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BOOK SYMPOSIUM

## Located in between times

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Comment on Strathern, Marilyn. 2016. *Before and after gender: Sexual mythologies of everyday life*. Edited and with an introduction by Sarah Franklin. Afterword by Judith Butler. Chicago: HAU Books.

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It was about twelve years after *Before and after gender* was originally written that I first came across feminist separatists in London. It was in Islington, an area of the city that was in the process of gentrification in the mid-1980s, but it was still possible to live there quite cheaply. Islington was one of the areas where people with alternative political views and lives of all kinds gathered, to live in shared housing, to frequent trendy pubs and small independent music and theater places, to participate in various kinds of political activity, that sort of thing. I had rented a room in a house near the Angel Islington, and my landlady was a lesbian feminist. She was not herself a separatist, but it was through her that I met a few women who were separatists. I was strongly affected by those women's account of gender relations and the ills wreaked by what they called hetero-patriarchy. I had never before heard anything quite like what they had to say, and I remember wondering what it meant for how they lived their lives: the implications of separatism seemed to imply a radical change in how they conducted even, or perhaps especially, the most intimate aspects of their lives. I was equally affected by the expressions of fear, and sometimes even hatred, from other women about separatists.

Several years later, in 1988, the same year as Marilyn Strathern's *The gender of the gift* (1988) was published, I began researching lesbian feminist separatists in London for my PhD in social anthropology. And my fieldwork ended just as Judith Butler's *Gender trouble* was published (Butler 1990). All three things—the mid- to late 1980s in “alternative” London, and those two books that topped and tailed my fieldwork—came back to me as I was reading *Before and after gender*. The questions and issues Strathern explores with both an acute and lateral gaze in the book were



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still highly important and debated issues in London in the late 1980s. Those issues had moved on in some ways, but many of the key themes Strathern identifies in the book, most particularly to do with the entanglement between contemporary European/Western concepts of the person, sociality, and questions of sex and gender, pervaded the discussions I had with separatists at the time. The questions Strathern raises were not only being written about by separatists in London (as Strathern notes in the book, prolific writing was a characteristic of feminist activity from the 1970s onward); they were living and breathing the implications of their version of those feminist politics, trying to change their lives in line with their implications.

This was a time considerably after the explosion of writing and political activity of the early 1970s (Greer, Millett, Oakley, Firestone, Brownmiller, Leacock, Levine, Juliet Mitchell, Robin Morgan, Rosaldo, etc.). It was a period in the United Kingdom that had become more conservative with the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979. That moment, 1988–1990, was somewhere in between the heady feminist period during which Strathern completed that manuscript in 1974 (which was intriguingly written in Port Moresby at about the same time as *No money on our skins* [Strathern 1975]), and the subsequent period of the 1990s and early 2000s during which the whole gender and sexuality thing would be rethought again, reconfigured again. That moment in London was located in between times, and perhaps somewhat awkwardly in between concepts (Green 1997).

Given that Sarah Franklin and Judith Butler have provided excellent commentaries and overviews of the intellectual contribution of the book, I have chosen to engage with Strathern's text by bringing it into relation with what was going on for separatist feminists at the time in a key European city where these issues were being debated. This brief ethnographic intervention aims to draw out the implications of some of the arguments that Strathern makes, and to look at how the concepts that she draws out were engaged with by this particular group of feminists in London.

The earlier part of *Before and after gender* deftly draws on both ethnographic material and some feminist writing (particularly de Beauvoir's writing) to lay out how the difference between men and women is culturally and socially variable (still quite a startling and hotly debated idea at the time), and that there are certain characteristics within European/Western ideas of these differences that seem to set up a particular kind of inequality between them. In this Western conception, women and men are clearly separated, and become complexly interdependent in a manner that renders women's roles, particularly within the household and in sexual relations, as being axiomatically dependent upon men. Combined with a concept of persons that focuses on individual rights rather than social responsibilities, this position of dependence places women in a position of profound inequality.

Up to this point, the overall separatist perspective in London in the late 1980s (there were many variations, of course, but for these purposes a broad generalization will have to do) fairly easily aligns with the implications of this discussion, even though separatist politics took these implications considerably further than Strathern might have imagined. Following the logic of a clear separation between men and women that places women in the household as dependents upon men and tied them into a conjugal relation, separatists regularly identified the heterosexual household as a key site of oppression for women. It was a site that they both vocally campaigned against and fundamentally avoided in their own lives. A



key element of separatism was precisely the avoidance of engagement with those kinds of spaces or relations. And the implicit concept of persons most separatists were drawing upon in developing their politics in this area was also recognizable in Strathern's sketch, in that it did focus on the concepts of individual rights, and most especially rights to autonomy.

It is at the point that Strathern begins to draw out the strands of what she argues is happening in contemporary sexuality and gender in terms of political activism where some divergences begin to appear. In arguing that the Western concept of the person has become, in more recent decades, something that bears rights, and which demands these rights as something to be extracted from others, rather than being an entity that bears both rights and responsibilities, Strathern suggests that autonomous individuality had taken precedence over the obligations of social relations. In effect, interest groups had replaced social collective responsibility. Strathern makes this claim entirely clear: "My contention is that notions about humanity—what a 'person' is—has in the European tradition come to be closely bound up with the concept of rights; and this is a particular, not a universal, association. . . . It makes out of every category of persons an interest group. It has, I think, profoundly affected the way the woman question has been tackled" (Strathern 2016: 196).

In one sense, the idea of people as interest groups went to the heart of the disputes between different women's groups in London in the late 1980s. It seemed to many as if each interest group was liable to split into ever smaller groups, as people added ever more fine-tuned interests to their human condition (what some people referred to at the time as a "hierarchy of oppressions"). Moreover, questions were already beginning to arise about "essentialism," an epistemological questioning of the foundations upon which each of these interests might be based—questioning in which Strathern was also engaging in *Before and after gender*. Strathern also addressed such questions in *Gender of the gift*, which actually was published in the late 1980s and was being read by some of the women who participated in my research. So these interest groups were being actively formed, debated, and negotiated, and within a political environment in which the differences between people started to become toxic, acting like an acid on any collective activity.

From this material, it seems as though Strathern's comments toward the end of the book were prescient: "The new myth is that one can interact as individuals, communicate as human beings, without the mediation of society. . . . Maybe this is a good myth to have. Analytically it is a contradiction in terms. Interaction can only proceed within the framework of rules. Whether these rules are instinctive or learned, or combinations of these, they are a premise of collective life" (Strathern 2016: 289).

Yet that was not quite all that was going on. There was undoubtedly a desire for the kind of autonomy that Strathern describes; at the same time, there was also an active desire for something else, something that was much more deeply social and responsible. Most of the women I met were simultaneously struggling with the issue of how to be free of the ties that bind (the kinship, and particularly the sex and marriage, that radical feminists identified as being at the heart of what oppressed women), and yet simultaneously create something else, something that was socially deeply responsible, and that might stand in the place of the relations that tied women, as they saw it, into self-imposed oppression. This generated a paradox, or

tension, between autonomy and sociality (rather than autonomy and dependence) that seemed impossible to resolve at the time, located as it was in a world in which the “hierarchy of oppressions” was still raging, and when only one or two rainbow flags had begun to flutter in the breeze of a few isolated shops and pubs in central London.

This paradox was not a question about intersectionality or queer, words that did not yet exist in the late 1980s within feminist and LGB London; and it was being confronted at the same time as, and in parallel with, all the activities involving interest groups. By the late 1980s, most of the separatist women I met had experienced interest groups as being the location of raging disputes between women, and as the opposite of whatever “community” might mean to them. Interest groups might be where they went to woman the barricades, to grit their teeth, and fight the good fight; it was not where they went for a sense of belonging. The paradox that, many years ago, I referred to as a tension between autonomy and sociality (Green 1997: 21, 118–19), was about an attempt to square the circle between the desire for individual autonomy and a sense of responsibility toward a collectivity. It was a question about how social relations, ones that could satisfy a sense of moral responsibility toward a rather unclear social entity, might be restructured without the built-in (hetero-)patriarchy with which these women felt they had grown up, while still retaining the principle of absolute personal autonomy that they insisted upon, and that distinguished them quite strongly from the socialist feminists that they encountered occasionally in the women-only spaces that they shared.

The final chapter of Strathern’s *Before and after gender* seems to sum up this dilemma when she says that “there is an antithesis between our concepts of personal freedom and the requirements of social relationships” (2016: 274), having earlier noted that, “A sex relationship can also embody efforts to assert *individuality* against relationship, self-identity against commitment, independence against dependence” (270, emphasis in original). The paradox faced by separatists in London in the late 1980s appeared to be embedded within this approach. Yet perhaps this is only a partial connection, on two counts. First, Strathern was referring to heteronormative sexual relations, and so questions of self-identity might be somewhat different among lesbian feminist separatists who lived within the same conceptual paradigm but with different forms and understandings of sexual relations. And second, by the time my research with these women in London ended in 1990, both the perceived problem, and the question, was changing: queer was on the way, and that was creating a different kind of relation with the spaces in the city that lesbian feminist separatists and their detractors had inhabited. It was one in which “after gender” would take on a more literal meaning in the manner described by Strathern in *After nature* (Strathern 1992).

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