



Anthropology Book Forum

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MARILYN STRATHERN, 2020, *Relations: An Anthropological Account*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 274 pp., ISBN 978-1-4780-0835-4

In *Relations: An Anthropological Account*, British anthropologist Marilyn Strathern offers up a genealogical treatise on the word-concept ‘relation.’ She probes into the particularities within and along the history of its evolution through the modern era of the English-speaking world. For the purposes of undertaking such an analysis, ‘relation’ is considered in two distinct ways. The first is as the familiar, seemingly inherently ever-evasive yet fundamental material to the construction of knowledge. The second is in the guise of kinship, that perhaps formerly trademark means and ends of the modern anthropological enterprise and its practice of ethnographic fieldwork.

In fact, relations, in their vastly myriad shapes and sizes, have figured significantly throughout Strathern’s body of work, whether the point of focus or adjacent to it, as gender relations, transactions, exchanges, connections – the in-betweenness of things, or, perhaps especially, as noted, kinship(s). While such relations were before considered in the context of a historical analysis of modern and contemporary Britain or on-site fieldwork in Melanesia, in the present investigation, the source word-concept is the very subject of attention, with implications abounding for all.

Strathern’s inquiry surveys the etymology of ‘relation’ from as far back as its incorporation into the English language from the Latin – ‘*relatio*’ – through the Middle Ages. Ultimately, however, attention given to this period is brief, as for the most part, the inquiry concerns itself with the course of relation’s changes in the formative modern period, as pertaining to the Western European, Anglo-American world’s history. Indeed, Strathern is careful to

make a point of emphasizing that her inquiry has relevance exclusively for the English-speaking world, and more specifically, for the discipline of anthropology as practiced at least in the Anglophone tradition. Strathern writes, “there is a decided particularity to my inquiry. I turn to the use of ‘relation’ as it is configured in the English language. The emphasis of this phrase is on configuring and use. My concern in this work is with the relation as an expository device or tool and I refer to its ideational capacity for such work by the shorthand, concept” (pg. 2-3). Strathern’s explicit focus on anthropology as practiced in the English language has to do with an acknowledgment of limits. Her attention to use and configuration articulate how such an inquiry will be undertaken. She furthermore explains, “it is in paying attention to the way relation is used that we might come closest to something like an ethnographic account of it [...] Relation is at once one of anthropology’s central tools of Inquiry and a prime target of anthropological knowledge, while at the same time its theoretical invention as a scaffolding device precipitates its discovery as something that seemingly slips out from under explicit theorizing” (pg. 2). After all, the British anthropologist known for his fieldwork in Melanesia, and theorizing on art, Alfred Gell, is cited as stating in the late 1990s that if anthropology had any specific subject-matter at all, it would be social relationships, a thought echoed by other practitioners of the discipline (pg. 1).

The breadth and depth of sources Strathern employs in her inquiry is exacting, particular, yet formidable still. She draws from fields as disparate as the philosophy of science, biology, art, and literary criticism, and the work of other anthropologists like Marisol de la Cadena, Manuela Carneiro da Cunha, Alberto Corsín Jiménez, Su Fang Ng, João de Pina-Cabral, and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. Hers is a philosophical dialogue spanning from John Locke to Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz to David Hume, and contexts from the Enlightenment, to modernization, identity, and the nature/culture (or society) dichotomy. With regard to relations specifically, Strathern considers forms such as kinship (or kin relations) and friendship, and aspects such as comparisons (and contrasts), metaphors (or analogies), similarities (and dissimilarities or differences), positive connotations, blood, relating (in the manner of narration or exposition), closeness and distance, degrees of

proximity, and alliances and other connections. This is all to render a rich, substantial discourse from which to analyze relations.

Strathern's inquiry is divided into three parts, the first of which is devoted to what she terms the historicizing and culturalizing of the connotations held by relation(s) (pgs. 19-20). In Chapter 1, she invokes Pina-Cabral's "objection to anthropological socio-centrism, that is, to using social relations as a prototype for all relations...[furthermore to] the long line of 'Anglo American philosophers' who treated 'all relations as being akin to paternal filiation,' succumbing to the sociocentric trap of seeing every relation as propositionally instituted in the way kin relations are" (pg. 28). Locke's writings around "Of Relation," which are liable to said objection, are referenced throughout. In Chapter 2, Strathern considers the "Registers of Comparison," a more recent, modern form of relation. She notes that "[i]n common usage, 'comparison' can both include the alignment of similarities and differences or be distinguished as focused on similarities by contrast with 'contrast,'" identifying an inherent bias for the latter (pg. 45). Such configurations no doubt have long affected how anthropologists have worked with comparisons, among other word-concept forms of relations.

Strathern further scrutinizes relations in Part 2, but focuses on (the) relation as a concept. In Chapter 3, she notes that "[i]n the register of academic knowledge-making, description is intimately bound up with exposition," and she identifies a "routine self-consciousness with which anthropologists organize materials and develop models...languages of expertise create themselves in turn as objects of knowledge," furthermore expressing no surprise that 'the anthropologist's relationship to other people's knowledge is always at issue' (pg. 73-74). Arguing that "the anthropologist's comparative enterprise is found not only in its elements but also in the relations that compose them," Strathern arrives at an analysis of the relation as in relating a story, or narration (pg. 74-75). In fact, a quite curious history can be traced for this relation, a dead genre that nonetheless heralded questions regarding trust in the teller (or narrator), believability, and authority (in experience), amongst others, which we today take for granted especially within academic and/or other more professional discourses (pg. 75). Strathern devotes Chapter 4 towards "probing into

notions of similarity in the imagining of relations” (pg. 97). Her concerns here more or less revolve around “the conceptual impasse that comes from trying to activate difference through ideas of relating saturated with the connectives of similarity” (pg. 110). This is to say, the word-concept of ‘relation’ is inherently loaded with or assumes some kind of similarity. In acknowledging this, how is one, then, to incorporate into the picture and make relation(s) work with difference?

In the third and last part of *Relations*, Strathern reflects on the evasive nature of relations in thought, and then on some of the limits of the word-concept’s workings with and through kinship. For Chapter 5, Strathern poses what could have been if Locke, in a dialogue with Hume regarding “personal identity,” that is, “selves (persons) or human beings (man),” had employed the terminology of kinship? She speculates, “[f]or this attribute of kinship could have been the imaginative link, the train of association, that brought relations to mind. Thus the thinking self might have summoned a multiplicity of such selves in dialogue with others” (pg. 133). She continues, “[c]onversely, if understanding relations is not intrinsic to the dual concepts of person or man, are we to conclude that kinship, being entwined with questions about relations as it is, finds itself irrelevant to these formulations of identity, too? As it stands, determinations of the nature of personal or organic identity could take place without any figuration of relations” (pg. 133).

There is much food for thought on offer in thinking about relations from Strathern’s relatively short yet dense inquiry. As well, the reader may come away with the impression that the possibilities seem endless in undertaking an etymological-genealogical inquiry, and that any number of words and their associated concepts could have been investigated. Strathern is quite forthcoming in admitting the former, at least. It is also made evident, if not explicitly, that the implications of such an investigation reach far beyond the social sciences, let alone anthropology. Furthermore, the reader, much as any student, is reminded of the gravity inherent in the practice of word usage as it comes to academic discourse.

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