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978-1-107-00968-4 - Recasting Anthropological Knowledge: Inspiration and Social Science

Edited by Jeanette Edwards and Maja Petrović-Šteger

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Edited by

Jeanette Edwards

and

Maja Petrović-Šteger



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For Marilyn Strathern

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This book is inspired by, and dedicated to, Dame Professor Marilyn Strathern. It is one of a number of ways in which her colleagues have attempted to express their gratitude and appreciation of her scholarship, intellectual generosity, kindness and integrity, as well as her unstinting support, over the years, of anthropology and anthropologists. It is, above all, a way of saying thank you. Earlier versions of four of the chapters (Petrović-Šteger, Putniņa, Reed and Yarrow) were first presented at a panel at the biannual conference of the European Association of Social Anthropologists in Ljubljana, 2008. The panel brought together anthropologists who had been supervised by Marilyn as doctoral students and was convened as a tribute to her in the year she ‘officially’ retired. The panel also included papers from Lissant Bolton, Tony Crook and James Leach, and the editors would like to thank them and the audience, as well as Samuelle Carlson, Terence Hay-Edie, Hélena Regius and Ilana Gershon, for their different contributions to the more dispersed and broader Festschrift. Jeanette Edwards would also like to acknowledge and thank Verena Stolcke and Christina Toren for early conversations about how best to mark Marilyn’s retirement. For her work on the final manuscript, we would like to thank Patricia Scalco; for his enthusiasm and impeccable professionalism, Richard Fisher at Cambridge University Press; for her help at the beginning and the end of this book, Fay Faunch at Girton College, Cambridge; and an anonymous reader for pertinent and perceptive comments on an earlier version of the collection. The people named here are just a few amongst many who would, we know, want us to add their thanks to those of the editors and authors of this collection to Marilyn Strathern as teacher and colleague *par excellence*.

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1 Introduction: on recombinant knowledge and debts that inspire

Jeanette Edwards and Maja Petrović-Šteger

The chapters in this collection are connected through the inspiration they draw from the scholarship of Marilyn Strathern, one of the most compelling and innovative social anthropologists of contemporary times. From early fieldwork and a series of monographs on the Hagen people of Papua New Guinea, Strathern earned a reputation as a Melanesianist, but her theoretical interests have always also been oriented towards Euro-American (that is, her own) society. Scholars in both the social sciences and the humanities know her as a feminist and trailblazing anthropologist of, amongst other things, new reproductive technologies, gender, kinship, economics and law. Over a forty-year career, Strathern has insisted on the constructed nature of such marks of professional and other identification, often convening them into new relations or radically recasting their accepted bearing to each other.

Strathern's reconfigurations have yielded a number of particularly invigorating conceptions of knowledge that have surprised in both their representations and their effects. Her pioneering works on the social and cultural dimension and implications of a range of technological and ethical changes in our time have had a defining, or perhaps a definitively unsettling, role in articulations of what is at stake in a number of current research projects across the humanities and social sciences. How, then, to begin to unpack and introduce Strathern's enormous contribution to scholarship generally and social anthropology specifically? Chronologically? Thematically? Through an archaeology of her key concepts? A review of her writings? Such strategies seem inadequate – inappropriate even. They go against the grain, risking the imposition of an arbitrary structure on a contribution

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that defies a linear account and is as immeasurable as it is uncontainable. Strathern's writings hold up for scrutiny familiar and 'taken for granted' concepts and she pays sharp attention to the premises on which 'western' scholarship is built. Such a compulsion is as destabilising as it is exhilarating and its impact, as noted above, is felt beyond the discipline of social anthropology. Yet 'impact', again, does not seem quite the right word.¹ Strathern's insights are subtle. They get under the skin and niggle. They work on you as much as you (have to) work on them.

The authors of the chapters presented in this collection take various strategies and we take our lead from them. Their brief was to pick up, run with and depart from key Strathernian concepts by way of their own current research. The result is something more stable than such metaphors of flight suggest. Instead of running, the authors of these chapters have decided to dwell. Debbora Battaglia (beginning this volume), for example, remarking on the generosity with which Strathern cites her students and colleagues and on how she reworks and re-worlds their ethnographic accounts, shows what it might mean to accompany rather than depart from Strathern: in her words, to go a-worlding with her. Adam Reed (ending this volume) is more cautious: for him, it is a moot point whether Strathern's generosity in citing her students is evidence of her having been inspired by them: but, dwelling on the concept of inspiration itself, Reed reveals its unbidden, all-encompassing, dynamic and deeply social and sociable nature. Multiple flows of inspiration run through the various chapters in this volume and not only between Strathern and her students. Bearing in mind, however, that Strathern's analytical categories have a tendency to dislocate and introduce incommensurabilities of time, place and scale between what, from another perspective, are tokens of the same current social meaning, our attempt to dwell in analytical restlessness poses a particular challenge.

In *After nature*, Strathern outlines a working conception of merographic connection. Similar to but not the same as the relationship between part and whole, a merographic connection depicts the capacity in Euro-American thinking to connect up entities, tropes, images and so forth in

¹ And even less so at a time when 'impact' is mooted in the UK as an appropriate measurement of the worthiness of research.

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Introduction

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domains of knowledge: connection in one domain entails disconnection from another. ‘Nature’ and ‘culture’, for example, are similar (connected) in the sense that they operate in comparable ways while having laws of their own. ‘Culture’ and ‘nature’ work in different fields of fact; each elicits, and is elicited by, sets of connections which differentiate the pair. Difference, then, becomes ‘connection from another angle’ (1992a: 73). Strathern’s tendency and capacity to rework and recombine knowledge originating elsewhere – in other persons and other relations – can itself be seen as an instance of the merographic. She unmoors ethnographic insight from its origins, and unhitches common idioms from familiar domains, mobilising them in a different conversation and connecting them in often unexpected but always productive ways. The authors of the chapters in this book follow suit: they make connections between their work and hers and in so doing make explicit her influence. They also, however, work their ethnography through contiguous research in their field and with the subjects and persons of their study. It is the duplex characteristic of these chapters specifically and the book generally that we want to flag here. While this volume pays tribute and is profoundly connected to Strathern it is also devolved from her and pursues its own lines of enquiry.

Continuing the theme of the duplex, we introduce the authors to you twice: once through some of their specific concepts and then through their place in the structure of this book. First we should note that the thematically diverse chapters in this volume are also linked by the person of the authors. They were all supervised by Strathern as PhD students and their diversity in terms of ethnographic sites, styles of writing, and what they have chosen, or felt compelled, to do for a volume that deliberately makes reference to her ideas and influence is indicative of her eclecticism and intellectual generosity. Strathern has a canny capacity for forging and maintaining relationships across institutions and disciplines, but perhaps more noteworthy, here, is her capacity for nurturing relationships with and between individuals ‘across the board’. This latter characteristic is recognised by colleagues (see, for example, Benthall 1994) perhaps because, in itself, it is remarkable in the world of British academia where antennae are often, and still, finely tuned to all kinds of distinction. It is almost an anthropological truism to say that Strathern takes ‘the relation’ seriously at all levels.

Recombinant knowledge

The anthropological relation that Strathern unpacks is a duplex: simultaneously conceptual and interpersonal (and see both **Riles** and **Putniņa**, this volume). Connections between idioms of thought run in tandem with connections between persons (with specific histories). This volume is itself an example of the duplex nature of the anthropological relation. Its contributors have benefited from their relationship with the person of Strathern and owe a personal debt which they cannot, should they wish to do so, completely unhitch from the relationship between their and her ideas (and see **Reed**, this volume). Yet even though the duplex nature of ‘the relation’ might mean it is partisan to privilege one aspect (for example, the conceptual) above the other (for example, the interpersonal), our intention was to be partisan: to black box the interpersonal and engage the conceptual. The authors have succeeded in doing this: they have engaged Strathern conceptually and run with her ideas in novel and unpredictable ways. Moreover, in the nature of the anthropological relation, the following chapters are also, and significantly, each an instantiation of a specific interpersonal relationship.

The anthropological relation that Strathern unpacks is also a tool: anthropology’s technology. Like the biotechnologist’s use of enzymes to splice and combine DNA where ‘life is put to work on life ... the anthropologist uses relations to explore relations’ (Strathern 2005a: 7). Extending the analogy with recombinant DNA, we draw on the notion of recombinant knowledge to flag the novel entities forged through splicing and melding different ways of knowing. Recombinant knowledge serves as an organising trope for this collection on various levels. First, as a whole, the volume brings together (recombines in novel form) the writing and ideas (knowledge-making) of anthropologists whose regular stomping grounds do not usually overlap. Here, researchers who work on Melanesian law and aesthetics enter into conversation with those exploring Japanese corporate business models, insect experimentation in Africa, and same-sex parents in Latvia: how might Strathernian projects link relations among such authors? Second, the term introduces individual chapters which themselves recombine