radical critique. To put it a bit simplistic, whereas critique in the ontological turn starts from the concern with making anthropologists think differently, Butler (and to some extent Strathern) are (at least more explicitly) starting from the need to think critically in relation to a particular (political) struggle (i.e. around feminism and queer marriage).

Final remarks

It has been our goal in this chapter to point to convergences and divergences between queer approaches and the ontological turn in anthropology. It is our opinion, that queer critique can gain important insights from engaging with theory development in the ontological turn in anthropology. This is so, in particular, to interrogate the assumption that power is always already there. Instead, working heuristically with difference creates an opening, a freeing even, of the possibility of radical critique. This is, in our opinion, a useful move for queer theory. It will allow for a much wider range of perspectives that can break away from what we can see as dominant, western intellectual traditions. This is, to quote Boellstorff again, a key ‘synergetic point’ in a future dialogue between ontological anthropology and queer theory. On the other hand, we have argued that the ‘ontological’ turn, in turning Strathern’s relational perspective into a methodology, also risks abstracting it from the specific struggles in relation to which both Strathern and Butler locate their thinking. In the case of Butler we find the insistence on keeping alive the tension between making a politically legible claim and maintaining a critical perspective. This is perhaps a tension that it is difficult to move beyond. One might have to choose between retaining a certain notion of ‘power’ and ‘politics’ in which we as researchers are located, or privileging difference as a

methodology. Or, one might think about these as different steps of critique, where the politics of location becomes relevant only after the recursive analysis has taken place. In Strathern's case, as Holbraad and Pedersen (2017: 156) argue, the potential awkwardness in her relation to the ontological turn is about an inherently feminist vision for a new aesthetics of ethnographic description, that is, in their terms 'deliberately non-explicit, and systematically non-transparent, about its own theoretical ground.' Indeed, they themselves ask whether the declarative style and assertive tone of the ontological turn is reaching for an analytical completeness Strathern's feminism deliberately avoids. It is perhaps in a dialogue between queer theory and the ontological turn in anthropology that these feminist challenges can best be elucidated. This is what we, with this chapter, call for.

Notes

- 1 Strathern (1991: XVI) argues that anthropology has already moved from a plural to postplural perception of the world [...] in the sense that 'the realization of the multiplier effect produced by innumerable perspectives extends to the substitutive effect of apprehending that no one perspective offers the totalizing vista it presupposes. It ceases to be perspectival'.
- 2 The ontological turn is currently used to name a diversity of approaches in anthropology, that invoke ontology in ways that are often mutually incompatible (Bertelsen and Bendixsen 2016). In this chapter, we limit ourselves to a discussion of a particular version of this turn, what we identify as the Cambridge version.
- 3 For a similar argument, see Bertelsen and Bendixsen who – as a warning against the neo-positivist critique of the ontological turn – write that: 'Anthropology has not been, and cannot be, we hold, in the business of producing apodictic certainty, that is, of exclaiming capitalized truths about the world' (2016: 28).
- 4 Weiss (2016: loc 4189, Kindle version) makes a similar point about 'a shared frustration in the limitations of our ways of knowing to do justice to our objects, or ourselves'.
- 5 In their most recent book, Holbraad and Pedersen (2017) explicitly discuss the feminist heritage from Strathern in their work. They also acknowledge that Strathern has not wholeheartedly embraced the ontological turn.
- 6 Also Roy Wagner's work is clearly part of this genealogy, see especially Wagner 1972 and 1975. The repetitive acknowledgment of Wagner has tended to overshadow the Strathernian influence, which is our main concern in this chapter.
- 7 Strathern, of course, famously developed the analytics of the relation (see esp. 1988; 1991) whereas it is the emphasis on method ('recursivity'), which we see as stronger in Holbraad (2012). 'Relational methodology' thus aims at pointing to a common ground between them. As we point out towards the end of this chapter, this generalization of recursivity in many ways also breaks with Strathern's approach, as it privileges the relation as a dominant form of anthropological analysis. Strathern's own approach is fundamentally more open.
- 8 We do not intend to say that these positions represent the same, only that they all in various ways take 'difference' as point of departure for their analysis.
- 9 We find efforts to shift the directionality of, or upset the categories of, subject and object, also in other strands of anthropology of course, such as for instance in the feminist literature on embodiment in the phenomenological tradition of Merleau-Ponty.

- 10 Here we also acknowledge the key insights and importance of Viveiros de Castro's work, see for instance 1992 and 2004.
- 11 Since Theresa de Lauretis (1991) first named 'queer theory' it has developed into a vital field of debate, harbouring numerous theoretical positions, analytical approaches and political projects.
- 12 This was even more explicit in 2013 with the critique of 'gender theory'. See interview with Butler <http://bibliobs.nouvelobs.com/essais/20131213.OBS9493/theorie-du-genre-judith-butler-repond-a-ses-detracteurs.html>.
- 13 One can sense in Holbraad's critique of Fassin a critique also of how the traditions of critique that Fassin invoke have such a long and weighty history that they may become in themselves obstacles to new things coming into being.
- 14 According to Povinelli (2014) every arrangement of existents at/on/in the plane of existence installs its own possible derangements and rearrangements. The otherwise is these immanent derangements and rearrangements.
- 15 This, as Holbraad (2017) acknowledges, would of course also imply his own conception of critique.

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9 Conceptuality in relation

*Sarah Franklin in conversation with, Silvia
Posocco, Paul Boyce and EJ Gonzalez-Polledo*

Editors' note: In preparation for the interview, we worked together to develop a set of questions which we shared with Sarah Franklin in advance of our meeting. We met Sarah Franklin in Cambridge in March 2018.

EJ: Would you like to contextualise for us when your relation with Marilyn Strathern's work began?

SARAH FRANKLIN: I took a somewhat unusual path through academia because I did an undergraduate degree in women's studies a long time ago. I graduated in 1982, and there weren't really any graduate programmes in feminism, gender or women's studies in the early 1980s in the United States. There were things like gender and history, women and history, women in philosophy, things like that. So I took a year off. I was working in Paris for a year and I noticed that the British universities have a much later application deadlines and they were much cheaper because they just had home fees for everyone and there was a women's studies postgraduate programme at the University of Kent. I went to Kent in the autumn of 1983 and started the women's studies programme there with Mary Evans and that was a sensational programme. By that point I had pretty much decided that I would really like to do a PhD, and I wasn't going to be able to do one in women's studies, so one of my former tutors suggested that I apply to the new NYU programme in social anthropology that was being headed up by Annette Weiner. I applied, was accepted, I got a scholarship, I moved to New York in the autumn of 1984. Annette Weiner was one of the first feminist anthropologists to work on reproduction, so she invited her colleague, Carol Delaney, to come give a presentation at NYU in the spring of 1985 which was based on her paper 'The Meaning of Paternity in the Virgin Birth Debate', which showed how ideas about conception aren't straightforward in any sense of the term; that was when I started to get very interested in the possibility of doing an anthropological project on changing ideas of conception in western societies. Instead of going to New Guinea or Australia, I wanted to do a 'talk-back' to the virgin birth debate based on a very detailed ethnographic study of in vitro fertilisation. I proposed that

to my PhD committee and for various reasons they basically said that wasn't going to be acceptable.

So I converted my early PhD into an MA and as my dissertation I wrote 'Conception among the Anthropologists' juxtaposing IVF and virgin birth debates.

And then I moved to the UK in 1986 and I got a place at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, and I started doing the PhD, and my supervisor Maureen McNeil was a historian of science who did her degree at the University of Cambridge. She worked on ideas of progress in the work of Erasmus Darwin, Charles Darwin's grandfather. So that kind of fitted, interestingly, with exploring ideas about biology and reproduction and scientific objectivity and all that. Maureen and I started a Science and Technology Sub-Group and we were doing a lot of work on reproductive politics in the UK; that was a time when they were trying to repeal the abortion act and the human fertilisation and embryology bill was going through Parliament. It was also the time when Clause 28 was enacted, so it was a very interesting period mid-way or towards the end of Thatcher's career. And we wrote a lot about Thatcherism and reproductive politics in *Off Centre: Feminism and Cultural Studies* (1991). I was also working on my PhD at this time, and I interviewed around 30 women in Birmingham about their experiences of IVF and that was the basis for my later book *Embodied Progress* (1997).

In 1989 when I was finishing my PhD I saw a job advertised in the Manchester Anthropology department and I applied for it. It was for a Lectureship in Gender and Kinship. I wasn't finished with my PhD, so obviously it was a bit of a long shot, but Marilyn wrote me a note and she said 'I read your very interesting application and I read that you wrote your MA on the question of the virgin birth debate and reproductive technology so could you send me a copy?' So I sent that to Marilyn and she read it and then invited me to come to Manchester. So that was the first time I met Marilyn, in June of 1989, and we talked for about three and a half hours. As if that wasn't amazing enough she then handed me the manuscript of *After Nature* and asked me if I would be willing to read it and give her some feedback! So I took it back to Birmingham and I remember walking back to my house from the bus stop with this manuscript in my bag and thinking 'Wow! I can't believe that just actually happened!' Because she totally got the whole entire idea of the disturbance to 'the biological facts' caused by IVF and all that. She was the first person I ever met who got it. You know, like why you would want to do a project that was deconstructing biology via reproductive technology in relation to these debates about conception in Anthropology. It made total sense to her. So we started working together.

My first job was working as a researcher on what became the ESRC project *Technologies of Procreation* (1993). It was a joint project with me, Marilyn, Eric Hirsch, Frances Paton and Jeanette Edwards. That

research went from 1990 to 91, it was just one year ... And that's when I decided that I wanted to work on the human embryo, I wanted to work on how the technologisation of reproduction actually queers our understandings of biology. And I think that's basically what I've been working on ever since. Except I don't think its often legible as that. I think if you're working on fertility it's such an incredibly heteronormative area, it's not really clear why that would be a queer topic. But of course it is.

PAUL: There's a convergence between the re-thinking of the anthropological tradition and the re-thinking of reproductive technologies. Can you say a little more about how that convergence came about in your experience?

SARAH: You use the same word for knowledge and for procreation you know, to *conceive* an idea. I think if you take seriously you have to understand that, of course, it will affect knowledge practices. But I think where you go with that is really a slightly different question. If you want to go back into the disciplines you have in front of you a rich reproductive world, because that's what the disciplines are doing. They're reproducing themselves. So as soon as you start to look at disciplinarity of any kind you're looking at lineages of inherited ideas, you're looking at the protection of that legacy, you're looking at the insides and the outsides of the disciplines, you're looking at the gatekeeping practices, you're looking at the generally quite patrilineal structure of a descent system that is profoundly anthropological. So if you are an anthropologist and you're doing that, then you have a lot of grist for your mill as it were. And you are going to see disciplines in terms not only of reproductive politics, but of reproductive conflicts. So, yeah, I think that's one of the things that Marilyn has done – to link together gender, knowledge, reproduction, identity and power differently. But Marilyn, as she notes in *Before and After Gender*, also has a very generous idea about conflict. She thinks that conflict is essential to the social life of say, a discipline or scholarly community. So she's not looking to end conflict as it were, but she is looking to understand gender much more in those terms, as something that's fundamentally a part of any social world. And indeed almost synonymous with how the social world is built.

EJ: It's interesting that the work before *Women In Between* was actually about conflict, about disputes ...

SARAH: Yeah, her early work was about disputes as well. The settling of disputes in courts.

EJ: I wonder if you could frame for us what or how you see the object of queer anthropology developing in those intervening years between the period you've talked about and *Before and After Gender*.

SARAH: You mean from the 80s and 90s onwards?

EJ: Right. How do you see that development?

SARAH: I think it was very important from the end of the 1980s and in 1990. Judith Butler published *Gender Trouble* and when I read it I definitely thought that is clearly the most articulate version of trying to say that

gender comes before sex which is an even more radical claim than most people think and very parallel to what I was trying to do in my own work at the time. I don't know how useful it is to do a sort of genealogy of queer because that's a kind of oxymoron, but I definitely think the impulse to undo the apparent fixity of the biological is a very, very strong theme in a lot of feminists' work and it's a theme that does get picked up in some feminist science studies. But I think it really is articulated most powerfully by Butler in *Gender Trouble*, and I think that book marked a real turning point. Once that book was published and had the impact that it did people really started to think quite differently about sex and gender. The book in some ways describes something that had already happened – it is in some ways a book review, you know? Of other books? But it described it so articulately and so powerfully that it made something appear before your eyes even though you knew it was already there. That's kind of the magical thing I think about really powerful conceptual writing, really powerful scholarly writing. And Marilyn's writing has a lot of that in it too. It's incredible to think what would have happened if *Before and After Gender* had been published in 1974.

So ... yeah, it depends a little bit what you mean by queer, obviously. I think at that time in the 1990s a lot of people were still using the feminist language of women and using the feminist language of sexual difference and using terms that belong to a really important history of work in psychoanalysis and a lot of really important feminist activist work. And of course all that legacy of the seventies. People like Shulamith Firestone. So that was still around and that was still influential, but you could feel, definitely, I felt, definitely that there was a shift going on away from those categories. And Donna Haraway would be one of the other key people who began to articulate a very, very different political script for feminism. And like a lot of people, when I first read the 1978 articles that Haraway wrote, I did not really appreciate the scale of her intervention, and even when I reviewed her first book in 1989, *Primate Visions*, I was still struggling. The first time I read her 1985 article 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs', yeah I was definitely kind of like, what?

I had to read that over several years to really appreciate its implications. I still re-read that article. It has so much in it.

SILVIA: Do you think a similar reaction is reached when one first reads *The Gender of the Gift*?

SARAH: I think it really depends on your training. Because I was formally trained in feminist anthropology and the question of the exchange of women was just so prominent. I mean Gayle Rubin is the one who shows how important that question is in her 1975 essay on 'The Traffic in Women'. It was a standard reading for any undergraduate doing anything remotely related to feminist anthropology in the 1970s and the 1980s. And it's so clearly written. It's so vividly clear. And in that article she wants to know about what she calls the 'exact mechanisms' of how sex,

sexuality and the ‘sex/gender system’ are reproduced and that’s her question really. And one of my favourite pieces that Marilyn wrote is her review of Melanesian marriage exchange, in which you can really hear this kind of puzzle of how to deal with Levi Strauss and how to deal with the exchange of women constantly driving her analysis; she produces a really elegant way to move beyond trying to explain the traffic in women by giving it a somewhat positive aspect, which is what Annette Weiner tried to do by showing that women have their own exchange systems. You know, women have their own value system and that makes sense up to a point. But Marilyn took a much more radical approach to that. When I read *The Gender of the Gift* I was so excited about the chapter where she talks about reproduction and how you have to make men and women first before you can make a baby. Because what she was doing was situating the whole question of exchange in relation to a very different understanding of gender; she took the ‘sex/gender system’ apart, she claimed that gender didn’t adhere to the person in any sort of neat one to one fashion, but that it was more like a kinetic identity that you could use partially and also ‘backwards’ – in which the effect becomes the cause. It’s a great counterintuitive model on one level, but if you take it from the point of view of reading Monique Wittig or from the point of view of being a lesbian or queer, actually it makes perfect sense! (Laughs).

And I think that’s probably one of the things about queer – that queer is partly about what is there, but partly queer is about how you are reading. Because if you are reading with a sensitivity to being very intensively othered within your own society – ontologically, grammatically, constantly – then of course you’re going to read very differently than if you are reading from the point of view of being part of the status quo.

PAUL: There’s another convergence again around the shifting contexts in which gender becomes the shifting context of knowledge production, where the same device [gender] becomes something else, as very much put forward again in Strathern’s work.

SARAH: Context is very important to Marilyn Strathern’s work. But it’s quite a sophisticated reading because she also wants to get out of the binary habit of thinking about context as external to whatever it is that’s being contextualised and she actually wants – I think it’s one of the things she does really skilfully – she wants us to think about context as something that’s much more part of what is seemingly shaped by it. She wants us to be able to think of that relation in a less binary way.

PAUL: In a post-plural kind of a way?

SARAH: Yes, in a post-plural, which is also backwards, way. I think what she means by post-plural (and that’s one of the terms she talks a lot about in *After Nature*) is the way context is used in what you might call the western imagination, in that you can always talk about the individual in relation to society or the individual in relation to biology or biology in

relation to society – that contextualising move pluralises everything for the Euro-American. So *in After Nature* she's concerned about what happens when you pluralise everything, you know, what's your ground. *After Nature* is all about what happens when the formative means of distinction are themselves unhooked as it were.

EJ: So how has that way of thinking influenced your work and that way that you've engaged with multiple kinds of knowledge?

SARAH: Well, because I work a lot in biology labs, I think one of the really surprising things for me was, you know, how queer they are. Because the thing is, the way biology is used as a kind of 'dominant logic', you might say, is all about fixing things, you know and it's about how things are determined. And if you're coming from a feminist background the way that biology is used is really political because it's constantly being used to justify patterns of behaviour using a totally circular logic like, 'well that's because it's biological and there's nothing you can do about it', and also the biological comes to mean the universal and innate ... Also it's used in a punitive way like, 'how could you question that?' you know, 'how could you possibly question that?' Even Shulamith Firestone (1972) in the first part of *The Dialectic of Sex* says, 'they'll think you're mad if you question things like that'. So, when you go into a biology lab and you start talking to scientists about something basic like how fertilisation occurs, I mean it's just so different from the mainstream narrative, the kind of normative narrative that Emily Martin talks about (1991) that very powerful, very deterministic, overarching and oddly ubiquitous gendered narrative about male agency and female passivity, which then quickly becomes a narrative about violent male aggression being necessary for the survival of the species and all those things that Donna Haraway writes so beautifully about in her work. But when you go into the lab it's just so totally different. Fertilisation itself turns out to be still a bit of a riddle, and a bit of a fiddle. You've got cases where it happens and others where it doesn't and nobody really knows why. And so what the actual, professional scientific world of a lot of bench biology is all about, if you're going to use Marilyn's description, is 'things not reproducing themselves exactly'. One theory about why certain biological functions are so highly conserved is precisely because they don't always work the same way. And this is a very different world from the world where half your genes come from your Mum and half from your Dad and that makes you a unique individual, you know. I mean that is so not what is happening in an actual biology lab where you'll be sitting with an embryologist and she'll be like, 'so, sometimes when I'm training post-docs I want to show them how resilient and tough these little embryos are'. So she'll rip them apart, she's in her micromanipulator and she rips apart an embryo and says 'I could take half this embryo and half that embryo and stuff it all back in, and it's just like putting it all in a big shopping bag, and it'll be fine. It'll grow, it'll develop, it'll be fine'. They're so robust human embryos, it's remarkable

what you can do to them. Mammalian embryos in general. I mean they do actually have a shell, it's actually quite hard the outside of the embryo, which is why it has to be cut in order to do a biopsy or to do micro-injection. And when you dump out what's inside of this shell it just sits there like an empty container, and you can fill it back up again and make a new whole, and that's just a very, very different take on the biological 'rule book' than the one where everything is predetermined and there are strict laws that apply like 'DNA makes RNA makes protein'. Now, after Dolly, we know that even that's not true. I mean Dolly was a very fascinating project because it was one of those projects that was thought to be impossible, like human IVF was thought to be impossible by many people, and it turns out that biology can do all these things that nobody expected it to – and that just goes to prove Butler's point that it's your perception that's actually the determining thing not the perceived. It's the perception that's driving the production of a specific world – including its 'fixed' possibilities. It's not like that world is just there and that's why you perceive it that way.

PAUL: You spoke of some of your conversations with biologists here and their struggle to understand what you were doing; their struggle to perceive their own perceptions after your view.

SARAH: Well, I think biologists are highly varied. Some of them are very interested in the social, ethical, philosophical domains of their work, and some of them are quite interested in critical perspectives on their work. Some scientists really don't like that, they find it bothersome and pointless. So when you're an anthropologist and you're working with biologists in labs you're mainly working with the biologists who want you there and think that it's interesting.

It's kind of weird how many biologists from Cambridge I'd worked with before I came to Cambridge. I'd never really made that connection until after I came to Cambridge but I think part of it is that when they're trained here they do get this college experience with lots of other disciplines, and it's considered to be quite important that you can sit down at lunch or dinner and have a conversation with someone in a completely different field from you. That's actually considered to be a highly valued skill.

So as an ethnographer, I mostly ended up working in biology labs with a head of lab being someone who was signalling to the other people in the lab that I was a respected guest and then of course the team were willing to take their time and show you things. I remember I did a study of preimplantation of genetic diagnosis at Guy's Hospital in London in 2001 or 2002, and I was very, very nervous of going to give my presentation there about the outcome of my field research. I felt that I had got a very good sense of what they do in the lab. I had learned a lot, I had shed a lot of my preconceptions about what pre-implantation of genetic diagnosis is about, but I hadn't really had time to analyse the data

or tell them anything significant other than what I had learned from them about how they do what they do. Which all seemed rather obvious and underwhelming. So I went to see Marilyn, which I usually do when I'm really having a lot of difficulty with something. I said I don't know what I'm going to tell them. I've spent a year in their lab observing their practice and I don't know what to say other than that this is what they're doing. And she said well just say that. That's exactly what you should tell them. That you have learnt what they're doing. So I did. I went and I told them my perception of what it was they were doing and they were totally impressed. It really helped to build trust and they were like 'oh yeah, you understand what we're doing, don't you?' And they were so surprised and reassured. Once that connection happens then you can go to a very different set of questions. It takes a long time to build up those kind of relationships and it has really instilled in me a deep respect for the power of description. I mean people might think it's pretty straightforward to describe a scientific experiment but I think it's very, very difficult to describe one in a way that the scientists themselves would agree it's a good description. That's actually quite difficult to do. But I have learned that it's one of the most important things to be able to do if you want to be respected as someone who does ethnography in labs.

It's kind of interesting on the reproduction question because what it means is that if you can give them back a version of something that they've given you, it creates a bond – as opposed to if you can't give back a version of something that they've given you. Then it does the reverse it creates more of a mistrust.

EJ: But in a sense that's what good anthropology should do, right? Give back that sort of image of the social world?

SARAH: Yeah. I mean those are the kinds of questions that I would ideally like to bring into the lab a bit more. Because I think that what's happening to biology right now is quite dramatic. I mean there are really dramatic changes happening in biology right now, and of course I'm at Cambridge so I see this all the time. Some of the very foundational understandings of how biological processes work are being abandoned. Because they are being replaced by new means of doing things that supersede those older orders. For example the ability to make an induced, pluripotent stem cell with only two or three additional elements. You know, to take a skin cell and to add two or three additional factors and turn it into a gamete. And then to use one of those for an egg and make a new animal. I mean that is way beyond where it was thought biology could go even just ten years ago. And that's a technological accomplishment, a superb technological accomplishment that is the outcome of decades of craft work in the lab; profoundly artisanal work with the components of the lab, including all of the living things that are in the lab. And that level of technological control is quite astounding. But what's happened at the moment is that scientists aren't really sure what to

do with these new abilities. OK you can make an induced pluripotent stem cell and yes, you can do loads of different things with it and yes, it sort of up-ends the apple cart of biological assumptions, but then what? And you've got that revolutionary overturning of previous ideas at the same time that you have this very intense concentration on what's called translation which is turning a scientific technique or product into a highly applicable device or procedure.

So then you start to get more interdisciplinary kinds of scientific approaches to specific problems, and at places like Stanford they won't fund any new scientific buildings unless it's for some kind of interdisciplinary project that's essentially topical. And it's so clear that now is the point when the social sciences should really be making a greater contribution than ever to the understanding of bio-scientific translation. I mean I can't really think of a time when it was more obvious ... Scientists need to be able to understand exactly the sort of question like how are their perceptions are affecting what they're doing, what are the knowledge systems that they're using, and what are the assumptions that are built into those, what is their black box and how do they open it? All those questions from science studies. This is really the moment when those kinds of questions should be asked, but it's still very, very hard to make those links. We'll see.

SILVIA: And can you speak perhaps about, or towards the question of the conceptual element that is built into our re-descriptions? So that when we do ethnography in the lab or in another setting, that the description that emerges from that, and that might be understood by those who are actually doing the technical work, might also entail the development of conceptual elements which shift and open up that which we have observed.

SARAH: Yeah. That's a really good question. Yeah, the elementary forms of conceptual life – that's what we should be writing at this very moment. Traditionally within the social sciences there is something called social theory that has been used as the source of overarching analytical approaches to things like economy, society, culture, and I feel at the moment that's one of the things that's really shifting because we're kind of in the same situation as the scientists in that there are a lot of things happening to our worlds for which we don't really have adequate conceptual resources. Or maybe I should say, theoretical resources, because I've started to distinguish between what you might call the level of the theoretical and the level of the conceptual. When you're doing ethnographic work what you're trying to do is to get people to give you their descriptions of the things that are happening in their world, you're trying to get them to explain to you how they know what they know, you're getting them to introduce you to their key concepts. And their key theories. Because any embryologist who's talking about how to handle an embryo in a dish has a theory about how that embryo is developing and

what it does, and what you can do to it or what you can't do to it or what will happen. I remember I did an interview with Austin Smith, it must've been nearly twenty years ago, and I asked him, well, how do you characterise a cell line? And he gave me a really clear and detailed explanation about how it takes a really long time because you have to keep comparing and comparing and comparing to see if this cell line that you think is A is always A, or whether sometimes it's B. In which case you have two different lines. And so you can learn from scientists what are their key conceptual points of reference, their landmarks, and how those ideas are embedded in their practice. Characterisation is a theory it's a concept, it's a practice, it's all of those things. Characterisation, like translation is absolutely fundamental to the sciences today. You cannot standardise something unless you know what it is. You cannot know what it is until you've characterised it. So this is really really key. But there isn't really like a social theory you could use to explain that repetitive, artisanal work of getting to know your cell culture – so you know when it's happy, when it's unhappy, when it wants to be left alone, when it needs your attention PDQ or else. I mean you could use Bruno Latour for whom the concept of translation is very important. He has the concept of translation, he has the concept of purification, and we could take these and we could apply them as it were to the lab, but it's a little bit like getting dressed for the party after you've gone home. There's not really much point. What you need when you're in the lab is to be able to extract some of the conceptual resources that are operative there and *then* use them to produce a sociological model of what's going on. I mean that's what I do, and that's what I teach my students to do.

PAUL: That comes back to what you were saying about your new respect or valuing of good description and the ideas emerging from that.

SARAH: That's right. Yeah I have this concept I've developed of interliteracy. Interliteracy is when you can describe the scholarly literature of a particular discipline well enough that someone in that discipline will recognise your description of it as equivalent to that of a competent insider. Like, I can tell you what the main point of this scientific article is, and you'll agree that that's the main point or more or less. And I can tell you in the methods section what are the slightly dodgy bits. And I think a situation where a scientist could read Marilyn Strathern and the ethnographer in that lab could read their latest article in *Cell*, and they were working together, I think that's the interesting direction we could be headed in – a much greater ability to generate genuine high-level conceptual exchange.

EJ: So in a sense, what you're saying, is it what you're saying that's really conceptual and theoretical is a false dichotomy, because at the end of the day what you're doing with your ethnographies is to produce a kind of response to that ...

SARAH: That's right. I'm maybe not making quite so broad a statement as that but I'm saying that I have begun to distinguish between the

theoretical and the conceptual because I have found that working at the level of the conceptual, working with what you might call ‘conceptual elements’, is a very important part of sharing knowledge. It’s a very important part of enabling us to work in areas where there isn’t really any sort of available theoretical edifice and also because, like I was saying, we are a little bit where the scientists are, we’re living in a period of extremely rapid and substantial technological change. I mean if you think about it every single aspect of our identities from how we communicate to how we make decisions to how we write how we get news has all been hugely affected by new technologies. It’s almost like our generation is in a blur of technological reinvention and I think that makes it hard for us to acknowledge things that are very obvious and right in front of us but hard to name. I have a word for it. I call it technological bewilderment. I sometimes wonder if Brexit was partly fuelled by a sense of being left out, being left behind that was partly to do with technology, but that’s another matter ... I think as a result we don’t have what you might call the theoretical tools that might be fit for purpose. I heard a lecture by a very prominent Cambridge scientist recently, Azim Surani, who is probably one of the most famous scientists in his field of developmental biology, and he was basically saying it was very important to work with the animal models (mice) he was using through his entire career but he could now see why they were quite misleading. Which is a pretty major statement by a very senior scientist that he can now see how most of his work was based on a very dated, and in some ways quite inappropriate model system. And that he’s not working with that any more and he’s going to be working with new model systems. That’s a real question for us I think, what is the model system that we’ll be using to analyse whatever it is we’re looking at, you know? Let’s say you want to write about why Brexit happened, you know, what is the theoretical model you’re going to use? I mean I don’t really think you can use Gramsci. You can use Stuart Hall up to a point but I feel like I’ve backed off from using theory the way I used to and even the way I was trained to, because it just feels that it’s not actually engaging with the things that need to be explained. I mean I’m working on fertility transitions right now and I think most people think they know what fertility is, and one of the main arguments about fertility over time is the demographic argument that as people begin to perceive that their children will live longer and that there are benefits to having fewer children they begin to exercise more control over their family size, which gets smaller. Demographic transition was one of the main features of modernity – when people started to have much smaller families, to invest more in the children and that’s where a lot of the changes associated with the modern era supposedly came from. It’s a very contested theory but the basic idea is that people’s *perceptions* of fertility affect their reproductive *behaviour*. And at the moment what we are seeing are some pretty significant changes in how fertility is perceived

both in terms of who is thinking about fertility because now a lot of queer and trans people are thinking from a much earlier age about possibly having a family, or even assuming that they would, which even twenty years ago would have been a very different picture.

Meanwhile in the heterosexual population egg freezing is being marketed to mostly young presumed to be fertile women, and fertility is coming to be seen as much more precarious. So from a situation where it was precarious not to use contraception, it's now become precarious not to have children before you're thirty-five. So I don't think we have a sociological theory of fertility that can explain that. It's not available. It doesn't exist. But for really basic questions about 'what does reproduction mean to people' and 'how are reproductive politics central to the functioning of the state', you have to know more about those questions. So you have to be generating those new conceptual resources. And something like fertility anxiety is a concept, it's a new conceptual approach to fertility, but it's not like it's being introduced from some overarching body of theory: it's being produced from aggregate observations about a very curious sociological phenomenon that is very much in our midst.

SILVIA: Given the distinction you propose between the conceptual and the theoretical, how do you read the repositioning of Strathern within anthropological theory?

SARAH: You're better placed to answer that question because I'm now the chair of a sociology department. I think gender and kinship are seen as a huge part of how anthropology has changed over the past twenty years because it was kinship that turned out to be other area that came to be associated with rapid technological transition. You might have thought it was mainly sex and gender but it was actually when gender and *kinship* got put together – in particular by Yanagisako and Collier, but also by Marilyn – that we began to see a much bigger uptake within anthropology of a whole new approach to what I call relationality as technicality. I remember Marilyn and I talking, it was a while back, about 20 years ago, when it started to be obvious that the anthropology of new reproductive technologies was being very widely taught. It's in a lot of course curricula, and even in textbooks, and we had a bit of a laugh because obviously when we started out doing it, nobody was doing it and we did not *at all* expect it would become mainstream within the discipline so quickly. I think in general what happens is that when there are major contributions from feminist scholars they do tend to be kind of side-lined, unfortunately. I mean I think that 1970s feminist literature and the 1980s feminist anthropology literature is fantastic. It's so interesting to read, it's all about economy, property, identity ... It's very political it's all about materiality, kinship exchange, gender identity and power, it's about hierarchy, it's about the state, it's about sexuality, it's about everything. But that literature has just kind of vanished. Hardly anybody reads it or uses it or refers to it or cites it anymore I don't think anybody

teaches ‘The Traffic in Women’ (Rubin 1975) any more, I don’t know. So then what happens is there’ll be these new high profile areas – and I won’t name any in particular – that become associated with the emerging or important theoretical questions, which are mostly theories by men, and then there’s sort of an effort to fit some of the powerful women in the discipline – like Strathern or Haraway – into those ‘-isms’. But they don’t really fit, because it isn’t really what they’re doing. So it doesn’t really work very well and you get these really stupid debates about ‘is she part of that -ism or isn’t she?’ It’s like when you give a paper and you finish and someone says ‘so are you basically making a sort of Foucauldian argument?’ They have to name it with this other -ism category that isn’t anything to do with what you’re doing, and even if you haven’t even mentioned Foucault. And then you have to say ‘well, no not really, I mean Foucault’s very interesting but actually I wasn’t doing a Foucauldian analysis’, I just think that is so tiresome and unhelpful.

It is rare even for hugely influential and original women scholars to just be seen on their own terms – to be their own ism! I think that Marilyn is now, and so is Donna Haraway, but it took a long time, much longer than it should have done. And I think your book will be really important in helping to make that clear. I really hope that people continue to come back to Marilyn’s work on its own terms and think about the questions we’re dealing with today. It’s a consistent pattern that very powerful feminist arguments have been side-lined and feminist literature has been side-lined, or re-aligned under some other male -ism that just detracts from their own work.

EJ: I just want to ask one of our last questions about how you conceive of this question of queer genealogy both in your work and your trajectory.

SARAH: Thank you for this question about queer conceptions and genealogies. I think that queer genealogies can be defined by what you might call a lack of loyalty. Because I think a lot of the way of academia’s genealogies work is through loyalty. And through a kind of implicit exchange: In exchange for your loyalty we will give you this and this. I think what a lot of feminist academics who’ve tried to challenge the system have done is to be loyal up to a point, but then to be disloyal. I think it’s also true of queer. Queer in the academy is about the forms of disloyalty that you wear publicly. That doesn’t just mean your physical self-presentation, how conformist you are to say, normative gender expectations, but also about what you say, what you spend your time doing, who you include in things, where you put your attention. It’s about who and what you want to be loyal to in the sense of extending your trust and energy towards certain things and not others. Similarly it’s about what you *don’t do* and what you *won’t* participate in when you withdraw your attention and energy. I think creating a queer space within the academy is very important and that doesn’t just mean queer people. In my research group even trying to eat different kinds of food, or breaking with conventions – so we

don't go to the college dinner but to a vegetarian buffet after the talk instead. I bring my dog to work, we have poems and songs and dances, and I have involved several artists with our group. Things like that are part of breaking down the reproductive mechanisms that keep certain kinds of expectations operating, and thereby opening up the space for a different set of expectations to thrive. So queering the academy is about being queer *in* the academy. It's about institutional non-compliance and deviance, and creating different ways to be, to survive and to thrive in the academy. Audre Lorde has that great poem about being in doorways, and being inside and outside, and yeah you do have to develop queer group survival tactics, they're very important. And it's equally important for them to be shared, collectivised and maintained. Because if you don't have that you can't keep going and do the work that needs to be done.

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10 How exactly are we related?

Henrietta L. Moore

Marilyn Strathern once famously claimed that there was no such thing as society (Strathern 1988). It seems most likely that for the same reasons there can be no such thing as social theory, anthropological theory or queer theory. Bodies of knowledge are imaginatively recast as sets of differentiating relations. This renders the impetus of queer thinking problematic, for reasons that will become clear as we proceed, for its impulses arise from an abiding wish to differentiate and to dissent. For this to be effective, earlier versions or accounts – whether theoretical, experiential or identitarian – have to be rendered oppositionally as totalistic, holistic and normative.

This text is proffered in the spirit of the volume, as a form of merographic, or partial engagement with the collective effort of the text. Its own impetus is one of reflection through analogy and metaphor. Analogies establish relations through comparison, and metaphors are particular ways of achieving or communicating connections. The slippage between the two in social theory is most often productive, but it has particular consequences when we move between domains of quite different orders.

Analogy and metaphor – and their internal workings – are Strathernian devices, since what her own thinking shares with the Melanesian context in which it developed is an insistence on the fact that both are acts, operations on the world. These devices are particularly important for anthropological analysis because together they work through revelation and displacement. This has the effect of bringing new relations, comparisons, insights, questions, concerns, manoeuvres into view.

Where is everywhere?

Queer is about non-adherence to the norm, a powerful critique of normative and exclusionary practices, a move against the closure of political and social horizons. Queer theory has sought – as many chapters in the volume show – to expand its domain, working outwards from issues of sexuality and identity politics towards broader social horizons, insisting on the generative, the disruptive, the askance. Tom Boellstorff has suggested that rather than a theory, queer might be a method, less a noun and more of a verb, a set of situated

practices for studying many things that are not self-evidently queer in the sense of relating to sexuality and adjacent matters (Boellstorff 2010: 215): a view endorsed by many scholars who see queer as simultaneously a modality of being and of enquiry. An interesting tension emerges here between the propulsive direction of this broader understanding of queer practice and others – including students, activists and committed proponents – who voice two kinds of concerns. The first is a reluctance to move away from queer as an identity. The second is an anxiety that queer's commitment to anti-normativity undermines those who wish to move towards defined identities associated with masculinity and femininity. Queer's commitment to transgression shifts uneasily alongside new forms of sexual politics associated with trans making and same sex marriage, for example, which seek recognition of social and sexual statuses and identities. At play here, as with all theorisations and forms of knowledge production, are questions of desire and investment, and how they play out (Weiss 2016).

Questions of gender, sexuality and desire permeate social relations, and stand in metaphorically for many other forms of objects and relations in which we make investments. In many African contexts, ordinary objects of household provisioning connect to such matters via fertility and eating, as they do in many other societies. Freud suggested that we have to relinquish libidinal investments of many kinds in order to be able to redirect our energies into social life. Malinowski made a similar point arguing that cultural values must emerge from specific mechanisms for managing physiological drives (Malinowski 1939). The ethnographic record is replete with examples, all extensively documented by anthropologists. This material emphasises the material, somatic and sensate character of metaphor – its engagement both with the concrete world of materialities and the imaginary. The result is not a single coherent model, a totality, a map of society, but a set of incomplete, over determined and intersecting traces that are the product of specific and situated engagements with the material and the imaginary (Moore 2007: 86–87). Partial connections are indeed how gender, sexuality and desire work.

As Strathern argues: 'A world obsessed with ones and the multiplications and divisions of ones creates problems for the conceptualization of relationships' (Strathern 2004: 53). Here we arrive at some of the difficulties of genealogies. One of Marilyn Strathern's distinctive contributions is how we might set out to explore forms of knowledge construction through kinship. In this she follows, but does not reprise, Freud, Foucault, Lacan, Levi-Strauss, Rubin, Butler and others. The close relationship between kinship and various forms of social theorising comes as no surprise since both are about our relations with others and how we connect to a world in which we are invested. Origin myths – indeed all versions of the question 'where do we come from?' – are an abiding concern of societies around the world, and also beloved of academic communities. One of the key tasks for an academic is to work out the kinship of ideas, their origins and potentialities. Most knowledge production works through forms of belonging and denial, by claiming descent or affiliation, or

killing off ancestors. We invest heavily in our theoretical positions, and forms of theoretical belonging are always ways of setting out. Desire is an important part of academic life and what it does is to set things in motion by creating attachments and detachments, forms of relation that are also points of departure.

No wonder then that ‘sexuality is everywhere: the way a bureaucrat fondles his records, a judge administers justice, a business man causes money to circulate; the way the bourgeoisie fucks the proletariat; and so on’ (Deleuze and Guattari 2004 [1977]: 322).

Marilyn Strathern from her own starting point makes a similar kind of claim: ‘Certainty itself appears partial, information intermittent. An answer is another question, a connection a gap, a similarity a difference, and vice versa’ (Strathern 2004: xxiv).

Plurality, uncertainty, cellular replications, fractals, non-linearity, potentialities – all are seductive in a post-plural world, a world of irreducible diversity and emergent forms, a world where authorities and authorship give way to potentiality and affect. This form of theorising and its attendant practices are deeply seductive because they preface a world without limits, one where encounter prevails, where connection promises the possibility of a theory of everything, a oneness with the world. This finds its most prescient forms in queer ecologies and their related constellations of practices, where sex and nature form a common ground for theorising about the multiple trajectories of power and matter. Cellular replication, materialisation and nonhuman forms of sexual and gender diversity provide the basis for non-teleological forms of relationality, sociality and pleasure (e.g. Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 2010; Seymour 2013). This powerful work reformulates the long-standing connections between sexuality and nature to develop a vision of interconnectedness that is powerfully seductive, even a form of romance with the world. Here the important move of dethroning anthropos flirts with the idea of a return to plenitude. Theories are always forms of belonging.

The pleasures of theorising are an important part of theory development and formation. The vision of a world without boundaries which is also one of emergent properties is hard to resist. Perhaps there should be no concern about, or purpose to, resistance, but explication is a much harder task than simply deciding to relinquish epistemic control over human and non-human possibilities or pluripotentialities. If everything in the world is linked, if sexuality and gender are everywhere, if relations merely reveal further relation, then what kind of explanations are being offered of the world we inhabit, and how might those explanations connect to efforts to make that world more liveable for all?

In some very general sense, everything is connected, but theorising is a form of selective amnesia. It has to be because it is impossible to take everything into account at once. This is one of the reasons for the formation of disciplines, the disciplining of directed intention and critical thought. Theoretical belonging has a purpose, but a good part of that purpose is given by

context, by situatedness in time and space. This form of embeddness cannot be reduced to notions of potentialities or even emergent properties or forms of relationality, if by relationality we simply mean the potential for relations to be formed and revealed in various time dimensions. Concepts and modes of being are honed in different problems spaces and in different historical moments. The development of new concepts, new theoretical languages and forms of rhetoric allow new questions to be asked and new data to emerge. Consequently, theories are not just about thinking about the world, but also acting on it – like metaphors themselves. Here, human social life differs from that of materiality because in addition to the forms of becoming and relationality that the human and the non-human have in common, human social life is subject to the effects of ideational forms. Different theoretical traditions differ as to the valence, import and velocity of their impact, but in terms of the theories humans develop of the world, there is no doubt that these models are powerful. Two of the most powerful from the middle of the 20th century onwards have been gender and sexuality.

One purpose of theoretical critique is to rearticulate norms, and to shift positions, to create new forms of relationality and positionality. This both Marilyn Strathern and queer theorists have done with elan. Theoretical critique of this kind relies on processes of judgement, training, formulation, elucidation, attention and scrutiny. If there are problems with norms, the means and mechanisms, material and imaginary, through which we lead our lives then we have to imagine, develop and promulgate new ones. This involves both ethics and politics. Situatedness or contextualisation is of many kinds for all social theorists, and should not be imagined in the singular or as necessarily a matter of culture, geopolitical location or nationality, although all may be crucial. More relevant for anthropology is the evident nature of co-creation, the fact that fieldwork is a long process of learning. Situatedness is what drives anthropology and provides it with much of its power. It is an inductive discipline and particularity is what makes comparison powerful.

Clearly such a statement is overshadowed by the long history of colonialism and exclusionary theoretical formulations which have been critiqued in the social sciences, and in which queer theory plays its part. Comparative categories derived from western theorising clearly risk drowning out and distorting the particularities of lives lived. However, most working anthropologists – and especially those who have an interest in theory – recognise that their theoretical preoccupations do not derive solely from disciplinary training and debate, but from contexts and forms of engagement in the world where they find purchase, engagement and power. Intellectual models depend for their impetus on imaginative possibilities they themselves cannot provide (Moore 1994: chap 7). Anthropology is no longer a single discipline, if it ever was, but rather a multiplicity of practices engaged in a wide variety of social contexts. The move to make anthropological or social knowledge partial and plural is obviously insufficient (Moore 1996: 2–6). But, the decentring of anthropos, the move to relationality, uncertainty, non-linearity etc. does little

to recognise the production of other forms of knowledge with stated comparative, generalisable and universal claims (Moore 2012a). The ethics of such a requirement is not materially advanced either simply by asserting the existence of multiple ontologies and multiple worlds, without also recognising the comparative scope of other forms of knowledge, and their validity as social theory (Moore 2015).

Ethics is a matter of theory as well as of method, and demands sustained reflection on what practices are adequate to the form of enquiry (Bell 2007). But, social theory is not just about sustained reflection, as other social theorists outside the canon of western social theory have shown us, because it needs to be crafted from committed engagement with a purpose and/or a vision of the world. It's not just a matter of data and models. Here queer theory finds potential purchase. But, it is also worth recalling that the situatedness of knowledge is both its strength and a condition of its partiality. There are only ever partial connections between the figure of anthropos and the specific theories available during a particular historical period. Foucault tried to draw attention to this fact by emphasising that there might come a time when the regime of sexuality would come to an end (Foucault 1976: 152–159). His warning was intended to remind us that in future contexts and histories it might be necessary to resituate the sexual subject in regimes of power and affect that could not be captured appropriately by the languages and ruses of sexuality as concept, experience or fantasy. A time might come when sexuality would not over determine all other life projects and subject positions (Moore 2012b: 15). In such a time, sexuality would no longer be a problematisation in Foucauldian terms. One question we might wish to ask is whether queer might be one of the names for such a moment. Is queer beyond sexuality? If so, what might post-queer signify? In what way could queer be beyond queer, and what kinds of things – subjects, objects, relations – could be realised in such a world?

One difficulty here is that genealogies are a tricky business. They almost never work through complete processes of either replication or disconnection. Their preferred *modus operandi* seem to be folded forms of amplifying recursive relationality – very Strathernian in fact – where points of departure lead backwards and forwards simultaneously. In the social sciences, we most often figure these forms of recursive relationality as sets of multiple and multiplying differences. This is what is intended in most instances by the deployment of new terms such as post-plural, pluripotentialities, post-queer. They represent an attempt, a desire to signal something beyond the limits of language, category, position. It is also precisely why the authors in this volume link Strathernian recursivity to a radically queering potential. However, as the old adage goes 'every good metaphor contains its opposite', and terms such as post-plural and post-queer insistently refer back to their origins and the conditions of their own emergence as forms of knowledge production. But, their expansiveness, their radical relationality cannot capture the totality of process, any more than the notion of society captures all the relations

which make it up. The story of everywhere will never capture the simultaneous versions of the relations between anthropos and world in their unfoldings, even when we deploy the analogies of nature, of cellular replication, of becomings, of life itself to assist us. As all scientists recognise, the closer you get to life the more it eludes you. There is always more to reality than meets the eye.

This is a fridge magnet

Analogies, as Marilyn Strathern argues, are constructions or reference points that create a revelation, they make things appear in the imagination (Strathern 2011a: 252). The very act of redescribing one thing in terms of another creates a ‘not-quite-replication’ which both resembles and differs (Strathern 2011b: 98). The result is a form of folded over estrangement. Metaphors often serve the same purpose and one of my favourites is: ‘The attorney general is a jellyfish’. We know something new about one thing by juxtaposing it with another, creating similarity and difference simultaneously. As Marilyn Strathern asserts, this is not necessarily a matter of comparing things that are obviously the same, rather it is the very assertion of relationality that is productive (Strathern 2011b: 96, 102).

In moving from category to plurirelationality/pluripotentialities, queer views itself as transgressive both in relation to its own genealogy of emergence in the social sciences, but also as a consequence of its hyper-relationality, the lack of boundaries between the human, non-human and material worlds, the act of queering those relationalities. There are a number of issues here, but one is a query about how – and for whom – the relations/encounters/intersections referred to should be understood as queer. Queer is a point of departure, displacement and unfolding with a particular history, but if plurirelationalities, encounters, ramifications, emergences are inherent in the world, then for most of that world they must by definition not be queer, at least in the terms in which queer theory and practice has defined the term. Queer cannot provide new forms of representational literalism. One might go further and suggest that a post-plural, pluripotential world is one in which the act of queering is logically unnecessary, since no boundaries or totalities are constitutive. In a world without limits, no metaphor of becoming, of pluripotentiality or of the post-queer, however well developed, could hope to provide an account of that world.

Marilyn Strathern’s interest in the post-plural (2004: xvi) reprises a world where parts and wholes have no purchase, and where the severance of one form of relationship founds a further relationship (2011a: 261). This is an example of what she refers to as ‘borrowing the insights without borrowing the substance’ because it is an idea that follows productively from the Melanesian insight that through reproduction persons are both duplicated and divided, replicated and created anew as a set of productive differences (Strathern 2011a: 262). Yet, Marilyn Strathern is also clear that while

genealogies differentiate and replicate, they do not necessarily lead in one direction or operate on a single time scale. As she notes, postmodernism does not come after modernism, it was found within it, it was already there (Strathern 2011a: 253). Part of the work of the analyst is to reveal or make evident relations that already exist. But, the queering of categories, relations, pluripotentialities began long before queer became one of the names for these processes.

The notion of transgression provides the opportunity for a moment of reflection here. Transgression is an act that depends on the idea that we are both telling it like it is, and telling it like it is not. It thus depends on a certain adherence to forms of representation. A good example might be Magritte's image *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*. This is a familiar work and its premise is that for an image to find its significance, it must be displaced from its natural given state, from the taken for granted. It is not just that the image in the art work is not a pipe, but that it seeks to destabilise the relationship between representation and reality, to undercut the literalism of the sign's relation to the world. From a genealogical point of view, it is probably worth recalling that it was painted a decade or so after the publication of Saussure's work on the arbitrary relation of the sign.

The desire to unsettle the taken for granted, to be transgressive, is a modernist aspiration, and as such marks out the traces of a modernist project within queer theory. However, modernism, as Foucault argued, is not an epoch, but a relation. Modernism, like many transgressive and leftist movements, harbours a desire to tell it like it is, to partake of representational realism. Marilyn Strathern also retains a commitment to literalism, to uncovering a truth: 'Making the implicit explicit I refer to as an act of literalisation, that is, a mode of laying out the coordinates or conventional point of reference of what is otherwise taken for granted' (Strathern 1992: 5). However, as the implicit is made explicit, at the very moment the arbitrary relation of the sign is made evident, a nostalgia for an authentic connection between sign and world is realised. Modernism consistently revealed the image's power of allusion and yet mourned for an authentic connection between sensation/nature/world and the sign (Clark 1999: 9–10). The metaphor for this folded over, recursive relation of displacement and connection is in the materialism of the art work itself. Yet, modernism, like modernity, had no power to cohere as a totality. It is recognisably itself, and yet also other to its multiple selves. Theories, like art works, are very often other to themselves. Magritte's image is now so popular that its capacity for shock has been transmuted into a consumable pleasure. For all those who may have seen the work itself, it is familiar to many more in its most popular instantiation as a fridge magnet. The queer potential of fridge magnets has yet to be realised.

However, the process of queering, rather than queer theory per se, suggests other parallels with the making of images that are instructive. In 1928, Magritte painted a work entitled *L'Homme au Journal*. It consist of four panels, the first of which depicts a man seated at a table reading a newspaper

with his back to a window. The adjacent three panels show the same room but with the man removed. In each case, there are very slight displacements of the image, slight changes of perspective. The only way to spot them is by looking at the shadows the objects cast. Once the image of the man is removed, other signs cannot stay constant, the meaning of the scene is uncertain. It is no longer a man reading a newspaper. These plural perspectives become perspectives for one another, they show the world making meaning in the absence of the meaning maker. They are an attempt both at denaturalisation and at recuperation of the object world, materiality as is. The images are in juxtaposition, both partial and merographic, but no one view offers a totalising vision.

The idea that there is more to the world than any one perspective can offer, and that this is revealed through a world of objects has a long history. But, Magritte's image works precisely because it does not specify its intentions, it is open, it is not providing a narrative, drawing a conclusion, marking out a pathway forward. It is an indicative proposition, an encounter at best. Its purpose is contrariness, estrangement, arbitrariness. The queering of all relations – both human and non-human – has a similar purpose, it does not lay out a pathway other than one of transgression and displacement. The political at the core of queer is the romance of the antinormative, the idea of a world of endless possibilities within relationality. This notion of queering works through the potentialities of obfuscation and association rather than through the effects of positionality or narrative. It is at odds with the identitarian elements of its own emergence and with the fact that it is permanently marked by sexuality. Clearly, it is impossible to reform queer's marking by sexuality since this is constitutive of the heart of the discourse. Queer does not come after sexuality but is found within it.

What is social change?

The challenge with academic genealogies is that they are not cartographies of descent, rather like formal kinship charts they are not accurate reflections of the lived world they seek to capture. Marilyn Strathern's notion of the post-plural is a space of non-belonging, but yet retains an oblique connection to the temporal and spatial contexts of its production. Foucault used the notion of problematisation to signal the crucial but oblique relation between historical circumstance and the theories of anthropos and the world thus occasioned. One of the abiding mistakes of social sciences is occasionally to mistake changes in theory for changes in the world or to imagine that the one can substitute for the other. Part of the problem here is the focus on difference and differentiation. The source of these ideas in social science theorising are various, but since at least the end of the nineteenth century, biology has played a crucial if often under theorised role. Biology, and particularly cellular replication, underpins the work of Deleuze (1991), Masumi (2002), Connolly (2011) and a host of contemporary writers. It is

therefore fundamental to queer theorising (Kirksey 2018; Lowe 2010) in ways that are often oblique rather than explicative. However, the social worlds of humans do not self-organise in the way that cellular replication and the materialities of the (so-called) natural world do. The very analogy of social life as a series of becomings or emergences is predicated on the non-linear potentialities of living forms, but it finds purchase within queer practice because it plays out the romance of the human at one with the natural.

While forms of becoming are certainly not captured by the notion of human time as history, we should be wary of subsuming the latter within the differentiations of becoming. Redundancy, reversals, needless repetitions and nostalgia are all part of human history and play a huge part in driving social change and creating dysfunctional forms of political economy. The notion of becoming in the social sciences risks reducing the plural temporalities of human (and non-human) time to the monotemporality of becoming (Born 2010: 243). Becoming as an emergence is not actually moving anywhere, as a series of emerging relationalities it is not marked by the human or the sign. The further risk is that relationality understood as endlessly ramifying difference everywhere – a queer universe – fails to distinguish between different kinds of relationality, with different temporal and value dimensions. If post-plural relationality or pluripotentialities (Connolly 2011: 116) become the new queer universe of the non-normative then we might need to watch out for what the normative is up to.

The very assumption that somehow a shift from performance to positionality and onwards via multiplicity and the post-plural to processes of becoming charts a form of progress in social science theorising should, at the very least, be interrogated (Grosz 1999). Rather like the view that we have somehow been moving along a progressive continuum from gender via sexuality to queer and post-queer. Of course, in social theory, as in life, ordinary everyday experiences of change, continuity, rupture and epoch sit alongside and are simultaneous with the objectification, categorisation and manipulation of history by those in power (Hodges 2008: 416). However, there is a risk that all these questions of history and social transformation fade into emergent potentialities or get refigured as simply the intricacies of personal struggle and identitarian politics. If queer becomes redefined as ‘resistance to a wide field of normalisation’ (Weiss 2016: 631), will it be sufficient to expose forms of political economy and power simply by queering them, especially when queer practices are allied to a philosophical commitment to a world of becoming, of emergent possibilities?

If we take as instructive the changes in sexual identities and sexual regulation over the last 30 years around the world, it is evident that enormous changes in identities, legalities and practices have taken place. However, it is equally evident that all such change is embroiled in relational forms of anachronism and repetition that are not well captured by differentiation and the non-identitarian precisely because they are folded-over versions of earlier positions, experiences, understandings and trajectories. Consequently, when

we reflect on the issues of same sex marriage and the rise of the trans movement, for example, we see and experience their liberatory potentialities, but we recognise also their reemergent identitarian and classificatory propensities. Sexualities, identities, objects of desire, audiences, activists and others are inhabiting multiple and not necessarily coincident temporalities, they are literally out of time with each other. The realisation of possibilities in human social life requires effort, they do not just become or emerge. This is one of the definitions of the political.

What then does history mean for human life in its pluripotential relations with materialities, the non-human and the more than human? Paul Rabinow has been exploring a version of this question for years in his reflections on the contemporary. He is clear that the contemporary is not an historical epoch (Rabinow 2007: 2), but an emergent relationship. His use of the term emergent is redolent of other terms including adjacent and accompaniment (Rabinow 2011). His interest is indeed in relations, in what is inherent in interactions themselves and how trajectories emerge out of those interactions. In a sense, everything is contemporary. He recognises the difficulty of this position by asking: 'How is one to decide where one is? And where is one going?' (Rabinow 2007: 12). Issues of discernment and judgement are important, the act of making things adjacent or contemporary is an act, and fundamentally a matter of politics. It is not sufficient to roll up all these difficulties into notions of becoming and emergence. The vocabularies of analysis work through analogy and metaphor, and as such they are acts upon the world. The desire to capture the world in its fullness is an old one and it is refigured anew in the literalism of theory as sets of emergent, pluripotential relations. The social sciences have a duty not just to describe the world as it is or to be at one with its potentialities, but to attend to the distortions and demands that humans make on that world, and to orient their critique towards a life that is more liveable for all of us.

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