

# Planet M

## The intense abstraction of Marilyn Strathern

Martin Holbraad  
*University College London*

Morten Axel Pedersen  
*University of Copenhagen*

### Abstract

This article examines the peculiar nature of comparison in the work of Marilyn Strathern. Contrasting her approach to more familiar arguments regarding the role of ‘reflexivity’ and ‘multi-sited ethnography’ in the comparative agenda of contemporary anthropology, we elucidate the logical and metaphysical tenets that underlie the particular manner in which Strathern connects and disconnects ethnographic materials (not least her juxtapositions of Melanesian and European ethnography). Focusing on her abiding distinction between ‘plural’ and ‘postplural’ approaches to analysis, we explore the role of ‘scaling’ in her anthropological project, and argue that this allows for a characteristically ‘intense’ form of abstraction, which, among other things, enables her to make ‘trans-temporal comparisons’ between ‘ethnographic moments’ otherwise separated by history.

### Key Words

abstraction • comparison • ethnography • Melanesia • post-plural anthropology • temporality

### INTRODUCTION

Marilyn Strathern’s work is what the ‘crisis of representation’ would look like had she been in charge of its management. To show how this is so, in this article<sup>1</sup> we seek to elucidate the character and role of comparison in her work. It is the manner in which Strathern conducts comparison, we argue, and not least comparisons between what others might call ‘self’ and ‘other’, that accounts for both the commonalities and the differences between her approach to anthropology and that associated with the ‘crisis of representation’ literature and its aftermath (e.g. Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Marcus and Fischer, 1986; Tyler, 1987). Following to its ultimate consequence the reflexive injunction to treat the ‘self’ as an object as well as a subject of anthropological scrutiny, we

believe, Strathern effectively comes out on its other side. At whatever scale one might choose to recognize it (ranging from the individual to the West), the ~~self~~ is eliminated as the subject of analysis and thus features only as its object. In exploring how this is so, our aim is not so much to point out the affinities between Strathern's anthropology and the 'death-of-the-subject' anti-humanism of structuralist and post-structuralist thought (although such affinities are no doubt there, and arguably go to the core of her divergence from the American-liberal humanism of the literature on the crisis of representation in anthropology). Rather, our question is this: if the 'self' features only as an object of analysis, alongside what one would take as its 'other' (e.g. English kinship alongside Melanesian kinship, commodity alongside gift, etc.), then what takes the place of the subject? Put differently, if Strathern treats herself (her person, her thinking, her culture, her society) as just another topic for anthropological inquiry – no different from, say, the people of Mount Hagen in Papua New Guinea – then who is doing the treating and the inquiring? Our answer is: Planet M.

Both the comic intent and the initial are of course taken from Alfred Gell's notorious essay 'Strathernograms' (1999), in which Gell describes his diagrammatically aided account of Strathern's argument in *Gender of the Gift* as an account of 'System M', leaving it to the reader, as he says, to decide whether 'M' stands for 'Melanesia' or 'Marilyn'. The tease being that Strathern's argument is, in Gell's terms, 'idealist', so the question of whether her analysis represents facts as they are in Melanesia or how she imagines them to be is ontologically moot. One of the motivations of the present article is to arrive at an answer to this question, although we may as well warn in advance that distinctions such as idealism versus realism hardly capture what is at stake in it. Indeed, crasser than Gell's, our own tease of calling 'M' a planet is only partly meant to evoke the sense of outlandishness that Strathern's sheer originality can produce. Our less facetious intention is to use the image to convey one of our central claims in what follows, namely that Strathern's peculiar way of *absenting herself* from her analyses is a constitutive feature of what comparison amounts to in her work.

By identifying Strathern's thinking with the imaginary Planet of M, we also have in mind the Kantian metaphor of the Copernican revolution. Indeed, the coordinates between subject and object that this image sets up can serve to articulate the core move that the crisis of representation literature sought to perform in the 1980s, when Strathern was also formulating her own thoughts on comparison. If Kant's Copernican revolution consisted in rendering the objectivity of the world relative to the transcendental categories that structure its subjective experience, its American 'reflexivist' counterpart involves making anthropologists' accounts of ethnographic others relative to the cultural categories of the self. So-called positivism is to the reflexive turn as heliocentrism is to Copernican astronomy. Strathern, we think, occupies a third position – one that exceeds the Copernican coordinates altogether. Hers is the planet in permanent eclipse, if you like, from which Earth and Sun can be seen alike but which cannot itself be seen from either.

## I

It is obvious that getting a handle on Strathern's concept of comparison is an exercise that instantiates (recursively, as she might say) the problems it addresses. Comparison as an activity and as an explicit concern permeates her works, so that discussing it inevitably

becomes a comparative exercise in its own right – a comparison of comparisons, as it were. Mindful of the frustrations with reference to which she herself gauges the stakes involved in the intellectual task of comparison – the dizziments of disproportion, arbitrariness, and assorted variables, levels, contexts, dimensions and so on running riot, we start our discussion from the most glaring example of Strathern's thinking on comparison, namely *Partial Connections* (2004) – a book whose subtitle, had it been given one, would surely include that word.

Indeed, one of the motivating premises of *Partial Connections* takes the form of a tragic irony: one may think that by changing one's viewpoint on one's material (e.g. scaling up to gain an overview of its general contours as opposed to scaling down to limit the amount of data considered, or shifting between different terms of reference altogether) one may reduce its complexity, but in doing so one soon realizes one is playing a zero-sum game. So, presumably, no matter whether one sets out to compare Strathern's comparisons across her many books and articles, or just in *Partial Connections*, or even – ~~as we shall mainly do here~~ – in just its first section ('Writing Anthropology', pp. xiii–xxv), the 'amount' of complexity should be expected to remain constant.

### Plural and postplural comparison

So what notion of comparison does Strathern have in mind in her discussion of 'partial connections'? The point is put recursively at the book's outset by way of a comparison of commonplace strategies of comparison in anthropology, cast in terms of the concept of 'scale'.<sup>2</sup> We give a gloss.<sup>2</sup> In line with modern Euro-American metaphysical intuitions, anthropologists imagine the world as consisting of many many things – an inordinately large field of 'data'. So the most basic methodological question for anthropology (as for any other 'discipline') is how to bring this 'plural' data under some kind of control. Put in very general terms, this must involve deciding which data go with each other and which do not. In this general sense all descriptive activity is comparative, although there is also a sense in which the anthropological challenge of cross-cultural comparison is 'exemplary' (p. xvi), since the things compared – societies or cultures – are fields of phenomena that are defined precisely by the fact that their constituent elements somehow go together, the problem being to work out what these elements are and how they do or do not relate.

Strathern argues that, in response to this challenge, anthropologists tend to plot their materials against different 'scales', understood as particular ways of 'switching from one perspective on a phenomenon to another' (p. xiv). This anthropological use of scales happens in two principal ways. The first can be glossed as quantitative, since it involves switches in size, and corresponds to the ordinary (literal) associations of the word 'scale' with quantitative considerations and measurement. Like, say, Bateson, one might devote a book to a single ritual performed by a particular group of the Sepik River in Papua New Guinea, or, like Lévi-Strauss, one might devote it (well, four of them) to hundreds of myths from across the American continents. One might say that the switches for which this kind of quantitative scaling allows depend on keeping the terms of comparison (i.e. its 'form') constant while shifting its scope (i.e. its 'content'), by scaling either 'down' to include more detail or 'up' to gain more purview. This then suggests a second, obverse way of thinking of scale, which depends on the possibility of maintaining stable contents while shifting forms, and could therefore be glossed as qualitative – arguably a

more metaphorical usage of the term 'scale'. Here viewpoints on a given body of data switch by changing the terms of reference one brings to bear upon it, as, for example, one does when one compares different cultures (or different elements within one) from the point of view of economic arrangements, or ritual practices, or cosmological reckonings, and so on. It goes without saying that, in anthropological practice, any attempt at comparison will involve multiple combinations and mutual adjustments of both quantitative and qualitative scaling, and its success will depend on the skill with which this is done.

Now, these articulations of the act of comparison (themselves apparently forming a two-place qualitative scale for the comparison of different kinds of comparison) may seem already to describe the partial nature of the connections on which comparisons rely. The point can almost be put theologically. Faced with the infinite plurality of the cosmos, the finite anthropologist is forced into the false containments of scaling – false because no finite scale could ever contain the whole. The tragedy of culture itself, as Lévi-Strauss (1990) would have it. This, however, is not Strathern's point. For her the real tragedy – if such it is – would lie in the way infinity replicates itself *within* whatever scale purports to carve it. As indicated by the absurdity of saying that by virtue of its narrower ethnographic focus Bateson's *Naven* is simpler or an easier read than Lévi-Strauss's *Naked Man*, or that Strathern's oeuvre is less demanding for having homed in more on social interaction than on religion and cosmology, the irony is that the potential for complexity remains constant no matter what the scale. To stick to the theological rendition, it is as if the notion that scaling can cut the cosmos down to size involves forgetting that infinity can be intensive as well as extensive, with angels dancing on the head of a pin just as well as in the ethers.

It is the irony of this logical palindrome that forms the basis of what Strathern calls a 'postplural perception of the world' (2004: xvi, cf. 1992), in which the notion that scales can act to carve finite, manageably simple parts out of an infinite, debilitatingly complex whole dissipates. If infinity goes both ways, both outward and inward, so that the scales that would purport to limit it end up acting as its conduits, then the very distinctions between plurality and singularity, whole and part, complexity and simplicity, as well as infinity and finitude, lose their sense. And this because the basic 'pluralist' assumption upon which each of these distinctions rests, namely that the world is made up of an infinite multiplicity of 'things' which may or may not relate to each other, vanishes also. 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.

This, then, raises the question: in what might comparison consist in a world without 'things'? And if there are no things, then on what might comparisons even operate? On such an image, what would be, say, Melanesia and Britain, or the Western and the Eastern Highlands in PNG, or the different kinds of flutes (or methods of initiation, or modes of exchange, or whatever) that one might compare across them? In *Partial Connections* Strathern presents a number of suggestive images: Donna Haraway's

‘cyborgs’, ‘Cantor dust’ and, more abstractly, the image of the fractal. Here we want to stay with the paradoxical formulation: things that are what they are by virtue of being at the same time more and less than themselves. The real ‘virtue’ of the paradox, we would suggest, is that just as it renders incoherent the pluralist metaphysic of things, it serves as a coherent rendering of the postplural alternative. Sure, we may assume, *things* cannot be both more and less than themselves. ‘More’ and ‘less’ are comparatives after all, and it is hard to see the point of comparing something to itself, let alone of finding it different. But this is just to say that the postplural alternative to ‘the thing’ is, precisely, *the comparison*. Stripped of the assumption that it must operate on things other than itself, that is exactly what a comparison would look like: something that is both more and less than *itself*. Which is just to say that on a postplural rendition, the differences that pluralist comparisons measure ‘between things’ now emerge as constitutive of those very same ‘things’, and can therefore best be thought of as residing ‘within’ them. This, lastly, implies also that the pluralist distinction between things and the scales that measure them also collapses into itself: saying that differences are to be thought of as internal rather than external to comparisons is also to imply that there is no ‘outside’ point from which comparisons could be viewed, measured or, indeed, compared. So comparisons are, if you like, **things that act as their own scales** – things that scale and thus compare themselves.

Now, it will be evident that this line of thinking has taken us fairly directly to a conceptualization for which Strathern’s work is perhaps most famous, and on which she herself pins her flag most firmly, namely ‘the relation’ (e.g. Strathern, 1995). That comparisons are relations in the Strathernian sense goes without saying. For example, the thought that places Strathern most obviously in the vicinity of post/structuralism, namely that relations are logically prior to entities, would be one way of rendering her point about scales and their relationship to things. Here, however, we want to stick to the apparently narrower notion of comparison, and this partly because we would argue that rendering Strathern’s relational universe ‘comparative’ adds something to it (indeed, we will argue that the ability to add to thoughts by narrowing them down is at the heart of Strathern’s notion of comparison ~~— it is, even, the royal road to Planet M~~). In particular, a focus on the notion of comparison in Strathern’s work redresses one potential source of dissatisfaction with the concept of the relation and the universe it comprises, namely its apparently inordinate malleability – the virtue it appears to make of a complexity that can ‘run riot’, to recall one of Strathern’s own formulations. From the point of view of exegesis, we consider that the advantage of a narrower focus on the notion of comparison in Strathern’s work, over that of the relation, becomes clear when one articulates the contrast between ‘plural’ and ‘postplural’ renditions of comparison in starker terms than she does herself. In fact, as we shall explain, it may be because Strathern does not offer an explicit and sustained account of this contrast that her position (typically cast in terms of the blunter notion of the ‘relation’) can sometimes be mistaken blithely for a kind of postmodern-sounding relativism.

Consider a contrast of images. On the one hand, depicting the drive to control complexity from which pluralist modes of comparison draw strength, Strathern presents two images that correspond to what we have called ‘quantitative’ and ‘qualitative’ scales of comparison: respectively, the map and the tree (2004: xvi–xvii). Scaling up and down to alter a form’s scope over content corresponds directly to what one means by ‘scale’

when referring to a map: the proportion that holds between a territory (content) and its depiction (form). Analogously, qualitative switches from one form of comparison to another (e.g. focusing on economic as opposed to religious dimensions of a given set of data) involve the assumption that each of these forms is related to the others in terms of the lateral and vertical relations that make up a genealogical tree. For example, while one might imagine economic and religious scales to belong to the same 'generation', like siblings, one might posit the scale of the 'social' to contain them both, like a parent. The two images are themselves laterally related (on a tree they would be siblings) inasmuch as they both make the control of data possible by virtue, in Strathern's words, of the 'constancies'<sup>3</sup> they imply:

[The map] implies the existence of certain points or areas, like so many villages or fields seen from the air, that will remain identifiable however much their features are replotted; all that changes is the perspective of the observer. [The tree] implies some kind of closure that defines a system of concepts and their potential transformation from within, insofar as only particular trajectories are 'genetically' possible from the principles one starts with. (2004: xvii)

Both images are to be contrasted, on the other hand, to the imagery with which Strathern depicts postplural comparisons – cyborgs, fractals and so on. While Strathern puts these metaphoric depictions to all sorts of uses in her argument – thus displaying, one might say, the sheer malleability of the concept of comparison itself – one also gains the impression that a notion of a *lack* of control or, put more positively, an inordinacy of potential, acts as their cumulative effect. So, for example, if maps and trees rely on the constancies of identity and closure to contrive a sense of control over data, the cyborg suggests an image of inconstancy, or even incontinence: it 'observes no scale', being a 'circuit of connections that joins parts that cannot be compared insofar as they are not isomorphic with one another' (2004: 54). Indeed, the image of the fractal itself, with its 'not-quite replication' (p. xx) that generates a 'proliferation of forms' (p. xxi) inward and outward all the way, may produce in the reader a sense of asphyxia as well as one of beauty, vertigo as well as wonderment. Equally, it may provoke a typical quip made against 'postmodernists' at the time *Partial Connections* was originally written, namely that of anything-goes 'flatness'. The impression could be borne out by the punch line 'postplural realization' that gives the book its name: 'The relativising effect of multiple perspectives will make everything seem partial; the recurrence of similar propositions and bits of information will make everything seem connected' (2004: xx).

Still, considering that the postmodernist message about multiplicity, partiality, pliable connectivity and so on, as well as the tetchy rebuke made of its levelling effects, are both by now well-digested in anthropology, we would suggest that something more interesting lies in Strathern's characterization of postplural comparison – an extra dimension to her thinking on which she never quite comments explicitly in *Partial Connections* or elsewhere in her work, but which is nevertheless present in the manner in which she conducts comparisons 'postplurally'. This 'eclipsed' aspect of Strathern's thinking pertains to the peculiar role that something akin to 'abstraction' plays in her concerns with comparison – although we wish to show that what is at stake here is something different than the logical operations one ordinarily associates with that term.

## Plural abstraction

The closest Strathern comes to an explicit statement of her concern with abstraction in *Partial Connections* is, tellingly perhaps, not as part of characterizing her own concept of comparison, but in the course of her most detailed commentary on an example of the pluralist comparisons it displaces. This is her discussion of attempts to provide an integrated frame for comparing societies from the entire Highlands region of Papua New Guinea with reference to a theme they are meant to have in common, namely the association of the use of bamboo flutes with male power (e.g. Hays, 1986). The problem with such cross-cultural comparisons, she argues, is that while they certainly do pick out significant ethnographic and historical connections, they also, necessarily, involve a slippage of levels. From where, one may ask, do they draw the features of the common theme whose variations they wish to chart? If, for example, in some cases flutes are focal to male initiation while in others less so or not at all, or in some cases the flutes themselves are conceived as male and in others as female or as both, while elsewhere bamboo flutes are absent altogether, then from which of these cases does the putatively ‘common’ notion that flutes are an important element of male power draw its strength? Strathern writes:

The difficulty with this comparison is that our supposed common regional culture is composed of the very features which are the object of study, the ‘meanings’ people give to these instruments, the analogies they set up . . . [T]he common cultural core, the themes common to the variations, is not a context or level independent of local usage. (2004: 73)

At issue here is the familiar anthropological charge of essentialism: mistaking ethnographic categories for analytical ones. Yet, as we understand it, Strathern’s remedy is anything but the familiar one (namely the tautology of saying that all categories are by definition cultural since they always come from somewhere, so the modernist chimera of a culturally neutral analytical language for comparison should be replaced by the wiser proposal for a culturally laden dialogue, tutored by the anthropologist’s own reflexivity – in other words, the crisis-of-representation move). Rather than treating the slippages of levels that essentialism entails as grounds for its rejection, she effectively makes a virtue of them. In fact, were one to think of Strathern’s discussion of the above example as an ethnography of anthropological comparisons,<sup>4</sup> one would recognize an instance of the very idea of comparison as partial connection (and only *therefore* a critique of its pluralist opposite, on grounds, so to speak, of ethnographic inaccuracy). From a pluralist starting-point, slipping from putatively neutral scales for comparison to culturally laden objects of comparison (viz. essentialism) is indeed a problem. But from the postplural position Strathern is articulating, that is precisely what comparison is: the ‘unwarranted’ melding together of what the pluralist takes for ‘scales’ and their ‘objects’ (things that scale themselves or equally, to complete the image, scales that ‘thing’ themselves). In fact, as we want to show, recognizing this allows one to arrive at a stronger characterization of comparison in Strathern’s work – its extra dimension.

The ‘difficulty’ of essentialism in the pluralist take on comparison can be described as a failure of abstraction. As a ‘scale’ for comparing Highlands societies, flutes and male power are not abstract enough, i.e. they do not constitute a ‘level’ of analysis that is

consistently of a different logical order from the cultural ‘contexts’ that are meant to be compared. Indeed note that abstraction is integral to the pluralist notion of comparison: for scales to be able to measure things they have to be more abstract than them. Now, it is obvious that the distinction between abstract scales and concrete things cannot survive the transition to thinking of comparison postplurally unscathed, the whole point being that in such a transition the very distinction between scales and things is obliterated. Nevertheless, we argue, something of the distinction between the abstract and the concrete does survive – it leaves a residue or, to borrow a term from Strathern, a ‘remainder’ (2004: xxii). To see this we may turn once again to the pluralist image.

How is conventional, pluralist abstraction *supposed* to work? Consider the verb: ‘to abstract’ something involves isolating from it one of its predicates. Take, say, a dog and isolate from it its quality of being a ‘quadruped’. Or take the PNG Highlanders use and isolate the quality of being ‘associated with male power’. As we have seen in relation to Strathern’s comments on the role of scale, such acts of isolation afford a battery of techniques that are supposed to help bring data under control for purposes of comparison – not least, quantitative scoping by analogy to maps and qualitative ordering by analogy to genealogical trees. To take the most rudimentary example, we assume that abstracting from a dog the quality of being a quadruped allows us to make analogies between it and a cat, or to study it from the point of view of its locomotion, contrasting it perhaps to other quadrupeds whose legs are otherwise different, or relating it evolutionarily to bipeds, or placing it within in the class of mammals, and so on. Abstraction increases the agility of comparison, one might say.

This is just to say that Strathern’s central paradox regarding the notion of control – the idea that no matter what the scale the degree of complexity stays constant – is integral to this way of thinking of abstraction. Just as ‘isolating’ a particular predicate would suggest a reduction of complexity (a dog is so many things other than a quadruped), so the very same act gives rise to new orders of complexity. But thinking of the paradox in terms of abstraction, we argue, serves to reveal further features of the constancy of complexity that make it seem less than a riot. Two hold particular interest. First, the idea that abstraction entails isolating predicates of objects allows us to emphasize one aspect that Strathern’s characterization tends to leave mute, namely the idea that what she calls scales can be said to *originate* in the things they serve to compare. Indeed, the manner of the origination is just as interesting as the fact. While the thought of comparing things ‘in terms of’ or ‘with reference to’ scales conjures a notion of application (as, one might say, a rule applies to instances), the obverse thought of originating abstractions (scales) from more ‘concrete’ objects brings to mind a notion of extraction: to isolate a predicate is to *cut it away* from the denser mass in which it is initially embroiled, that is, what looks like ‘the thing’. To use the sculptor’s figure/ground reversal, it involves cutting away the mass to make the abstraction appear – a metaphor that is integral to the imagery of ‘Cantor’s dust’, in which scalar effects are replicated by the creation of intermittencies and gaps (Strathern, 2004: xxii–xxiii).

This brings us to a second characteristic of abstraction, which has to do with notions of removal and distance. We have already seen that such notions are foundational to Strathern’s characterization of the metaphysical assumptions of pluralist comparison, since ‘distance’ is precisely what is imagined to separate not only things from each other but also things from the scales that are brought to bear on them. It is just such distances



that images of maps and trees conjure – scaling up or down on an axis proximity and distance, or branches and stems that are related vertically and horizontally by degrees of inclusion and exclusion. For scales to offer a vantage point from which things can be compared they have to be posited as being separate from them – perspective implies distance. Thinking of comparison in the key of abstraction, however, foregrounds movement as a condition for both. If abstraction involves cutting predicates away from the things to which they belong, the distance it achieves can be conceived as the result of an act of *removal* – a trajectory that **cuts open** a gap.

Two thoughts about abstraction, then, are embedded in Strathern's account of the pluralist metaphysic of comparison: the notion that the things can scope their own comparisons by being cut (multiplying their comparative potential, so to speak, by being divided) and the notion that this involves a trajectory of movement. Both of these features carry over to Strathern's characterization of 'partial connections' – i.e. her account of what comparisons involve when one shifts to a postplural metaphysic, in which the distinction between scales and things is collapsed. Indeed, we would argue that they can be used as the basis for a suitably altered conceptualization of the notion of abstraction itself, one which goes to the heart of Strathern's thinking on comparison.

### Postplural abstraction

We call the postplural inflection of abstraction that we detect in Strathern's work 'abstension'. Abstension is what happens to abstraction when the distinction between abstract and concrete itself is overcome, as it is in Strathern's postplural universe. We have seen that, as per the Strathernian concept of the relation, the postplural move involves rendering internal to things the differences that scales of comparison would find between them, thus turning things into self-comparisons. Clearly the ordinary associations of abstraction with hierarchically ordered 'levels' separated from each other by degrees of distance (the images of maps and trees) have no place here. Nor does the corollary of this way of thinking, according to which abstractions represent things in more 'general' terms – as the concept of quadruped stands to any 'particular' dog. Indeed, one way of characterizing abstensions would be to say that they are what abstractions become when they are no longer thought of as generalizations, i.e. as concepts that group together in their 'extension' things that share a particular feature.

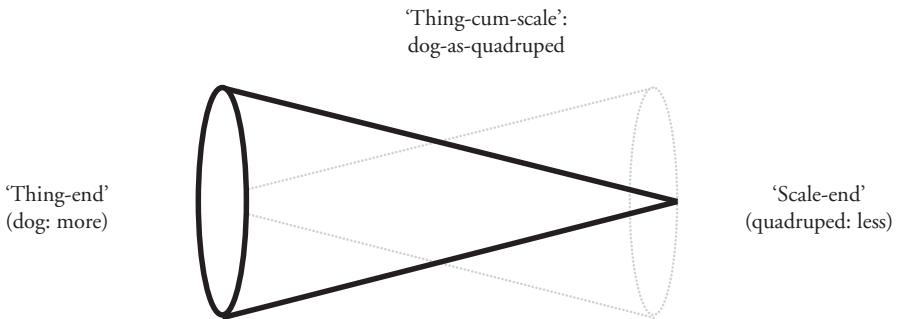
Rather, abstension is what happens to abstraction when it turns *intensive*, to borrow the Deleuzian terminology (e.g. De Landa, 2002, and see Viveiros de Castro, ~~in press~~) – and hence the neologism. Abstension, then, refers to the way in which comparisons are able to transform *themselves* in particular ways. Considering our rudimentary example once again, abstension is what happens to a dog when it is considered *as* a quadruped. That is to say, to think of a dog as a quadruped does not involve positing a relationship between two elements – a dog (deemed as a 'particular') that 'instantiates', as philosophers sometimes say, the concept of quadrupedness (deemed, in this sense, as a 'universal'). After all, the distinction between particular things like dogs and universal concepts like quadrupedness is exactly the distinction from which a postplural metaphysic moves us away – just a version, surely, of the distinction between concrete things and abstract scales which renders the world a 'plural' place. Rather, to consider a dog as a quadruped, on the postplural image of abstension, is just to turn it (~~or 'scale it'~~) into something different, namely, that thing-~~come~~-scale that one would want to hyphenate

as ‘dog-as-quadruped’. This new ‘third’<sup>5</sup> element is a self-comparison in just the sense outlined earlier: it is ‘more than itself’ because, *qua* dog-as-quadruped, it is a full-blown dog; and also ‘less than itself’ because, again *qua* dog-as-quadruped, it is merely an ‘abstracted’ (though we want to say *abstended*) quadruped.<sup>6</sup>

To bring out the peculiar ‘sharpness’ of abstension, we may supplement the range of images that Strathern uses to convey her notion of comparison (the fractal, the cyborg and so on) with what one could claim is their most rudimentary form – the shape of a cone laid on its side (see Figure 1).

Imagining abstensions in this way serves, first of all, to illustrate the crucial differences between postplural abstraction and its plural counterpart, which Strathern depicts with the twin images of the tree and the map. As we have seen, plural comparisons posit distances (or ‘gaps’) that separate both things from one another, and things from the increasingly abstract generalizations in whose ‘extensions’ they are included. Moreover, the latter relationship (i.e. between things and their generalizations) is irreducibly hierarchical or ‘vertical’, since what makes generalizations suitable as scales for comparing things is that they are more abstract than the things compared. As seen in Figure 1, however, abstensions are devoid of both these characteristics of conventional abstractions. What in ‘plural’ abstraction look like extensive gaps ‘between’ things (and between things and scales) in the postplural mode figure as intensive differentiations ‘within’ abstensions, indicated in Figure 1 by the asymmetrical proportions of each of the ‘ends’ of the abstension – the broad ‘thing’-like end and the sharp ‘scale’-like one. Furthermore, this asymmetry on the vertical axis of Figure 1 indicates that hierarchy is absent here. Laid on its side, as it were, the hierarchical dimension that marks the distances between things and scales dissipates into the internal self-differentiation of abstension.

This correspondence between the ‘verticalization’ of ordinary abstraction and the lateral ~~self-differentiation~~ of abstension gives clues as to why Strathernian comparisons are sharper than just ‘relations’. After all, it is the loss of the ordering principles in hierarchies of abstraction (and their corollaries in terms of inclusion and exclusion, connection and disconnection, similarity and difference, and so forth) that critics of the postmodernist penchant for profligate relations lament. So the formal correspondence between hierarchy and ~~self-differentiation~~ raises the prospect of retaining, if not a set of



**Figure 1. Abstension**

*Note:* The grey penumbra indicates that the correlation between, on the one hand, ‘thing’-likeness and ‘scale’-likeness and, on the other, ‘more’ and ‘less’ can be inverted, as explained in note 6.

ordering principles as such, then at least a principle of a (no doubt new) kind of order, that may show why Strathern's postplural universe is more than just a magma of relations (cf. Scott, 2007: 24–32). Might the asymmetry of self-differentiation do for the postplural world what the symmetry of hierarchy does for the plural one? To see that this is so, we may home in on the questions of 'cutting' and 'removal' that we introduced earlier.

Plural abstraction, we saw, involves the idea that scales of comparison can be said to be derived from the things they compare in two moves. First, deriving predicates (e.g. 'quadruped') from things (e.g. dog) by 'cutting' away from them the denser, 'thingy' mass in which they are initially embedded. And second, creating a distance between them and the mass from which they are extracted by placing them at a different level of abstraction, thus creating a gap between predicate and thing by a step of 'removal'. Each of these moves has a direct equivalent in postplural abstension. First, when the difference between thing and scale is 'internalized' in the abstension, the latter is still derived from the former. Only now, the sculptor's figure-ground reversal (viz. cutting the mass of the thing 'away' to make the abstract predicate appear) is reversed back: the mass of the thing is retained, but chiselled into a sharper, scale-like shape – still the same mass, that is, but 'less' than itself at its scale-like end (to visualize this, imagine how the cone of Figure 1 might be sculpted out of the mass of a right circular cylinder). Second, while this 'internal derivation' of the scale from the thing does not involve opening up an (external) distance between the two, it does still turn on an act of removal, namely the 'internal' removal of the self-transforming proportions of the cone, as one moves from its broader end to its sharper one (again, to visualize this, imagine the motion of the sculptor's gouge as it cuts into a cylindrical mass to give it the shape of a cone). So what in the plural image were distances 'between' now become formal transformations 'within' (*trans-formations*, to emphasize), that can be conceived as 'internal motions' – motions that are perhaps not unlike the ones classicists appreciate in the 'rhythms' of ancient columns.

Strathern's postplural universe of what we have called abstensions, then, presents an image that arguably comes close to what Lévi-Strauss had in mind when he spoke of the 'science of the concrete' (1966), provided we remain clear on the essentially oxymoronic character of that phrase, where 'science' is meant to have connotations, precisely, of abstraction. And just as Lévi-Strauss argued so forcibly for the irreducible sophistication of this science, albeit 'savage', we may note that Strathernian abstensions are in no way inferior to 'plural' abstractions when it comes to the sheer agility of the comparisons they furnish. Only now this agility is no longer a matter of adopting different purviews onto things from the vantage points that more abstract scales afford (e.g. grouping cats and dogs together on grounds of their common quadrupedness and the contrasting them, say, from the viewpoint of their locomotion). Rather, the potential for comparison is enhanced by the capacities that what a plural metaphysic would call 'things' (e.g. the dog) have to be transformed by being 'cut' in particular ways, 'sharpened' so as to have particular aspects of themselves revealed (e.g. the dog-as-quadruped). And the effect of such transformations is to provide, not a point of more general vantage, but rather one of *further departure*. As thing-like (and scale-like) as the dog from which it was derived, the dog-as-quadruped presents further possibilities for comparative transformation in a whole spectrum of directions – including cats, locomotion, mammals and so on.

Now this conclusion, itself intensely abstract perhaps, may seem scholastic in its insistence on the contrasting metaphysics of plural and postplural comparison. We would argue, however, that it goes to the heart of one of the most compelling characteristics of Strathern's manner of conducting comparisons, namely what we have already called its sheer originality. While it goes without saying that one hardly needs to be Strathernian to be original, we would argue that the work of abstension is inherently oriented towards originality. For, one way to express the contrast between plural abstraction and postplural abstension is to say that while the former involves an 'upward' (as in the tree) or 'outward' (as in the map) move from the particular to the general, the latter moves sideways, as it were, from particular(-cum-universal) to particular(-cum-universal), by means, as we saw, of the peculiar capacities for transformation that it reveals. So comparison is no longer a matter of identifying the general scales that may act as 'common denominators' that relate things (as 'quadruped' may relate cats and dogs). Rather it is oriented towards revealing 'uncommon denominators', if by that one means the peculiar and highly specific capacities for transformation that things(-cum-scales) hold so contingently within themselves.

## II

Having established, in Part I, the overarching premise of this article – namely that Strathern's comparative project works according to a logic of 'intense abstraction' – we now turn to consider two 'remainders' (in her sense) to which this argument gives rise. The first relates to the peculiar role of time in Strathern's thinking. The second addresses her no less unusual writing techniques. To anticipate our argument somewhat, Strathern may be said to be doing the same with time as she does with ~~all~~ other mediums of abstension, namely making a virtue out of its failure to act as a more general or 'abstract' scale of comparison. By treating time as just another thing-cum-scale of analysis – as a scale that is no more context-independent than, say, flutes – she allows for a particular and very novel kind of comparison between societies across time. In line with the above analysis of the logic of abstension, we argue that the originality of these comparisons comes down to Strathern's ability, evident in her writing as well as in her thinking, to avoid drawing the most obvious connections between her Melanesian material and its Western analogues by 'cutting open' the least obvious (most original) lines of comparison.

### Trans-temporal comparison

It is well known that Strathern's original fieldwork in the Mt Hagen area of the Papua New Guinean Highlands occupies a special place in her anthropological thinking (e.g. Strathern, 1999: 6–11). Given that the bulk of her fieldwork was carried out in the 1960s and 1970s, one might see this as posing an (automatically growing) methodological problem: does the increasingly 'historical' nature of her material not render her comparative project more and more dubious? Surely, a standard social scientific objection would go, one cannot as part of the same analysis compare two different places (such as Melanesia and 'Euro-America') and two different periods (as, for instance, Hagen kinship terminology in the 1970s and British kinship today) simultaneously. Either axis – the temporal or the spatial – must be kept stable so as to compare like with like.

Strathern's response to objections of this kind (e.g. Carrier, 1998) has been characteristically indirect. Instead of seeking to counter the claim that her material is not

contemporary (with reference, perhaps, to her more recent fieldwork), she has pleaded guilty as charged, happy to admit that many of the practices she originally observed in Hagen have since changed or disappeared altogether (e.g. Strathern, 1999: 142). This is not to say that Strathern accepts the premise of this critique. On the contrary, her response to James Carrier and others reveals key assumptions about the nature (and in particular the temporality) of conventional anthropological comparison, which remains invisible to itself:

[T]he knowledge anthropologists have made out of their encounters with Melanesians . . . does not cease to become an object of contemporary interest simply because practices have changed. I would indeed make it timeless in that sense. Carrier's argument is that historical change is crucial, because . . . that shows up the social and conceptual location of previous practices, and this must be part of – not excluded from – the knowledge with which one works. Yet, from another perspective his own categories of analysis remain timeless, as in . . . his notion that there is such a thing as 'the relationship between people and things'. By contrast, my interest is directed to the historical location of analytical constructs, for none of the major constructs we use is without its history. (1999: 143)

Yet, to describe Strathern's concepts as 'historical' is not, perhaps, sufficiently precise a characterization of the work of temporality in her thinking. To illustrate this, we may raise a question grounded in our earlier discussion of her postplural metaphysics. What would a 'trans-temporal' comparison of socio-cultural phenomena look like, if we by this understand a 'lateral' analysis in which the dimension of time itself is not assumed to be independent from these phenomena – that is, if time were not assumed to constitute (as pluralist metaphysics would have it) a 'scale' that occupies a transcendent, vertical position with respect to the 'things' whose comparison it facilitates? We suggest that certain writings by Strathern represent concerted attempts to facilitate (a-chronic) comparisons *across* time, providing an alternative to both the synchronic project of cross-cultural comparison and the diachronic comparison of different historical moments of one society.

To understand the role of time in Strathern's thinking it is useful to consider the veiled critique she makes of the method of multi-sited ethnography in *Property, Substance and Effect* (Strathern, 1999: 161–78). The problem with George Marcus (1993) and others' attempts to 'modernize' the ethnographic fieldwork is the pluralist assumption behind the notion that the limited scale of 'the local' is automatically overcome by conducting fieldwork in several different places. The assumption seems to be that, by 'following the people', the multi-sited ethnographer gains a new perspective from which different 'local' phenomena can be brought together into a single, albeit fragmentary, narrative, by someone whose perspective (scale) is sufficiently 'global' to do so.

If the multi-sited approach involves the 'tracing [of] cultural phenomena across different settings' to 'reveal the contingency of what began as initial identity' (1999: 163), the goal of Strathern's comparisons between Melanesian and Euro-American property arrangements in *Property, Substance and Effect* is very different. Rather than tracing 'global' connections between dispersed 'local' phenomena, it is her deliberate strategy to

avoi[d] discursive connections, making a story, in order to avoid both the false negative appearance of stringing surface similarities together and the false positive appearance of having uncovered a new phenomenon. *For what the locations presented here have all in common has not necessarily happened yet.* What I believe they have in common is their potential for reconceptualisations of ownership, and specifically for raising the possibility of persons as property. What has not happened yet is the way in which these sites may in future connect up . . . Exactly the routes that they follow, or what chains of association they set up, will be the subject of future ethnographic enquiry. (Only) the potential is present. (1999: 163; emphasis original)

One could describe this approach as ‘trans-temporal comparison’ – a distinct anthropological method that differs both from the modernist ideal of cross-cultural comparison, and from the postmodernist preference for multi-sited fieldwork. The term ‘trans-temporal’ draws attention to the fact that Strathern’s units of comparison are neither outside time nor prisoners of a certain historical period. Instead, we suggest, trans-temporal comparison proceeds according to an abstensive logic by which the anthropologist’s knowledge about certain (Melanesian) pasts is brought to bear on certain (Euro-American) futures. As an abstract mode of comparison, it turns on a peculiar ‘intensification’ of the act of fieldwork, namely what Strathern calls the ‘ethnographic moment’.

While Strathern does not fully draw out these implications of her comparative project, she does offer important hints on a number of occasions. One such is in *Property, Substance and Effect*, where she discusses different ways of thinking ‘about historical epochs as domains from which to draw resources for analysis’ (1999: 145). ‘In certain respects’, she writes, “‘traditional’ Melanesian societies belong much more comfortably to some of the visions made possible by socio-economic developments in Europe since the 1980s than they did to the worlds of the early and mid-twentieth century’ (1999: 146). Hence her confident response to the charges of anachronism by some Melanesianists: *on* a trans-temporal perspective, her Hagen fieldwork has ‘not cease[d] to become an object of contemporary interest simply because practices have changed’ (1999: 145). In fact, for certain analytical purposes (such as her study of intellectual property rights in the above passages) it is the other way round: the comparative purchase of her Hagen material within a contemporary Euro-American context to some extent hinges upon its very non-contemporary status within a Melanesian context:

[What] time is the anthropologist in? From what historical epoch should I be drawing the tools of analysis? . . . One of the times Euro-Americans may find themselves in has so to speak only just happened for them. But it may have ‘happened’ long ago in Papua New Guinea. I wonder if some of the considerations voiced by Kanepa – especially those with their roots thoroughly in Hagen’s past – might not *anticipate* certain future economic directions in Euro-American quests for ownership. (1999: 150–1)

Thus, ‘the knowledge anthropologists have made out of their encounters with Melanesians’ is indeed ‘timeless’ (1999: 145) – not because such knowledge belongs to a context-independent dimension of general truths that transcends the temporal, but

because Strathern's recollections of her original Hagen fieldwork may continually be mobilized in order to make productive analogies with emerging property forms in Britain and elsewhere. So, if the plural analytics advocated by Marcus treats ethnographic knowledge as general but not abstract (enabling a narrative to bring together otherwise dispersed phenomena), then Strathern's postplural approach treats ethnographic knowledge as abstract but not general. Trans-temporal comparisons reveal links between societies, which, far from being made possible by multi-sited scale shifts, works by collapsing the distinction between the local and global, and other (post)modernist fictions.

To support this conclusion, we may consider another instance in which Strathern explicitly addresses the temporal implications of her postplural analytics. We are referring to certain passages in *Partial Connections*, where she discusses an oft-cited article by Kirsten Hastrup (1990) that offers an emphatic defence of the contested use of 'the ethnographic present' as an anthropological writing strategy. What especially interests Strathern is Hastrup's provocative assertion that the anthropologist has 'no choice of tense' (2004: 48), for 'only the ethnographic present preserves the reality of anthropological knowledge' (Hastrup, 1990: 45). After all, Hastrup rhetorically asks, '[w]hat would the point of anthropology be if its truth had already gone at the moment of writing?' (1990: 56). With Ardener's work on prophecy in mind, Hastrup answers as follows: 'through the dual nature of the anthropological practice, of experience and writing, a new world is created – a world of . . . betweenness that places the anthropologist in a prophetic condition, and forces her to speak in the ethnographic present' (1990: 56).

While Strathern clearly sympathizes with Hastrup's defence of the ethnographic present, it is not made explicit how these ideas about the temporality of anthropological writing relate to her own ones about the 'timelessness' of anthropological knowledge. But one could ask: what would the concept of the ethnographic present have to be like for it to allow for a certain (Melanesian) past to 'foretell' a potential (Euro-American) future? It is here useful to consider another instance where Strathern discusses the work of time in anthropological thinking, namely in her musings about the 'scandal' of its holistic method (1999: 3–11). It is precisely because of the holistic ideal (the scandal) of wanting to know 'anything' – as opposed to 'everything' (1999: 8) – that the fieldwork exercise is

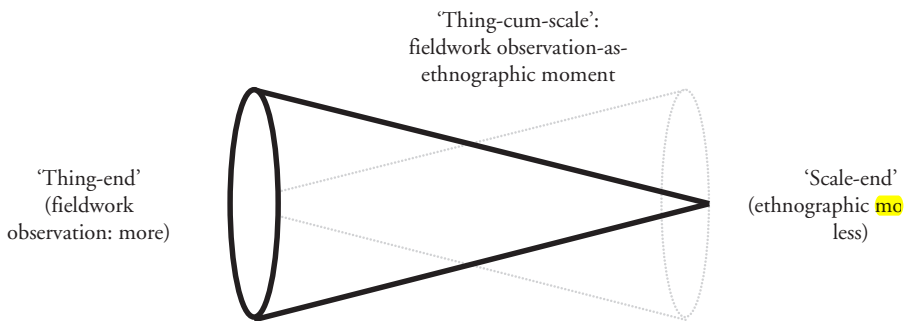
an anticipatory one . . . being open to what is to come later. In the meanwhile, the would-be ethnographer gathers material whose use cannot be foreseen, facts and issues collected with little knowledge as to their connections. The result is a 'field' of information to which it is possible to return, intellectually speaking, in order to ask questions about subsequent developments whose trajectory was not evident at the outset. . . . Much information is amassed, hopefully, by the field ethnographer with specific intentions in mind. But, at the same time, knowing that one cannot completely know what is going to be germane to any subsequent re-organisation of material demanded by the process of writing can have its own effect. It may create an expectation of surprise. (1999: 9–10)

Once again, we see how the 'timelessness' of ethnographic knowledge emerges as a paradoxical effect of its historicity. In fact, Strathern seems to go as far as to suggest that the

longer the span between fieldwork and analysis, the bigger the chance that germane connections can be drawn by ~~making~~ recourse to one's 'field of information', for it seems to be at this point – and at this point only – that the 'would-be' ethnographer is made into a real one. **It is worth taking notice of what seems to be the distinctly anti-phenomenological tenet of this conclusion. For Strathern, it would appear, the potential of the ethnographic fieldwork/the ethnographer's field of information for generating surprising insights increases with time. This flies in the face of established phenomenological wisdom concerning the tragic and inevitable loss in terms of the sensuousness of the fieldwork experience as one's memory of it is assumed to gradually fade in intensity over time.**

This is where Strathern's concept of the ethnographic moment departs from Hastrup's concept of the ethnographic present, for it is here that the intensive and lateral – as opposed to ~~general~~ and vertical – nature of the abstractions created through trans-temporal analysis is revealed. While the ethnographic present 'transcend[s] the historical moment' by adding more 'provisional truth[s]' to the world (Hastrup, 1990: 56–7), the ethnographic moment has the capacity to 'transverse' history by *cutting away* what may, at first, come across as the 'most evident' connections between one's fieldwork observations and one's object of comparative analysis. To understand how trans-temporal comparison in that sense involves an intensely abstract process of post-plural scaling (or as we also put it, 'removal'), we return to our pictorial outline of the logic of abstension:

As explained earlier, the logic of intense abstraction refers to how things-cum-scales transform themselves in specific ways. As we depict in Figure 2, the 'ethnographic moment' can be said to constitute just one such abstensive transformation, namely a self-scaling of the ethnographic fieldwork observation or, more accurately perhaps, fieldwork encounter. ~~This is the implication the holistic 'method' (or lack of it):~~ the fact that the would-be ethnographer vaguely senses that unknown future connections could one day appear, transforms her 'field of information' from being a historical artefact confined to a certain point in time (when the fieldwork took place) to a trans-temporal scale of comparison (from which analogies may be drawn at any given time). In that sense, the ethnographic moment is both ~~more~~, and ~~less~~, than the fieldwork encounter. As a post-plural, *abstract event*, it simultaneously effectuates a 'sharpening' of the anthropologist's field of information (on account of drawing on what is only an insignificant amount of



**Figure 2. Trans-temporal comparison**



her data), and a ‘widening’ of the fieldwork material at hand by making ~~visible the ‘less evident’ analogies in it.~~

Now, if trans-temporal comparison involves an act of intensification in which some ‘thing’ (the fieldwork observation) is ‘scaled’ into a different version of itself (the ethnographic moment), we may also ask: Which scale is being ‘thinged’ in the same process? We suggest: time itself. One radical implication of Strathern’s analytics is that it undermines the transcendent – or even, in Kantian terms, transcendental – status of time in Western knowledge traditions. As noted, ‘time’ is not different from ‘flutes’ in its capacity to act as a conduit for comparison: both can act as postplural scales that allow for specific kinds of relational transformations. So, on the abstensive logic of trans-temporal comparison, time is reduced to just one of many (in fact, countless) possible scales for the elicitation of analogies between actual and virtual forms, and, more generally, for man’s perception and conceptualization of the world and his place in it (one could imagine an alternative universe where apples and pears are invested with the same a priori nature as time and space in Western epistemology). Thus the medium of time is brought down from its Kantian pedestal. If the ethnographic moment is a certain scaling of a ‘thing-like’ observation, then it is also a certain thinging of (otherwise ‘scale-like’) time.<sup>7</sup>

Thus time in Strathern’s work assumes a rather different role than in other forms of anthropological analysis. If it makes sense to say that, ~~on the~~ Planet M the only time is ‘now’, then this is because of the ethnographic moment’s self-scaling capacity to extend itself to any event of the future (or indeed the past), along a transversal, trans-temporal vector with no end point, yet bursting with directional thrust. It is the inherent tendency for intensive interpretative proliferation in one’s fieldwork material that makes it so important to obey ~~that~~ seems to be a key lesson of Strathern’s trans-temporal approach: that of cutting ~~off~~ all the most evident relations in one’s ‘field of information’ to ensure that all one is left with are odd pairings of phenomena (‘uncommon denominators’), which would otherwise be separated by history. For the same reason, anthropological analysis requires unusual interpretative patience – the cultivation of a sort of ‘deep hesitation’, which enables the anthropologist to *not* make connections (start comparing) before the moment is right.

### Deep hesitation

This requirement for hesitation also expresses itself in Strathern’s peculiar way of writing, and the challenges this style presents to her readers – the second ‘remainder’ of our discussions in Part I about the role of comparison in her work. As we shall now show, Strathern’s notoriously difficult writing style can be seen as a reflection of the realization that the capacity to add to thoughts by narrowing them down is not an ability that ~~she or other any~~ anthropologist is automatically imbued with. On the contrary, ~~abstaining~~ from drawing the most obvious connections from one’s material requires constant abstract work.

Why is it so difficult to read Marilyn Strathern? Musing over this same question, Alfred Gell recalls how he ‘used to think it was her writing style, and that something could be done by dividing each sentence in half, then attaching the first half of each sentence to the preceding one, and the second half to the succeeding one, and in that way one could produce a series of sentences each of which was on the topic, rather than each being precariously suspended between two topics’ (1999: 30). Although Gell

eventually ‘changed [his] mind’ and concluded that it is ‘not the manner in which [Strathern] writes, but the content of what she says, that is difficult to understand’ (p. 30), we believe that his original and only half-serious comment about Strathern’s writing style was, in fact, onto something important. There really *is* a sense in which Strathern’s sentences are ‘precariously suspended’ between two poles: surely we are not alone in often having to pause after finishing one of her sentences, unsure about whether we can move on to the next.

Does this reflect a deliberate strategy? Certainly, Strathern is deeply reflexive about her own and others’ writings, even if she considers the ‘literary turn’ associated with the crisis of representation to be an impoverished alternative to the obsolete conventions of modernist anthropology (2004: 7–16; see also Reed, 2004: 19). In the foreword to the updated edition of *Partial Connections*, she explains how it was composed with the intention that ‘every section is a cut, a lacuna: one can see similar themes on either side, but they are not added to one another’ (2004: xxvii). Note the characteristic sense of ‘cutting’ here, which is used not in the sense of reducing complexity (its conventional, ‘plural’ sense of making a generalization), but as a particular conduit for (scale of) complexity:

*Partial Connections* was an attempt to act out, or deliberately fabricate, a non-linear progression of argumentative points as the basis for description . . . Rather than inadvertent or unforeseen – and thus tragic or pitiable – partitionings that conjured loss of a whole, I wanted to experiment with the apportioning of ‘size’ in a deliberate manner. The strategy was to stop the flow of information or argument, and thus ‘cut’ it. (p. xxix)

While denoting a particular experiment, this rare self-description might be extended to Strathern’s entire *oeuvre*. Indeed, one may speak of a distinct aesthetic form – which might be called creative cutting – that is replicated, fractally so to speak, at every scale of her work, ranging from the partial connections between her books to a certain irreducible friction between her sentences, if not between her words.<sup>8</sup> This might explain Strathern’s tendency ~~for indirect reasoning and for~~ using what sometimes comes across as unnecessarily cumbersome syntax. If her style accords to the criteria of a postplural aesthetic that dictates that self-similar ‘cuttings’ must recur across all dimensions of text, she could perhaps be said to be always writing the same sentence twice (Riles, 1998). Is there a sense to which invisible ‘remainders’ are always present within or between her sentences, like propositional shadows whose ghostly clauses are themselves not quite replications of their visible doubles?

Recalling the lacuna-inducing strategy that informed the composition of *Partial Connections* (‘one can see similar themes on either side, but they are not added to one another’), and inspired by Adorno’s metaphor of the colon as the green light in the traffic of language (cited in Agamben, 1999: 223), we may say that, on Planet M, there are only orange traffic lights, the latter image indicating the doggedly persistent, obviously deliberate and sometimes unpleasant hesitation that Strathern’s writings provoke in readers like Gell and, indeed, the two of us.<sup>9</sup> Between Strathern’s sentences, a gap must be crossed that is much wider than in the pleasant breathing space produced by a conventional full stop (let alone the impatient thrust of the colon); indeed, it is here, in the intensive passage created by cutting all the most obvious implications of the previous

proposition away, that Strathern's abstensive thinking most clearly shows in her manner of writing.<sup>10</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This article has explored what the 'crisis of representation' debate in anthropology might have looked like had it had not remained trapped within a pluralist metaphysics, but had instead unfolded according to the postplural alternative developed by Marilyn Strathern. To fully understand the radical character of Strathern's anthropological project, as well as the subversive (if not downright disturbing) analytical and rhetorical forms this entails, we may return to the contrast between Strathern work and the 'crisis of representation' literature, with which this article began.

One could understand the 'crisis' of anthropology in the 1980s and 1990s as an attack on self-consciousness. Imagining earlier generations of anthropologists (and not least the British tradition of social anthropology) as having ignored in the name of positivistic objectivity the irreducible influence of their own personal, cultural, political (etc.) outlook on their research, the idea was to re-invent anthropology by making these influences explicit. After all, it was ~~rightly~~ recognized, anthropology is itself a socio-cultural practice, and hence belongs to the same order of phenomena that it purports to study. What was called for, therefore, was an anthropology imbued with a double vision: one eye on the object of inquiry, the other on the inquirer. What made this move a 'crisis of representation' was that it had the potential to bring down the entire project of modern anthropology, understood as the endeavour to arrive at accurate representations of social and cultural phenomena which could provide the basis for theoretical generalizations: no more modernist naïveté, was the message. But for its detractors (not least in Britain), the real crisis resided in the reflexivist remedy itself. As with sundry forms of scepticism, the call to problematize the conditions of possibility of anthropological knowledge is subject to an apparently debilitating infinite regress. If these conditions of possibility are themselves to become part of the object of knowledge, then what are the conditions of possibility of *that*? Which is just a quite formal way of expressing the habitual quip against the reflexivist 'turn' in US anthropology since the 1980s: 'navel gazing'.

One way of articulating the contrast between Strathern and the reflexivists is to point to the way she avoids this latter charge of navel gazing (that she avoids the first charge of naïve modernism is self-evident). The key difference relates to how Strathern decouples a pair of binary oppositions that the reflexivist argument conflates, namely the epistemic distinction between subject (as knower) and object (as known), and the identity distinction between self (or the 'us') and other (or the 'them'). For the charge of infinite regress depends on ~~mistaking~~ ~~to be one~~ these two levels: on taking the call to examine the self as tantamount to examining the epistemic subject as such (and thus to raise epistemological concerns about the conditions of possibility of its knowledge). Strathern avoids this solipsistic trap. The self can certainly be the object of ethnographic scrutiny, also when this 'self' is anthropological reasoning itself. However, in coming under scrutiny in this way the self must cease to be the epistemic or hermeneutic 'subject', which was the centre of the reflexivist turn. For if the 'self' is to be scrutinized in the same way as all other things are scrutinized, then it cannot be scrutinized as a subject, since to scrutinize things is to treat them, precisely, as objects – the old philosophical chestnut.<sup>11</sup>

So, instead of the well-tryed (and we would submit impossible) ‘inter-subjective’ method of reflexivity, where the purported subjectivity of the self is turned into an ever more transparent object for its own introspection, Strathern offers an ‘intra-objective’ alternative, where the ‘objectivity’ of the self is transformed onto less stable – and thus less transparent – intensifications of itself. Unwilling to partake in disciplinary auto-therapy, Strathern’s analytics allows for the ethnographic self to be studied through a logic of sustained ‘extrospection’ (our term), which, to paraphrase from the final pages of *Partial Connections*, works by letting ‘the centres of others become centres for [the self]’ (2004: 117).<sup>12</sup>

These reflections about the eccentricity of the position from which Strathern conducts her comparisons takes us back to Planet M, and our introductory comments about the half-comical, half-serious intent of this metaphor. In a sense, our subsequent argument in the article has left this initial image in a somewhat battered state. After all, we have argued, Strathern’s ‘position’ (inasmuch as it makes sense to say that she takes one at all) hardly can be described as a specific *place* (not even a shadowy one in permanent, post-Copernican eclipse). Rather, as we have sought to demonstrate, Strathern’s thinking amounts to a particular form of controlled movement, which we have tried to convey by introducing concepts like postplural comparison, the internal ‘removal’ of abstension, deep (trans-temporal) hesitation, and sustained extrospection. But perhaps, then, there is also a sense in which, as an ironic effect of the motility of our object of analysis, the planetary metaphor now comes back with a vengeance, full orbit. Only now Planet M does not so much refer to the vanishing point from which Strathern conducts her analysis, but rather to a position we have needed to occupy in order to carve a comparative scale out of her.

## Notes

- 1 This article is the result of many hours, if not years, of sustained collaborative friction between the two authors. A shorter version has appeared in *Cambridge Anthropology*. We thank Morten Nielsen for insightful and challenging comments on an earlier version, as well as *Anthropological Theory*’s anonymous reviewer.
- 2 For another treatment of ‘scalar theory’ inspired by Strathern, see Wastell (2001).
- 3 ‘Control’ married to ‘constancy’ would be their parents!
- 4 Strathern says as much: ‘My interest is in the proportions that sustain the conviction of anthropological accounts’ (2004: 75).
- 5 There are echoes here of Charles Peirce’s concept of thirdness: ‘Thirdness is the mode of being of that which is such as it is, in bringing a second and third in relation to each other’ (Peirce, 1958: 328).
- 6 It is important to note that one’s intuitions about what counts as ‘more’ and as ‘less’ here must also be inverted unto themselves. To imagine the dog as being more than the dog-as-quadruped (‘more full-blown’) and the quadruped as being less than it (‘merely an abstraction’) is to think of the dog-as-quadruped as a thing-like abstension, by analogy to the dog. But abstensions are, as we have seen, defined as the kinds of things that are also, at the same time, scales (and to make this point is, if you like, to abstend the notion of the abstension itself – the abstension of the abstension). But if one thinks of the dog-as-quadruped as a scale, by analogy to the quadruped, the coordinates of ‘more’ and ‘less’ flip over. Now one wants to think of

the dog as being less than the dog-as-quadruped ('merely a particular') and of the quadruped as being more than it (more 'general' or 'universal'). Indeed, if one could say, very broadly, that the former way of imagining, thing-like, expresses an aesthetic that is characteristic of, say, phenomenology, while the latter one, scale-like, expresses an aesthetic of formalism (or even formal logic), then Strathern's thinking is their 'third' too.

- 7 But which 'thinging' are we talking about – what time is it, so to speak, in the ethnographic moment? A proper engagement with this question lies beyond the scope of this article, but the answer cannot be linear, chronological time. Had it been so, Strathern would indeed be guilty of the charge of anachronism hurled at her for drawing analogies between actual Hagen pasts and potential Western futures. But this is clearly not what she is doing. Rather, she seems to conduct her trans-temporal comparisons across durational time, in Bergson's (and Deleuze's) sense. Instead of using time as a shared context for every thing she describes, she uses time alternately as foreground and background, figure and ground, by carving temporal scales out of things while also putting things in time. Thus the scaling ('timing') of things and the thinging of scales (time) go hand in hand: only through an unfolding (scaling) of the fieldwork observation into an ethnographic moment is it possible to enfold ('to thing') such moments of insight 'back' into the ethnographic present. Understood in such durational terms, what happens in 'the moment' is by no means restricted to 'the present'. Unlike the present, the moment is not defined by a single tense, which, paradoxically, is precisely why the ethnographic moment does not allow for any generalizations aimed at transcending history. What the concept of ethnographic moment does allow one to do, however, is to dive into a pool of potential analogies to be drawn between one's past fieldwork experiences and one's future objects of comparative study (as opposed to the concept of ethnographic presence which is forever imprisoned in itself, unable to self-transform for comparative purposes into different past or future versions of itself).
- 8 As Adam Reed points out, *The Gender of the Gift* (1998) is 'a text whose significance and rigour derives from what it omits. Orienting dichotomies of social analysis . . . are . . . deliberately hidden. *The Gender of the Gift* is a book about that disappearance, one that speaks of its own constraint. It invites the reader through demonstration, as well as explication, to consider the contours of these absent dichotomies' (Reed, 2004: 11).
- 9 According to Agamben (1999), the colon fulfils a distinct purpose in certain of Gilles Deleuze's writings: 'If we take up Adorno's metaphor of the colon as a green light in the traffic of language . . . we can then say that [Deleuze's use of the colon marks] a kind of crossing with neither distance nor identification, something like a passage without spatial movement' (Agamben, 1999: 223).
- 10 The awkward relationship between any two given units of texts in Strathern's work calls to mind what she has described as the 'doorstep hesitation' (as opposed to barricades) between feminism and anthropology: 'Each in a sense mocks the other, because each so nearly achieves what the other aims for as an ideal relation with the world' (1987: 286).
- 11 The idea that one aspect of something (~~like the self~~) might be eliminated in order for another to feature more prominently recalls Strathern's own vocabulary of the

'eclipsed' and the 'revealed' (and their numerous pairs of synonyms and corollaries) which mark the conceptual coordinates of what in *The Gender of the Gift* she calls 'objectification', i.e. 'the manner in which persons and things are construed as having value, that is, are objects of people's subjective regard or of their creation' (1988: 176). To us it is revealing that Strathern's 'binary licence', as she has recently called it (Strathern, forthcoming), does not extend to the notion of objectification itself. Considering the proliferation of binary distinctions in her work, why is Strathern's concern with objectification not articulated with reference to a contrasting term – presumably, 'subjectification'? We argue that the gap is consistent, inasmuch as it bears out the idea that subjects (as opposed to selves) are the one thing that cannot be talked about.

- 12 As an anonymous reader of this article pointed out, *The Gender of the Gift* (1988) has sometimes been described as 'an authorless text' (a term which calls to mind the once heated debates about the so-called 'anti-humanism' of Lévi-Strauss, Foucault, and other French thinkers). Presumably, this and other similar characterizations of Strathern's work have not always been meant as praise; and yet it could be maintained that it is precisely for its lack of any author voice/reflexive subject that her work achieves its full radicalism. Could this be why Strathern reaches the conclusion that, ~~however sympathetic the idea,~~ Tyler's notion of evocative ethnography falls short of suggesting a textual form from which 'an emergent mind that has no individual locus' (1986: 133, cited in Strathern, 2004: 14) can emerge? After all, as she then goes on to say in a remarkable comment on the merits of what we call extrospection, for a writer to produce a textual event 'that takes place neither within nor outside the person, one needs to turn the emergent mind with no individual locus into a much stronger sense of exteriority: to imagine a person as a "someone". One needs to restore a perception of other presences – of those who jostle, pressing in, as concrete and particular others who will neither go away nor merge with oneself. Between the event that takes place nowhere . . . and the individual subject . . . I wish to suggest a third way of personifying the ethnographic experience, to draw a figure who seems to be *more than* one person, indeed more than a person . . . [T]here is a sense of holding together in one's grasp what cannot be held . . . of trying to make the body do more than it can do – of making connection[s] while knowing that they are not completely subsumed within [one's] experience of them' (2004: 26–7).

## References

- Agamben, Giorgio (1999) *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy* (edited, translated and introduced by Daniel Heller-Roazen). Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Ansell Pearson, Keith (1999) *Germinal Life: The Difference and Repetition of Deleuze*. London: Routledge.
- Bateson, Gregory (1958) *Naven* (2nd edition). Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Carrier, James (2005) 'Property and Social Relations in Melanesian Anthropology', in C. Hann (ed.) *Property Relations: Renewing the Anthropological Tradition*, pp. 85–103. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Clifford, James and George E. Marcus (eds) (1986) *Writing Culture: the Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

- De Landa, Manuel (2002) *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy*. London: Continuum.
- Gell, Alfred (1992) *The Anthropology of Time: Cultural Constructions of Temporal Maps and Images*. Oxford: Berg.
- Gell, Alfred (1999) 'Strathernograms, or the Semiotics of Mixed Metaphors', in Alfred Gell, *The Art of Anthropology: Essays and Diagrams* (ed. Eric Hirsch). *LSE Monographs on Social Anthropology* 67: 29–75.
- Hastrup, Kirsten (1990) 'The Ethnographic Present: A Reinvention', *Cultural Anthropology* 5(1): 45–61.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude (1966) *The Savage Mind*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude (1990) *The Naked Man*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Marcus, George (1993) 'Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-sited Ethnography', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24: 95–117.
- Marcus, George E. and Michael F. Fischer (1986) *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Peirce, Charles Sanders (1958) *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce, Volume 8* (ed. A.W. Burks). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Reed, Adam (2004) *Papua New Guinea's Last Place: Experiences of Constraint in a Postcolonial Prison*. Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Riles, Annelise (1998) 'Infinity within the Brackets', *American Ethnologist* 25(3): 378–98.
- Scott, Michael (2007) *The Severed Snake: Matrilineages, Making Place, and a Melanesian Christianity in Southeast Solomon Islands*. Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press.
- Strathern, Marilyn (1987) 'An Awkward Relationship: The Case of Feminism and Anthropology', *Signs* 12(2): 276–92.
- Strathern, Marilyn (1988) *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Strathern, Marilyn (1992) 'Parts and Wholes: Refiguring Relationships in a Postplural World', in A. Kuper (ed.) *Conceptualizing Society*. London: Routledge.
- Strathern, Marilyn (1995) *The Relation: Issues in Complexity and Scale* (Pamphlet No. 6). Cambridge: Prickly Pear.
- Strathern, Marilyn (1999) *Property, Substance and Effect: Anthropological Essays on Persons and Things*. London: The Athlone Press.
- Strathern, Marilyn (2004[1991]) *Partial Connections, Updated Edition*. Walnut Creek: Altamira Press.
- Strathern, Marilyn (forthcoming) 'Binary License', paper presented at the Comparative Relativism Colloquium at Copenhagen's IT University, September 2009. To appear in special issue of *Common Knowledge*, edited by C.B. Jensen, M.A. Pedersen and B.R. Winthereik.
- Tyler, Stephen (1987) *The Unspeakable: Discourse, Dialogue and Rhetoric in the Post-modern World*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo (2009) 'Intensive Filiation and Demonic Alliance', in C.B. Jensen and K. Rodje (eds) *Deleuzian Intersections in Science, Technology and Anthropology*. Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Wastell, Sari (2001) 'Presuming Scale, Making Diversity', *Critique of Anthropology* 21(2): 185–210.

MARTIN HOLBRAAD works at the Anthropology Department of University College London. He has conducted fieldwork on Afro-Cuban religion and socialism in Havana since 1998. He is co-editor of *Thinking through Things: Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically* (Routledge, 2007) and *Technologies of the Imagination* (Special Issue of *Ethnos*, Spring 2009). His monograph, *Ifá Never Lies: Cuban Divination and Anthropological Truth*, is in preparation. Address: Department of Anthropology, University College London, 14 Taviton Street, London WC1H 0BW, UK. [email: m.holbraad@ucl.ac.uk]

MORTEN AXEL PEDERSEN is Associate Professor at the Department of Anthropology, University of Copenhagen. Based on fieldwork in rural and urban Mongolia, he has published articles on a range of topics, including shamanism, landscape, humour, violence, and hope. He is co-editor of two volumes: a special issue of *Ethnos* on Technologies of the Imagination and a special issue of *Inner Asia* on Perspectivism. His monograph, *Not Quite Shamans: Spirit Worlds and Political Lives in Northern Mongolia After Socialism*, is forthcoming with Cornell University Press. Address: [email: morten.pedersen@anthro.ku.dk]

---