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Thinking through proliferations of geometries, fractions and parts : Conclusion and Summary of the work of Marilyn Strathern

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<CT>CONCLUSION

<CST>Thinking through Proliferations of Geometries, Fractions and Parts

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<FL>It is strange how easy it is to misremember stories, particularly ones that are important. For years, I remembered that my fascination with mathematics came from reading *The Phantom Tollbooth* as a child (Juster 1962). That part of the story is true. What is less true is my memory that the book was entirely about a boy's journey through a magical world of numbers (the boy's name was Milo). In fact, only a part of the book is about the 'kingdom of numbers'; much of the rest is about the kingdom of words, and the book as a whole concerns an unfortunate split between two brothers, Mathemagician and King Azaz, who were the respective rulers of each world, having divided their father's Kingdom of Wisdom into two, as they were unable to agree on anything. Milo's task was to bring them together again, and thus to restore Rhyme and Reason (two rather sensible young women) to their rightful place of reigning in the reunited Kingdom of Wisdom. Rhyme and Reason do not displace the kings of numbers and words (Mathemagician and Azaz), but they reunite the parts.

I went back to the book recently because of my sense that my repeated encounters with Marilyn Strathern's work, including reading refractions of it through the papers in this volume, involved something distinctly geometrical. And the part I remembered most clearly from *The Phantom Tollbooth* concerned a Dodecahedron, whom Milo encounters on his way from Dictionopolis to Digitopolis. Dodecahedron has twelve faces (each sporting a different facial

expression), and he wears a rather fetching beret. After explaining his name, Dodecahedron asks Milo, 'What are you called?' And after Milo responds with 'Milo', Dodecahedron asks, 'Is everyone with one face called a Milo?'

<EXT>'Oh no', Milo replied; 'some are called Henry or George or Robert or John or lots of other things'.

'How terribly confusing', [Dodecahedron] cried. 'Everything here is called exactly what it is. The triangles are called triangles, the circles are called circles, and even the same numbers have the same name. Why, can you imagine what would happen if we named all the twos Henry or George or Robert or John or lots of other things? You'd have to say Robert plus John equals four, and if the four's name were Albert, things would be hopeless'.

'I never thought about it that way', Milo admitted.¹

<FL>Hopeless indeed. How could there be any understanding of the entities that add up to four (the two twos), never mind understanding what their combination, four, might be – if the first two is called Henry and the second two is called George and, on this occasion, the four's name is Albert, yet on a different occasion, a four's name might be something else (e.g. Fred)? Milo spends quite a lot of his time in the book being befuddled by such questions and wondering whether it is him, or the strange entities that he encounters, that are not entirely making sense.

I was right to return to the book. It captures something of the combined sense of confusion and exhilaration I had when I first began reading Marilyn Strathern's work. What is more, *The Phantom Tollbooth* captured that sensibility in a manner that put its finger (face?) on

what it was that generated the simultaneous befuddlement and excitement: there was something about the combination of the mathematical abstraction of geometry (and its precision) with the diversity of names (terms, concepts and their proliferation of significance) being presented in Strathern's work that was simultaneously mind-bogglingly confusing and enormously thought-provoking. I have lost count of the times when, just as I thought I had grasped *the* point, the text would proliferate other points, none of them more or less important than the previous one.

I often experienced reading her texts as semirecursive loops (a concept also drawn upon by Jensen and Winthereik in this volume), where an idea is introduced like a thread, drawn in one direction for a while and then woven into related ideas, before the text returns to a previous thread only to be cut or nipped somewhere and then finding the beginning of a new thread nearby that may or may not be tied directly with the first one, or a different one. This recursive looping, threading and cutting occurs not only within one text but between texts, and Strathern herself often draws attention to this interweaving and repetition, the not quite replications that appear (for example) at one moment in *Partial Connections* (Strathern 1991) and a year later, reworked, in *After Nature* (Strathern 1992).

In an updated edition of *Partial Connections*, Strathern is perhaps at her most explicit about this, saying that the Euro-American issues of complexity and scale that she addresses in that book are reproduced in a different guise in *After Nature* as a form of Euro-American discursiveness she calls 'merographic' (Strathern 2004, xxix). A merographic way of thinking, she explains, means the idea that 'any part of one thing may also be part of something else' (ibid.). I made sense of this by imagining an individual located at the intersection between several overlapping circles or spheres of a three-dimensional Venn diagram.

For example, within modern forms of English kinship, persons could be thought of as being, amongst other things, the combined outcome of both nature and culture/society ('born and bred'): there is a whole domain of phenomena that are imagined to be natural and another, and different, whole domain of phenomena that are imagined to be cultural and/or part of society; and at the intersection between them, where they overlap, is both some principles of modern English kinship and the individual English person. Moreover, there are infinite numbers of other domains, in addition to nature and culture/society, of which individuals could be a part: gender, class, nationality and so on. An individual is only ever a *part* of any one of these whole entities (e.g. nature) because they are simultaneously also a part of something else (i.e. they are neither wholly natural nor wholly cultural), and potentially, they could be a part of an infinite number of other things (or domains). This generates a sense of plurality, Strathern says: infinite possible combinations, in which each result is a unique individual.

This is all fine, until Strathern reconfigures the geometry of this in two ways. First, she points out that the only way to think about individuals like that (i.e. to think about them merographically) is to imagine a pre-existing entity (the individual) who is related in some way to all these different domains, which is the key Euro-American trope that both makes merographic thinking possible and is also its outcome. Consider instead, she suggests, the Melanesian situation, in which persons are imagined literally as being relations: 'When a Melanesian looks inside a person (a relation), he or she finds other persons (relations)' (Strathern 1992, 79).

In that situation, there are no pre-existing entities (no individuals): it is not possible for a person to belong partly to one whole entity and partly to another and to potentially belong to infinite numbers of others. Instead, persons enact their relations, which makes those particular

relations actual, rather than potential; there is nothing more than, nor less than, their relations. And there are also no infinite possibilities: the relations carry all the substance of the person within them. Within this understanding of persons, there is also no possibility of *choosing* relations: entities that are brought into existence by having and enacting relations cannot thereby choose one relation over another – there is no entity to do the choosing; the relation has to exist before any action can take place.

The geometric logic of this is both simple and inexorable, and yet, because it dragged me away from the heart of what I had previously been capable of imagining about persons and their relations, the thought, when I first encountered it, caused me to feel like Milo: I had never thought about it that way before. This was despite the fact that I had been trained in the same British social anthropology that Strathern draws upon to build her arguments. It took a mental geometric relocation, a shift from thinking from the location of the individual to thinking from the location of the relation, and then an erasure of the dot that stands for the individual and replacing it with a fleshy container full of relations,² for me to ‘get’ the Melanesian point.

Second, Strathern states in *After Nature* that the Euro-American plural, individual, merographic, way of thinking, which Strathern introduced in this book and that I spent quite a long time trying to understand, was perhaps in the process of disappearing. *What?* The logic of that was inexorable as well. Drawing on a combination of political sensibilities at the time (what would today be called the development of neoliberal logic) and technological transformations (especially new reproductive and genetic technologies), Strathern suggests that a world imagined in a ‘postplural’ way could be replacing the world imagined in a merographic (plural) way. Thatcher’s Britain, which appeared to be typified by Thatcher’s claim that there was no society, only individuals who choose – meaning consumer choice, in the market – combined with

technological changes, particularly new reproductive technologies, which implied the difference between nature and culture was no longer a clear difference, seemed to be taking all the boundaries of the domains away.

If in this part of Euro-America people began to imagine that there is no society and no nature that is different from culture, then the most important domains (nature, culture, society) of which individuals are made up cease to exist as distinct domains. The implications were dramatic: ‘The “postplural individual” is no longer imagined merographically,’ Strathern says (1992, 135), which carried the implication that what this combination of this new political economy and new technologies was causing people to *think* could be fundamentally changing Euro-American concepts of persons. In the end to the prologue to the book, and after noting that the main ideological trope of this new approach appeared to be equating freedom with the freedom to choose (meaning consumer choice, which of course runs fundamentally against Mauss’s logic of the gift), Strathern famously says:

<EXT>Free-ranging access, such apparent freedom of choice, in the end turns the sense of plurality into an artefact of access or choice itself. An approximation to the insight, then, of what it might be like to belong to a culture whose next imaginative leap is to think of itself as having nothing to construct. It would not, after all, be after anything.
(Strathern 1992, 9)

<FL>I have written about this elsewhere, so I will not repeat the point (Green 2015); suffice it to say here that in a postplural world in which these distinctions are blurred and turned instead into choice, there is no way of differentiating the key domains of nature, culture and society. None of

the differences make any difference anymore, even if the differences proliferate at an alarming rate these days: one could say there is nothing *but* difference (a Deleuzian point, of course), with no way to choose between the differences, even though choice is all there is, the only logical option.

It is intriguing that most of the authors in this collection draw upon the strands of Strathern's thought which concern this Euro-American combined conceptual and political shape-shifting more than almost any other aspect of her work.

Greenhouse's consideration of the way US legal arrangements transformed individuals into statistical identity categories, rather than identities, as such; Corsin's study of the transformations effected by managerial rescalings and equations, and efforts to create paperless offices; Kirsch's study of how indigenous rights claims can creatively cross-domains to generate certain effects; Navaro's study of how a software program called a structured dialogue design process (the mind boggles), aimed at conflict resolution in Cyprus, is entangled in the postplural (posthuman, even) technical logic of mediating social relations; Jensen and Winthereik's study of the effects of audit on the auditing process itself (a kind of looping back); and perhaps even Strathern's own afterword: on the one hand, that text loops all the way back to Fortes's comments on the past fascination anthropology had with roles and statuses.

Yet it is done in order to create a commentary on the recent separation of the role of the William Wyse Professor of social anthropology at Cambridge from the office of head of department there and how that appears to reflect a move towards a personalized position (a Milo, a Henry, or a George), not an office with obligations and relations attached which contains a current incumbent (a circle, a square, number two or William Wyse Professor).

The exception to this general focus on conceptual shape-shifting in this volume is the dialogue between Viveiros de Castro and Goldman, in which the focus is more on their mutual efforts to gain a perspective on Strathern's work on perspectives (what they refer to as an 'exchange of perspectives'). That dialogue loops into an engagement between Strathern and Viveiros de Castro that takes place elsewhere, concerning the difference Strathern has evoked between a 'perspectivist' and a 'perspectival' approach (Strathern 2011). Strathern's comments on that were published in the same journal as Viveiros de Castro's 2004 paper, 'Exchanging Perspectives' (Viveiros de Castro 2004). I also read this debate as another form of geometry, but this time, one that involved a particular kind of engagement with the 'geo' part of geometry: an engagement with the logic of location, as such.³

The similarity between the words (perspective and perspectival) came together with my own work on the strange geometry of the Balkans (Green 2005), and my former readings of political philosophy in relation to the question of perspectives (especially Foucault and Nietzsche) to once again cause a deep sense of both confusion and intrigue with this debate. Fortunately, there is some reiteration here, some loops and partial connections back to what has been thought before and which made me realize that all my work on understanding what merographic might be about had not gone to waste.

One key difference between perspectivism and perspectivalism is the question of *choice*; another is whether relations are based on similarity or difference. The *perspectivalist* (Euro-American) approach imagines a pre-existing individual who could have many different perspectives, which depends on the individual's location at any given moment – in a sense, her position in the Venn diagram of overlapping domains. In contrast, within a *perspectivist* approach (Melanesian/Amerindian), each 'perspective' is based on relations – which, as relations

create the person, they also generate the perspective, the location (or world, in a sense) from which things are viewed. ‘To be perspectivalist acts out Euro-American pluralism, ontologically grounded in one world and many viewpoints; whereas perspectivism implies an ontology of many worlds and one capacity to take a viewpoint’ (Strathern 2011, 92).

The distinction between perspectivist and perspectival ‘views’ in Strathern’s terms thus concerns the logic used to generate the geometry of relations; it is not literally about ‘seeing’ things. In the perspectivist (Euro-American) logic, there is a ‘view’ on something: the assumption is that there is in reality one world, and there can be many different ‘views’ on it. This of course again requires the pre-existence of a self-contained individual who *chooses*:

<EXT>This notion of choice is a prop to the notion that relations (actively) link terms, parties, and entities, so that links can be made (more or less) anywhere in this regime of plenitude . . . it is over and over again the terms, not the relation, that are regarded as prior, which means that Euro-Americans . . . continue to live in the perspectivalist world of things with preexisting attributes. (Strathern 2011, 100)

In contrast, within perspectivist logic, which Strathern regards as typified within Melanesian/Amerindian thought, there are many parallel worlds created out of relations. The example of the relation of brother-in-law comes in more than once: brother-in-law is a relation generated by kinship rules, in which one man has a sister who is another man’s wife. Each man has a different relation to the woman, which is what generates the character of the tie between the men; Strathern even notes that in Melanesian terms, this woman is what divides the men (2011, 94). ‘What such a relationship does is create a universe of relations that turn on its

enactment. In occupying different positions, then, a person switches not individual viewpoints but relationships' (Strathern 2011, 94).

The absence of choice is crucial here. Again, there is no pre-existing individual who chooses a relation, or a point of view; there are relations that are enacted, and in enacting them, the world is created. The person, who contains the relations (both of difference and similarity), enacts parts of them at any given time; but they are parts of one, they all add up to one. The implication is that there are as many worlds as there are relations, and each world can be understood as being an analogy of another one: it can be understood, even if it is not experienced, because the relational logic that generates the one is the same as that which generates another.

In contrast, within the Euro-American perspectival logic, individuals, as well as things and animals, are pre-existing parts of many different wholes, as distinct entities or (epistemological) domains. Those individual entities (ethnicities, types of beans, cats, trees, whatever) which are classified as being similar to one another may be defined as a group that has a particular perspective on the world. Note it is the *similarity* between the separate entities that creates a connection between separate entities here. Strathern calls this the 'ethnicist' version of relation. Or the entities might be different, in which case they could, given a good reason, come into relation with one another. But there has to be a reason, a reason to *choose* the relation.

In contrast, within perspectivist logic, each entity already contains all relations and therefore all similarities and differences. The entity *is* its relations; there is no 'reason' to come into relation, because the relation has to exist prior to the world that it creates. Within perspectivalism, individual entities that are similar to one another (e.g. English people as a group) have to choose to come into relation with entities that are different from them (e.g. nature

or culture as separate domains). Within perspectivism, the differences are already integrally implied: a person who is made from his relations already has the differences embedded within the logic of his kinship integrally implied within him.

This issue of the geometry of similarities and differences is where I began and it is also where I will end this brief excursion, with a final quick look at another one of Strathern's most (re)productive concepts, scale. This involves another impossibly long thread, but I will cut it, in the manner described by Strathern herself, as all acts of interpretation must do in order to make sense of anything:

<EXT> Interpretation must hold objects of reflection stable long enough to be of use.

That holding stable may be imagined as stopping a flow or cutting into an expanse, and perhaps some of the Euro-Americans' voiced concern over limits re-runs Derrida's question of how to 'stop' an interpretation . . . 'cutting' is used as a metaphor by Derrida himself. . . for the way one phenomenon stops the flow of others. (Strathern 1996, 522)

<FL> My cutting draws on the fact that Strathern's use of the concept of scale often involves fractal geometry as well as the Euclidian sort (to which Venn diagrams belong, for example). She carefully renders the term 'scale' so that it simultaneously refers to size (magnitude – bigger or smaller) and to domain (classification of the type of thing being measured, e.g. natural or cultural things). That way, she can draw upon both a merographic understanding of scale (the overlapping of different domains, which generates partial fragments of many separate wholes) and a fractal one (the overlapping of different magnitudes, which generates fractions of an always singular whole). This understanding of scale also allows her to consider an interplay

between them, given that scale incorporates both meanings. That has allowed her to analyze differences between, and changes in, how relations work and how persons appear (and sometimes disappear). This is, of course, a reiteration of what I have already discussed, but it takes things in a slightly different direction.

One point about fractal geometry is that it eludes scale understood as magnitude: the same thing happens at the largest and smallest levels. Branches of a tree, veins in the leaf, roots of the tree – all the same structure working at different magnitudes, but none of them fragment into different domains. All the similarities, and all the differences, are fractions of one; all are encompassed within one. Partitioning within fractal geometry does not create the dissolution of entities/persons which break up into bits and parts once there are no clear-cut domains to hold them together: fractal geometry does not generate plurality in the merographic sense and thus also does not generate a postplural condition.

In ‘Binary License’, Strathern draws on the example of the concept of ‘Balkanization’ to demonstrate a logic which is precisely *not* fractal in that sense, but is instead an embattlement caused by a plural logic. By reputation, the Balkans famously contain ethnic/nationalist groups whose claim to territory overlap with claims to the same territory by other ethnic/nationalist groups, and there appears to be no way to resolve the overlaps: too much similarity between the groups which ought to be entirely separate makes it difficult to *choose* which group ‘naturally’ belongs to one territory and which group belongs to another. Yet in this logic, there are pre-existing groups (ethnic/national groups), and in the end, all they can do is choose (Strathern 2011, 100). The problem is that there is no means for separating out one domain from the other (the plural towards postplural problem), no way to establish which choice is the ‘right’ one.

This analysis loops one of my own texts into the discussion, as Strathern draws on my own redescription of the issue of Balkans/Balkanization in order to make this point (Green 2005). And once again, Strathern brilliantly extends and refracts one part of the logical problem I discussed there. Both my account and hers describe how Euro-American logic (in Strathern's terms), when confronted with too much similarity and therefore no clear way to distinguish so as to be able to choose how to separate things out, creates a problem that, in practice, has generated major conflicts in the Balkan region. Strathern extends that to show the persistence of that plural Euro-American logic, that sense that in the end the world is made up of pre-existing entities that *must* choose, even if there is no final way to do that to everyone's satisfaction.

Yet there was also another part in my account where I evoked fractals rather than this Euro-American perspectivalist logic, and that was in my discussion of the history of Ottoman statecraft in the region. This was not about too much similarity, too much connection, but on the contrary, about difference, about cuts that make no sense and that subsequently cause trouble. The point was a relatively simple one: the logic used by the late Ottoman regime to generate a relation between people and location was quite different from the logic that replaced it, involving modern, nationalist claims to territory. These two logics were not only different: they directly contradicted one another. The Ottoman state structure, and particularly the millet system, was built on the logic that differences exist within the territory and that each part (e.g. Orthodox, Jewish, Catholic and the majority Muslim religious institutions) makes up the whole (the Ottoman Porte).

Nationalist logic, in contrast, asserted that each territory should be coterminous with a single, self-similar group: a nation for the nationals and what Strathern has rightly called the 'ethnacist' understanding of difference and similarity. In the part of my description concerning

Ottoman logic, my interest was in what happened when the Ottoman logic came into direct contact with the nationalist logic in the Balkan region and how the considerable and repeated conflicts that resulted were accounted for in ideological terms from the Euro-American perspective (i.e. how the concept of Balkanization came into existence). And my reasons for doing that, for trying to understand what happens when different geometrical logics come together in a place, especially when there is political power behind both of them as was the case here, was the same as the reason I pursued Strathern's work even when it initially baffled me: I wanted to understand something more about it, because there was clearly some kind of important thread in there about the dynamics of social life.

The significance of the thread regarding Ottoman logic for me came from my encounters with people on the Greek-Albanian border: many of their descriptions seemed to contradict Balkan logic (the perspectivist/ethnicist logic, in Strathern's terms), even while they evoked the concept of 'Balkans' to explain why it all seemed so complicated. What that led into, and it is something that I am still exploring, was what happens in the encounter between different logics.

So what is that sense of geometry that provoked me into rereading *The Phantom Tollbooth* when I was asked to say something about Strathern's work? The answer of course has to be both partial and personal. Geometry is not any kind of mathematics; it is the part that fundamentally has to do with relations and, in having both Euclidian and fractal versions, it captures the variations in parts, wholes, fragments, fractions, divisions, binaries, fractals, one and many, extensions, connections and disconnections that has proven to be so evocative in thinking about sociality. It is good to think.

<FL>**Sarah Green** is professor of social and cultural anthropology at the University of Helsinki. Broadly, she is interested in the dynamics of location, particularly questions of establishing where people are as opposed to who they are. In earlier years, this focused on questions of the politics of gender and sexuality and then later on the introduction of digital technologies to people's spatial lives. For many years since then, she has been studying the logic of borders in the Balkan and European regions more widely and the relative locations involved. More recently, she has shifted her attention from the Greek-Albanian border to the Aegean and is studying how locations overlap and the relations and separations between them.

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<A>Notes

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1. Juster 1962: loc. 1794–1813 of Kindle version of the book.
 2. Alfred Gell helpfully drew a series of what he called ‘strathernograms’ to depict this thinking as it was expressed in *Gender of the Gift* (Strathern 1988; Gell 1999).
 3. Although it could be noted that this is also another looping back. In *Shifting Contexts*, Strathern adds an afterword called ‘Relocations’ (1995, 176)