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Partible Persons and Multiple Authors

In reviewing this book I cannot simply engage in linear exposition and critique, because it charts a most extraordinary course between the imagined worlds of Melanesians and of Western analysts, between the sociality of gift and commodity economies, between anthropological and feminist debates. Ultimately I criticize these binary oppositions that steer its course. But like Mary Douglas, writing in the *London Review of Books* (1989), I am stunned by the cunning of the book's design. It is not the cunning of concealment-- on the contrary, this is a book that wears its scaffolding on the outside. Douglas likened it to the Centre George Pompidou in Paris-- that famous building that extrudes its air conditioning in brilliant external panels, whose escalators creep like transparent caterpillars on its surface, and with as much art happening outside as is enveloped within. Surface complexity affords multiple vantage points for the reader, and in this book for the author too!

But first, what is meant by *The Gender of the Gift*? For Marilyn Strathern gender means much more than the existence of male and female as sociological categories. It is rather the rendering of persons, artifacts, events, and sequences as male and female. Thus the gender of

the gift is not simply that men exchange women, or that only men transact, but the gendering of transactors, goods, and exchange events and sequences (p. ix).

The gift for her is antithetical to the commodity. Following Gregory (1982), she sees the gift exchange as establishing a relation between exchanging subjects, while commodity exchange establishes a relationship between the objects exchanged. In a commodity economy people experience the desire to appropriate goods; in a gift economy the desire is to expand social relations (p. 143). In a commodity economy persons and things assume the social form of things: they are reified; whereas in a gift economy things and persons assume the social form of persons: they are personified. But while Gregory allows the coexistence of the two forms of exchange in the real world of contemporary Melanesia, Strathern deliberately segregates them in her analytical fictions.

It is important to the way that I proceed that the forms so contrasted are different in social origin (Melanesian/Western) even though the manner in which they are expressed must belong commensurately within a single Western discourse. Thus a culture dominated by ideas about property ownership can only imagine the absence of such ideas in specific ways. . . . It sets up its own internal contrasts. This is especially true for the contrast between commodities and gifts; the terms form a single cultural pair within Western political economy discourse, though they can be used to typify economies that are not party to the discourse. (P. 18)

This fiction (and others) becomes pivotal in the process of Strathern's regional comparison. She covers an extraordinary range of Melanesian material--from the Highlands, west and east, to the Massim and Vanuatu--but her comparative method is rather unorthodox. Orthodox comparisons decontextualize cultural elements from wholes, talk of traits or institutions (the presence/absence of male initiations, pollution beliefs, warfare) without due regard to cultural context, to their meaning in an experiential whole. For Strathern it is not so much decontextualized elements as cultural wholes that are the problem. What passes for comparison is often the mere juxtaposition of ethnographic materials from several places (collected in one volume, but still intact). Strathern suggests in a great backhander that this may be "because of too much good work" in Melanesian ethnography. Brilliant ethnographies convey a sense of completeness and closure, and thus resist

incorporation in a frame different to that bounding the original depiction.

Strathern's strategy is different--she wants to do a partial job. This seems to be a knowing pun--partial in the sense of analytic openness, but also partial in the sense of an interested vantage point. For her that vantage point is Mount Hagen, although she moves far beyond it into the Eastern Highlands, the Massim, and Vanuatu. But still the view of Melanesia is a view from the Western Highlands. Her analytical problem self-consciously derives from the first case, namely "how to specify the widely varying relationships between public cult activity, ceremonial exchange, and (formerly) warfare and the organization of horticultural production and domestic kinship on the other" (pp. 43-44). This has been construed by some as the relation of the male public domain versus the female domestic domain. This is not Strathern's model (as we shall see). As Strathern moves away from the Hagen center she observes a difference in how the public collective life of men is constituted. In the Western Highlands, it is ceremonial exchange; in the east, male cults. In the west, politics creates prestige as a separate value; whereas in the east, and the Massim, collective exchanges are predicated on kinship, and create more kinship values rather than detached prestige values.

This ethnographic array, though it entails brilliant comparison and reinterpretation, is not just a display of the splendid diversity of Melanesian societies. For, as she says rather cheekily in the conclusion, they are after all but variations of one Case-- *Melanesian* sociality (p. 340). And perhaps more important than the comparison internal to Melanesia is the comparison with the imagined West. Here regional comparison does not compromise an extreme distinction of us/them; if anything it buttresses it by demonstrating the variety of ways in which Melanesians can be the opposite of us.

The underlying logic is one of alterity--not just gift versus commodity but a difference in sociality, which for Strathern renders inapplicable a range of Western concepts: subject, object, exploitation, domination. Strathern reflects how in the decade prior to this book she made an "easy living" through setting up negativities between Hagen and Western thinking, for example, about nature/culture and domestic/public. Her aim was not so much to demonstrate the inapplicability of these concepts, to get closer to the Hagen concepts, to suggest our English glosses were a poor translation, but rather to get closer to the exogenous constructs of anthropologists. Here she interrogates not the deep metaphysics of others but of Westerners (cf. Keesing 1985). Central to Western metaphysics is the relation posited between culture and the

individual. She demonstrates how this antimony has hindered past anthropological analysis in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea. We need to think about society in the singular and the person in the plural--composite and partible.

She takes us back to that dark time in Highlands ethnography, to that prehistoric period dominated by an intense pair of debates--first about the nature of descent groups, and second about "sexual antagonism." The first is dead--no longer do ethnographers worry unduly about non-agnates and loose structure-- but the second endures. Strathern shows they were an intimate couple; understandings of "descent" and "male-female" relations were complicit. The problems of Highlands men became the problems of male anthropologists--how to preserve the maleness of groups in the face of threats, intrusions and allurements from women. In talking about sexual antagonism there was a similar slippage between indigenous and exogenous constructs. Read's model of male cultural superiority achieved in the face of men's natural inferiority assumed that society inhered in male collectivities, culture in male creativity ([1952] 1971). Women, of course, had "nature."

Even in contemporary ethnography, Strathern detects a convergence between the interests of the ethnographer and Melanesian men. She perceives in Sillitoe's and Feil's recent work a hymn to male individualism. She reads Gil Herdt's ethnography of Sambia male ritual homosexuality (1981) and finds his analysis saturated with a concern for the boundaries of the male individual. The individual "as a being that worries about its boundaries and searches for a unitary entity, remains an unspoken premise in the anthropology of experience" (p. 57). The individual actor is an agonist, and expressly a male agonist plagued by self-doubt and the fears of the female within. Says Strathern, such rites are not about "making men"; they are not, to use the argot of American social psychology, "sex role socialization."

This relates to the important question of whether the sexing of male and female bodies is an innate state or is constructed only in discourse. This is a matter of intense debate among feminist philosophers (Gatens 1983; Grosz 1989). Strathern has it both ways by suggesting that some societies posit neuter subjects and others sexed subjects. But, she challenges a naive theory of representation that presumes a simple correspondence between sexed individuals and male and female viewpoints. Gender construction in Melanesia is much more than the social construction of difference on the preexisting bodies of male and female. Gender difference constructs the world of things and events as well as persons, and in constructing bodies/persons, it tends to make them partible. Baldly put, men and women have both male and female bits.

This argument about persons and bodies is intimately related to an argument about activity-- in particular the posited segregation of social life into two domains of activity, the male public and the female domestic. Many other commentators have queried the boundaries of this distinction, either by stressing the presence of men in the domestic domain and the presence of women in the public domain of ceremonial exchange or by suggesting the ideological character of the domain distinction. For Strathern it is not a question of where male and female bodies are and what they are doing, but rather of how activity is represented. For Hagen she argues that, although domain distinctions are deployed, this does not align men on the side of the public and women on the side of the private. Such a border smuggles in the Western antimony between society and the individual.

By this view women are conflated with the domestic (as in Rosaldo and Lamphere's model of 1974) and men with the public and, by a further slippage, the social. Strathern dislodges this equation between the collective public activity of men and the social (cf. Yeatman 1984). She stresses the sociality of domestic life, the collective character of kinship. In the fourth chapter she uses many examples of women standing for society or collective interest--although interestingly these examples are all drawn from a more historically situated ethnography, dealing not just with timeless Melanesians but with the world of postcolonial politics, migrant labor, and business. Her own work with Hagen migrants in town suggests that absent young men represent society back home in terms of female ties (pp. 77-79). Second, my own ethnography of the Sa speakers of Vanuatu discusses the historical emergence of the opposition between male mobility and migrant labor versus immobile women and rooted tradition (*womanples*) (pp. 79-82). Finally, Sexton's work on *wok meri* groups in the Highlands examines new female collectivities concerned with the ritual regeneration of money and society (pp. 82-86).

Strathern suggests that these novel contexts do not imply a redrawing of the boundaries. Women are not moving into collective male rituals; they are still primarily associated with domestic, kinship relations. But domesticity in Melanesia does not diminish women, it does not render them closer to nature, as socially incomplete. It is only Western models of the individual that require that the individual break with the domestic circle to become a full adult. Indeed, the Melanesian household is rather the locus within which full personhood is most apparent--in the conjugation of male and female persons as husbands and wives.

She suggests both in Hagen and beyond that there are two kinds of sociality: domestic and collective, associated with cross-sex and same-

sex transactions. This contrast between cross-sex and same-sex transactions is analyzed through an enormous corpus of ethnographic materials--from Hagen, Enga, Paiela, Gimi, Orokaiva, the Muyuw and Sabarl, the Trobriands. I will focus on two examples, her reanalyses of Hagen and of the Sambia (described by Herdt). These two examples I consider in the context of her dispute with Marxist and feminist accounts of Melanesian gender relations--that these relations are not relations of exploitation or of male domination. Such analyses she dismisses on the basis that they alike depend on Western models of the possessive individual--Western models of active subjects owning passive objects.

In Mount Hagen both males and females are involved in conjugal relations making children and making wealth, but the conjoint products of their bodies and minds are used exclusively by men in ceremonial exchange, in *moka* transactions of pigs and shells, which "make" a "name." Strathern has described these conjugal relations in idioms of reciprocity, mutual "looking after," rather than in terms of a relation of exploitation whereby men appropriate the joint products of their labor from their wives and use them in transaction.

Josephides has presented the argument about exploitation and appropriation in a most forceful way. She sees idioms of "looking after," of reciprocity, as masking hierarchical relations between men and women in domestic relations. She also points to the way in which value is accrued in transaction itself, the increment of value in the pig as wealth, and the incremental value accrued to male transactors as prestige. This is, she says, a "smokescreen" that hides the real origin of pigs in home production (Josephides 1983:306; p. 150).

Strathern offers what she calls "a gentle deconstruction," which in fact proves quite devastating. She asks, How can people conceal what they do not know themselves? At the core of Marxist analysis she finds Western presumptions of property, namely, that an individual should own and control what he or she does. That is, the work of a person is presumed to be naturally attached to that person (a necessary premise in the theory of alienated labor and of surplus value). Strathern argues that in the Hagen case, labor is not alienated, nor are women exploited by the appropriation of their products. The value conversion does not rely on erasing the work women do (as in Western domestic labor). Pigs, for instance, are seen as conjoint products--multiply authored by men and women. Thus, when men transact pigs in *moka* they eclipse their own production, as well as that of their wives, in the process of transacting. The creative work of making gardens and rearing pigs is fully acknowledged; work is not obliterated but becomes wealth in the process

of male-male transaction. The value conversion is in the sphere of male agency: men eclipse the domain of domestic sociality, and in the process eclipse their own persons. The metaphor of an eclipse is crucial for “as in a lunar eclipse, for the effects to be registered, there can only be partial concealment not obliteration” (p. 157).

This value conversion involves a transformation from a cross-sex to same-sex transaction. Wealth in domestic kinship has a multiple identity; in ceremonial exchange it takes on a singular, male identity in transactions with other males. In relation to his wife, the male person is several and his products are shared creations; in relation to other men, he is a singular male. Exchange between husband and wife is unmediated--they have a direct effect on the disposition of each other, they do not detach parts of their bodies and give personified things to each other. Exchange between male partners is mediated--they transact gifts by attaching and detaching wealth that is seen to lie on the skin. At this point, Strathern does not deny male domination (as she does later) but rather finds it in the domaining of social life--in the rearrangement of relations between male and female persons.

But does the multiple authorship of things and the partibility of persons render the language of exploitation and alienation, or that of hierarchical encompassment, inadmissible? The mutuality of work in making things may be acknowledged, but is such work necessarily of equal value, and is “work” irrelevant in representing the product in exchange? In other ethnographic contexts multiple authorship does not imply equivalent authorship. For South Pentecost, Vanuatu, I have suggested that although conjoint labor is involved in producing yams and pigs, male and female labor is not accorded equal value. Female labor, though acknowledged, *is* ultimately of lesser value, for in the context of exchange these goods are represented as “male,” embodying not only male labor but transformations of male bodies. The value of women’s work is *not* erased, but it is *encompassed*, rendered inferior to the superior value of male work. It may be said that men also eclipse (encompass) the “domestic” parts of themselves, in the new context of transaction, but women are more thoroughly encompassed, since they are not transactors. Transaction is here male-male (as distinct from other parts of Melanesia where women do transact in cross-sex and same-sex relations).

Second, I consider Strathern’s reanalysis of Sambia male cults, a collective male activity that involves not the transacting of pigs and shells but the transacting of semen between men, Young men receive semen from ritual seniors. The ingestion of semen by young men and the asso-

ciated expunging of maternal blood, Herdt suggests, makes Sambia boys into men, renders them full adults who can marry and procreate. Thus ritual homosexuality is the necessary precursor of adult heterosexuality. The link between male initiation and marriage is clear: the junior is "wife" to the senior "husband"; the boy's sister ultimately marries this man, that is, he becomes his sister's husband (p. 216).

The symbology of these cults, like those of many initiatory cults in Melanesia, has long been analyzed in terms of male mimicry of female procreativity, of men doing culturally what they cannot do naturally, or of men appropriating the powers of female fertility. Strathern suggests that these analyses rely on the assumption that women are mothers by nature and men, fathers by culture.

Strathern demonstrates how our own procreative beliefs encode certainty about "real" versus "imagined bodies." Maternity to us seems real and visible and paternity, because less visible, less real. The baby thus seems to us to belong to the mother, as the natural extension of her proprietary body (pp. 314-318). The procreation and gestation beliefs of the Sambia and a congeries of related Eastern Highlands peoples, however, suggest that it is men, not women, who make babies--they are coagulations of semen within the mother's body (which is itself largely composed of male substance, and is thus arguably a paternal and not maternal body). The baby is fed through the mother's ingesting semen, in acts of intercourse and fellatio with her husband while in the womb and then by suckling milk, which is transformed semen. a

In reanalyzing the dramaturgy of Sambia male cults, Strathern focuses on the ritual artifact of the flute--which stands both for penis and for breast--a vessel filled with nurturing fluid. Rather than this flute symbolizing penis and by another substitution the flute standing for the breast, Strathern suggests that both male and female nurture is encoded in the one ritual object. The gender of human sexual organs, like the flute, is not fixed. Persons are male and female not because of their appendages and orifices but because of their social relations. In the relation of initiation the young Sambia boy is female to the initiating husband, but by ingesting the procreative substance (both semen and milk), he becomes male. He is not rendered male through ingesting male substance, but his person masculinizes the semen. He is thus filled up and can grow as a male person. Hence it is not that fathers directly produce sons through ingestion of an all-male substance. Reproductive masculinity instead relies on a cross-sex transaction, and the one who inseminates is canonically not only his but also his sister's husband. Brothers and sisters are thereby linked through ingesting the semen of a

one husband. Such semen constitutes the nonpartible part of the body of both male and female. Men have partible semen as well, which can be detached and transmitted to other men or to women as wives.

For Strathern the gendering of partible products--shell valuables, pigs, semen--marks transitions between two modes of sociality: conjugal cross-sex relations contrasted with male same-sex transactions. This process is expounded in great detail and complexity in the second part of *The Gender of the Gift*. The gendered movement of objects has to do with agency. In the cross-sex state, agents are completed and passive. In the same-sex state, they are incomplete and active. As active agents men can separate objects from their source, in order to signify a new singular male identity. But, importantly, the way in which this is done differs significantly between those places where ceremonial exchange is the dominant form of male collective life and those where the dominant forms are initiatory cults or kinship-based transactions. The transactions of ceremonial exchange define the relation in terms of the transaction itself--in terms of a history of debts and credits. These transactions are incremental; they propagate more transactions, with an increased velocity of the flow of objects down exchange paths. In transactions based on kinship connections, be these matrilineal or patrilineal, there is a preexisting debt, a debt prior to the transaction. These relations, moreover, are nonincremental. They are everlasting cycles of cross-sex substitutions, rather than the vortex of increment in male-male exchange.

Gift exchange seems to us endlessly recursive--objects circulate in relations in order to make those relations. Thus, objects appear both as the cause and the effect of social relations. In contrast to Bourdieu's view of the temporality of the gift (1977:6), Strathern views the gift as predicated on time's flowing backwards, since gifts are given in terms of their anticipated outcomes (pp. 303-305). The Sambia boy is imagined as his future wife, the result of the transaction of semen anticipated before it is given. For Strathern gender thus becomes a code of temporality, of sequencing in action. Melanesian aesthetics creates male and female as timeless analogues of each other--time not only flows backwards but is in fact denied (p. 344).

There is a close fit between this espousal of eternity and the thoroughgoing alterity that characterizes this book. Strathern embraces alterity as an analytical fiction necessary for her narrative. She sets up a number of compelling dichotomies: us and them, the gift and the commodity, anthropological and feminist analysis. These are all persuasive fictions necessary to emplot her story, she claims, to undo that "meta-narrative"

of Western thought, the relation between society and the individual, What emerges is not realist fiction but a compelling series of picaresque stories that seem in search of an author. Just as the individual is expunged in the analysis of Melanesian personhood, so the author eludes us. We think we find her in one analytical posture, but then she has skipped to another. The reader needs to be very nimble to follow her (cf. Gell 1989). Ultimately, however, the brilliance of this authorial evasion generates an anthropology that exoticizes and eternalizes "the other" and denies the relation between "us" and "them" in real historical time.

Cell suggested that the opposition of gift and commodity was the one most likely to draw criticism and so it has. Thomas (1991) has argued that the commodity/gift dichotomy should not be conflated with the opposition between "us" and "them," between Western and Melanesian societies. Commodities, as detachable, alienable entities, preexisted Western colonization in the Pacific, and indeed contemporary Melanesian economy and sociality must be seen in terms of a coexistence of the two types of exchange (as must contemporary Western societies). The very categories of Melanesian and Western sociality not only essentialize and eternalize two dubious labels for culture areas, but deny the historical relation between Europeans and Melanesians. This relation is one of mutual interpenetration rather than the mere subordination of "Melanesia" to the domination of a monolithic capitalist culture. This historical relation has generated novel creolized cultures, which defy analytic segregations into their "Melanesian" and "Western" bits (cf. Keesing and Jolly n.d.). The segregation of "Melanesia" and the West is defended as an analytic fiction. But such a fiction leaves out some of the most interesting chapters in the recent history of the region, unwritten chapters replete with gendered personae and processes that constitute exchanges with the "West."

There is also a problem with the extreme differentiation Strathern draws between Western ideas of the possessive individual and Melanesian notions of the person. In much of the recent anthropology of the person, the character of the Western person as canonically the isolated individual, as against the person who is a nexus of social relations, has been overdrawn (cf. Errington and Gewertz 1987). If we look not just at liberal political philosophies of the individual, and the normative structures of American psychology but at the ethnography of our daily practice as persons in relation to each other, the individual seems more permeable and partible. Do we never see persons as composites of relations? Do we not recognize agency elicited by others rather than always as the action of a motivated individual? And what of the alternative

grand political philosophies of Foucault, Nietzsche, and Derrida proclaiming the death of the Western subject, the fragmentation of the soul atom, or the end of the author?

Finally, I feel unhappiest with the way Strathern has portrayed the relation between anthropology and feminism. Ultimately, anthropology is her "we" in relation to the "them" of feminism. Despite her continuing brilliant contributions to feminist anthropology, Strathern has persistently described the two terms as an awkward relation, full of tension or even mutual subversion (e.g., 1985, 1987).

She contrasts the philosophies of knowledge implicit in anthropology and feminism. Both deal in difference and diversity (pp. 22-29). Feminism, though it might appear to some outsiders as unitary, is in fact a plurality of competing positions, a polyphony of theoretical voices. But this theoretical plurality ultimately relates to decisions based in our life and practice. In anthropology, by contrast, plurality pertains to relations sustained with other lives. Thus, she suggests a tension between feminist scholarship and politics-- academic radicalism tends to be politically conservative, and radical politics conceptually conservative (a paradox I find as unpersuasive as Lévi-Strauss's declarations about radicals at home and conservatives abroad).

Her ambivalence about feminism has been rather harshly chided by Vicki Kirby in the pages of *Australian Feminist Studies* (1989). I sympathize with Strathern's response that there is doubtful benefit in the transformation from being a dutiful daughter to being a dutiful sister (1989:27). But I do lament the paralysis in her final theoretical posture about gender and power. She denies the existence of male domination in the New Guinea Highlands (pp. 325-328). Strathern argues that because men and women are not unitary sociological entities, because they are multiple persons with male and female parts, we cannot speak the language of domination, for "[d]omination is a consequence of taking action, and in this sense I have suggested that all acts are excessive" (p. 337). I disagree. Although it is crucial to see both men and women as actors, and not to render women as victims to male free will, I think we must also acknowledge how women in some contexts are not just eclipsed by men but dominated by them, often by persuasion and sometimes by violence. Whereas both men and women may initiate action, a man has an advantage because of "other men at his back" (p. 328). The political enlargement of male interest, the potential of men to be "big men," is the precondition of violent acts on women. "Such asymmetry turns rules into penalties, the enclosure of domestic life into confinement, and the cause of men's own activity into the wounds of someone

who is beaten and given pain for it" (p. 328). But such as oppressive aesthetic is not just a male creation, maintains Strathern.

But can we agree that because domination is partial, contextual, and jointly created it therefore does not exist? There are theories of domination that see power not as all-encompassing or hegemonic but as a dialectic in which the collaboration/resistance of the less powerful is as crucial as the persuasion/force of the powerful.

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