



RELATIONS

AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL ACCOUNT



*Marilyn
Strathern*



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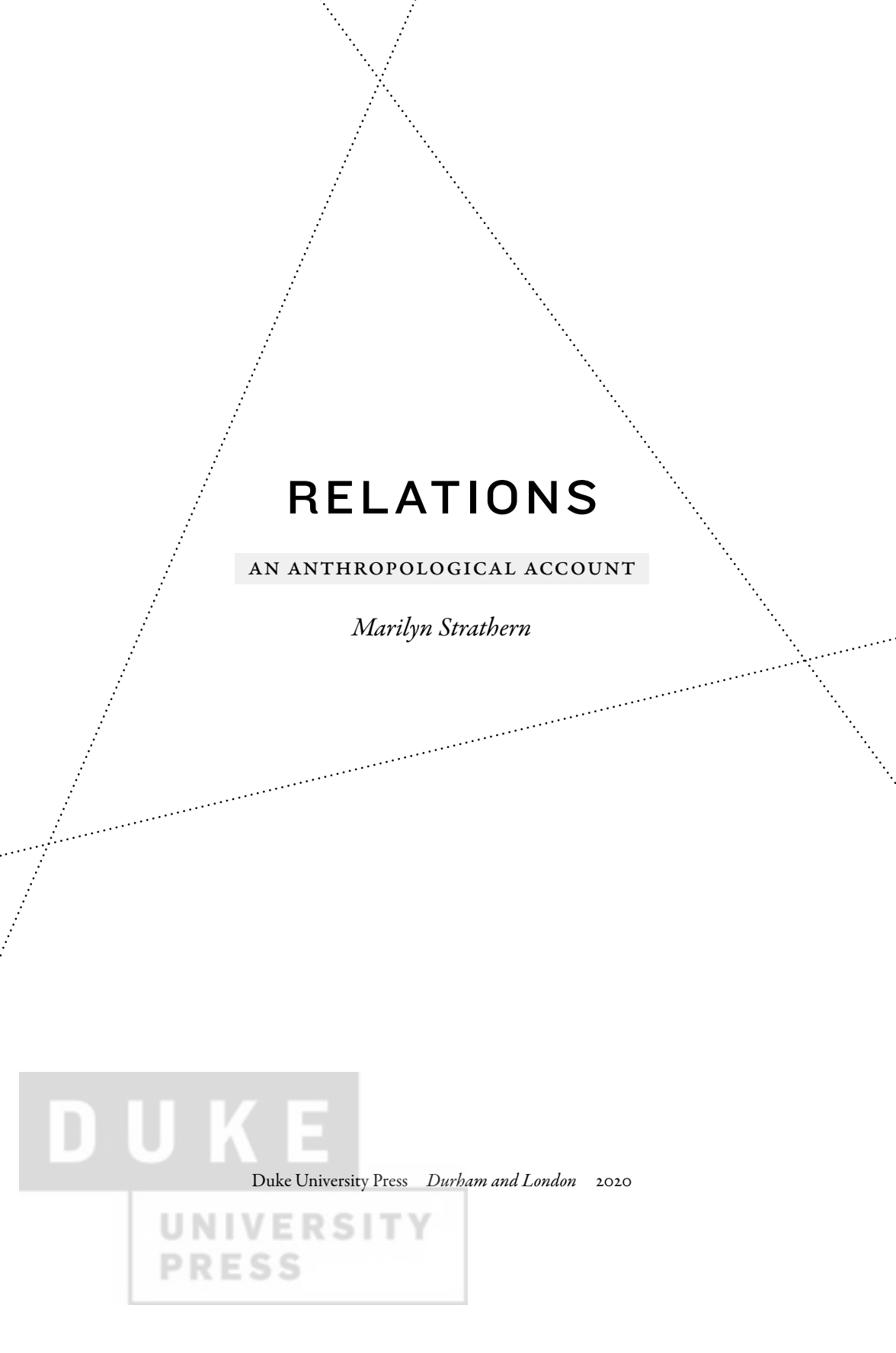
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Marilyn Strathern

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Preface

Many more relations inhabit this book than those on which I remark. Ruminating on how paradigms shift and turn, some ten years ago Navaro (Navaro-Yashin 2009) concluded that ethnography leads one to write against that grain, namely against the way old conceptual apparatuses are forever discarded in favor of new ones. Ethnography instead invites trans- or multiparadigmatic writing. For when a conceptual apparatus is under scrutiny, one's inclination is to assume that it is being scrutinized in order precisely to discard, displace, or bypass it. That is not the case with relations, nor with the arena of their attention in the present work, sociocultural anthropology of the English-speaking variety. In fact I would not mind if much of what follows is received as a report on a state of affairs; the concept of the relation might then have been "ethnographically" conceived. To bring this about, we might say that the work had to be written precisely against the grain of that expectation about paradigms.

There are indeed many more relations in this book than those remarked. Among the unremarked is the sense of proportion with which disciplines marshal their subject matter. In mind is the order and range of detail that the reader will encounter in diverse materials presented here. By itself, detail may seem "out of" proportion (too much, too little). Yet the order of proposition hazarded by anthropologists is — more or less — taken for granted. They know what is meant by a case study or a particular example, or by a characterization of a mode of thought or set of values. There is, more or less, and embracing multiple purposes, an overall intention in common. In twentieth-century terms, the intention was imagined as elucidating the social or cultural character of phenomena, an imagination that endures latterly in vigorous attempts to make

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such terms appear anachronistic. The approach axiomatically assumes that the character in question must be grasped relationally, that is, analysis will rest in unraveling the relations involved. Such an assumption molds anthropological exposition, and this is the heart of the book. It is about descriptive (subsuming analytical) practices. I do not abandon my long-standing agnosticism as to the feelings, states of mind, or thoughts of the people mentioned here, but perhaps I make more explicit than usual my fascination with forms of expression and modes of argumentation, and the symbolic resources on which they draw. *Images* of thought, as Viveiros de Castro reiterates of concepts. They make the worlds through which we speak, no less.

I refer at many junctures to specific times and places, as I do, for example, to twentieth-century English. At times it is to comment on what seems unusual or unique. Indeed, expository convention often takes this to be the point of specificity (a first occurrence, an exclusive characteristic). However, an ethnographer might also wish to be particular about a concatenation of circumstances, apropos some twentieth-century English usage, say, without claiming that it never happened before the twentieth century or applies only to the English. After all, a phenomenon may be of “cultural” salience without conferring distinctiveness. This is frequently the case in what follows. I hope it will be clear which emphasis is meant. In addition, the materials are often doing double work; although I rarely draw attention to the connections, within many of the diverse examples are observations that support or supplement suppositions made elsewhere in the account. As to diversity of time and place, what are drawn from all those historical and geographical circumstances do not amount to independent data ready for further illumination by an already-made proposition concerning the concept of relation. Rather, with that concept being the object of scrutiny, they are intended as frameworks or contexts as though they were doing the work of analysis. It is thus that the air pump in Joseph Wright’s eighteenth-century depiction of *An experiment on a bird in the air pump* (see the frontispiece) is, so to speak, the context for the bird’s agitation and its dramatic effect on those around it. The cause, the slow withdrawal of air, points to the mechanical device as though its various elements offered an analysis or diagnosis of those relations. A timekeeper registers its effects.

My father (Eric Evans) always thought the householder with his hand on the watch might have been Erasmus Darwin, his two sons also present, although identifying the figures in the painting is a continuing matter of dispute. In other publications I have acknowledged my mother’s inspiration; here, I acknowledge Eric’s. He was nineteen when he bought a secondhand and much-

annotated edition of Locke's *An essay concerning human understanding*, and at twenty-one he acquired a matching copy of *Essays, literary, moral, and political* by Hume, whose skepticism he so much admired. (That was about the age when Hume himself discovered those paradigm-changers, Descartes and Locke.) Eric might have been surprised that I have made so much of them since.

THIS BOOK BEGAN life as a collection of essays, in the main already published, and initially considered by Duke University Press as such. The essays' metamorphosis is due to the encouragement of the press; among other things, it has enabled me to correct some inaccuracies. With great warmth I thank Duke's commissioning editor, Gisela Fosado, who spurred me on, as well as Liz Smith and the editorial team. The cover design had an early beginning in Daniel Evans's conceptual work.

Since earlier versions of the chapters have thus appeared elsewhere, I must at the outset acknowledge these sources, while also making a general acknowledgment of those editors and convenors of collected works who, in all manner of ways, have been behind the present venture. The sources follow, in order of publication:

"Reading relations backwards" (Marett Memorial Lecture, Oxford).

2014. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (n.s.) 20 (1): 3–19.

"Anthropological reasoning: Some threads of thought." 2015. Ed.

S. Green. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4 (3): 23–37.

"Being one, being multiple: A future for anthropological relations."

2015. In G. Mohácsi and A. Morita, eds., "Acting with nonhuman entities," special issue, *NatureCulture* 0.3: 122–157 (online).

"Connections, friends and their relations: An issue in knowledge-

making." 2017. In P. Charbonnier, G. Salmon, and P. Skafish, eds., *Comparative metaphysics: Ontology after anthropology*, 61–83. London: Rowman and Littlefield.

"Naturalism and the invention of identity." 2017. Ed. C. Jensen and

A. Morita. *Social Analysis* 61 (2): 15–30.

"Afterword: Becoming enlightened about relations." 2018. In N. Rap-

port and H. Wardle, eds., *An anthropology of the Enlightenment: Moral social relations then and today*, ASA Monograph Series, 171–188. London: Bloomsbury.

"Opening up relations." 2018. In M. de la Cadena and M. Blaser, eds.,

A world of many worlds, 23–52. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

“Friendship and kinship: Comparatism and its theoretical possibilities in anthropology.” 2019. In R. Gagné, S. Goldhill, and G. E. R. Lloyd, eds., *Regimes of comparatism: Frameworks of comparison in history, religion and anthropology*, 418–446. Leiden: Brill.

The chapters also draw on an additional essay:

“Relations.” 2018. In F. Stein, S. Lazar, M. Candea, H. Diemberger, J. Robbins, A. Sanchez, and R. Stasch, eds., *The Cambridge encyclopedia of anthropology*. <http://doi.org/10.29164/18relations>.

The press’s readers, who I now know were Susan McKinnon and Alberto Corsín Jiménez—they generously read the manuscript in both its forms—could not have been more discriminating or more helpful; I am grateful beyond measure for the detail and illumination of their comments. Parts of the book have been read to its profit by Debbora Battaglia and Jeanette Edwards. The whole work was tackled with considerable thoughtfulness by Peter Skafish and, with his historian’s eye, Alan Strathern; I also benefited from their meticulous editorial scrutiny. I wish I could have taken greater advantage of all these readers’ insights into what I was trying to do.

My thanks must also include colleagues whose hands had an emphatic imprint on the original essays: Karen Barad, Mario Biagioli, Mario Blaser, Marisol de la Cadena, Manuela Carneiro da Cunha, Janet Carsten, Natalie Zemon Davies, Gillian Feeley-Harnik, Sarah Green, Donna Haraway, Casper Bruun Jensen, José Kelly, James Leach, Geoffrey Lloyd, Gergely Mohácsi, Atsuro Morita, Elizabeth Roberts, Anne Salmond, Jonathan Sheehan, Anna Tsing, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, and Kath Weston. And for many conversations and sharing of materials, I thank Olivier Allard, Françoise Barbira-Freedman, Barbara Bodenhorn, Louise Braddock, Philippe Descola, Susan Drucker-Brown, John Dunn, Debbie Epstein, Pat Fara, Don Gardner, John Hendry, Eric Hirsch, Martin Holbraad, Susan James, Jane Kenway, Bruno Latour, Ashley Lebner, Phyllis Mack, Jill Mann, Willard McCarty, Tom McLeish, Annemarie Mol, Morten Pedersen, Anthony Pickles, Anastasia Piliavsky, Alain Pottage, Paul Rabinow, Felix Ringel, Almut Schneider, Anthony Stavrianakis, Karen Sykes, Katherine Verdery, Aparecida Vilaça, and Robert Wilson, as I do several colleagues I first knew as doctoral students. They have all inhabited the writing, stretched the thinking, and generously participated—in agreement or otherwise—in this venture.

At the end of 2018, it is appropriate to recall Roy Wagner; as the volume took shape, he was a reader over my shoulder.

OTHER READERS WILL no doubt include those who find my painfully truncated deployment of a few conceptual markers to talk about “kinship,” as an anthropological topic, thin in the extreme, but then I would put myself here, too. Conversely, many may find much in this account of relations tautologous. Tautology is usually deliberate on my part, as in the dictionaries that moderns write, in order to emphasize the expository habit of describing something in terms of variants of itself. (For example, the notion that cultures can be compared; otherwise put, it is what can be compared in people’s ways of doing things that is called culture.) Then there is the happenstance that at the moment when Duke had accepted the essays but before they had become the present text, Matei Candea sent me the manuscript of *Anthropological comparison*. To adopt his own phrase, it means that much of this book has already happened, that my moves have already been described. Although I allude to his work, this is not a response as such; however, that manuscript did have an effect on the writing insofar as it nudged me to make the pervasiveness of “similarity” as a relational trope even more explicit than it had been. Finally, over recent years several notable colleagues have contributed, through collections and journal issues, to critical interpretations of my work, including some of those whose work I once “supervised” but whom I haven’t separately named. Engaging with them again would take reciprocity a step too far, but many are inspirational, and I cannot imagine they will not have breathed life into the present account. I express my thanks, indirectly, through a rehearsal of much that will already be familiar.

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Introductions

THE COMPULSION OF RELATIONS

Relations are ubiquitous in the accounts people give of their world, and no less in the observations or theories by which any kind of knowledge is made. Indeed, attempts to address the relation as a concept get quickly lost in the diffuseness of this highly abstract term. Seemingly, it has to be qualified to be useful, as when we speak of social relations or logical relations. Yet the term slips out of such restrictions in the kind of confident surmise, as frequently voiced, that there is something profound in pointing to a relational exercise or in uncovering relationality at the heart of people's concerns. To anyone interested in the way ideas are propagated, there is no point in wishing the ambiguities away. So while the subject of this book is all around, there might be something to be learned from bringing it, in part at least, into focus. The exercise might be particularly interesting to undertake for the kind of knowledge-making that does not simply seek out associations and dissociations across phenomena but imagines and describes them *as* relations, and indeed may use the epithet "relational" to claim a distinctive quality of analysis. This is especially true of the practices of (sociocultural) anthropology, and of what some would consider its principal means of existence.

"Now I see what anthropology is all about: it is about relations!" Lawrence Kalinoe's words spoken in Cambridge in 2000 rang with the clarity of a discovery. Only a short time into a joint research project with anthropologists and this lawyer from Port Moresby in Papua New Guinea had pretty effectively summed things up.¹ It was about then that the Melanesianist Gell asked what an anthropological approach to art might consist of, and he answered himself through a type of relation: if "anthropology has a specific subject-matter at all, that subject-matter is 'social relationships'" (1998: 4). However, this book is

not concerned with a particular part of the world, although investigations in Papua New Guinea remain inspirational and have informed many past occasions on which I have explicitly dealt with relations, as well as furnishing some materials for this one. Nonetheless there is a decided particularity to my inquiry. I turn to the use of “relation” as it is configured in the English language.

The emphasis of this phrase is on configuring and use. My concern in this work is with the relation as an expository device or tool and I refer to its ideational capacity for such work by the shorthand, concept. Any focus on the term “relation” — or “relations” — draws attention to the obvious: that a single term may cover a variety of concepts. But adopting the view that, in Skafish’s reprise (2014: 16), concepts “lead a virtual, self-consistent existence . . . [constituting] a space of their own in which it is their divergence and interconnections, not their degree of correspondence [with the world],” through which they provoke thought does invite one to think of the relation as a candidate. In any event, I treat it as though one could have just such a concept of it.

Usage is crucial to the present exercise. It is in paying attention to the way relation is used that we might come closest to something like an ethnographic account of it.² Any object that materialized in these terms would obviously be many-sided. Relation is at once one of anthropology’s central tools of inquiry and a prime target of anthropological knowledge, while at the same time its theoretical invention as a scaffolding device precipitates its discovery as something that seemingly slips out from under explicit theorizing. Relations (in the plural) organize the sequencing of arguments and marshaling of ideas, quite as much as they weave through whatever material is to hand, sneaking up on one, springing surprises. Simultaneously confined and unruly: dog-leads wrapping themselves around every foothold; unherdable cats going off in every direction. At some moments, then, relations appear the only thing one can hold on to; at others, countless usages and applications render them conceptually elusive. It seems pointless to imagine gathering such a multitude under a single rubric, if not plain silly to be lured by the fact that so many circumstances meet in the one word (relation). But all this, precisely, is not in question. The word is an attractor: a term that engages other terms, a concept in a field of concepts, an idea that draws in values and disseminates feelings, a substantive from which adjectives (relational) and abstractions (relationality) can be made exactly as though everyone knew what was meant.

The account that follows attempts to elucidate the force that this attractor exerts in any attempt at exposition. Its magnetism shows equally in endless, pluralist, proliferations of application or of meaning *and* in the infinite differ-

entiations, fractal or holistic, of versions of itself. This gives it the character of a duplex. Working with relations can turn out to be as trivial — because of their pervasiveness — as it is powerful — given their capacity to at once join and separate. Indeed, the relation can be a duplex in many registers.³ That need not detain us now, except to add that for the purposes of this book the principal register concerns a kind of discourse, that of description, and within description, exposition: exposition's relation, we might say. Unqualified, the anthropology that is my principal expositional case is Anglophone. The substantive focus, then, is on how relations behave — how they are used — when English, and particularly the anthropologist's English, is the language of exposition. Overlaps, elisions, elusiveness, like Latour's hybrids, are not to be tidied away. One needs, rather, to be precise about the work such slippages do. Anthropological writing as usual, it could be said.

Relations start taking on the contours of an object of reflection insofar as they are seen to have certain correlations or co-relations, that is, are themselves held in place by relations evidently particular and specifiable. A brief introduction is in order.

An Introduction to Relations

Supposing sociocultural anthropology is indeed concerned with the elucidation of relations, then what is “anthropological” about them?⁴ The relation has a definitive presence in anthropological work, including the positive tenor it generally carries, the privileged place it holds both in structures of argumentation and in what are understood as prime objects for study, and especially the way it is often introduced into discussion to signal a critical (in the sense of probing and questioning) move. Yet it is honored with no special, or specialist, definition. Indeed, Viveiros de Castro (2015: 16, emphasis omitted) observes that anthropology distinguishes itself (from other discourses on human sociality) “by maintaining only a vague initial idea of what a relation might be,” precisely because its distinctive problematic consists less in determining which social relations constitute its object than in asking what its object constitutes as a social relation. My introduction to relations lays out certain situations in which relations are evidently constituted, some but not all of which will reappear later. For the introduction also serves another purpose. It will be seen, from the scope of what is laid out here, that the following chapters lean in one direction: their focus is on the effects of a specific line of Anglophone thinking. That skewing needs to be kept in sight.

Being Anthropological about Relations

The kind of description at which anthropology excels is expository; exposition entails setting forth information in a way that might encompass interpretation, explanation, and other analytical moves, but all with the aim of elucidation. Anthropological notions of analysis and theory, and above all that special trademark, the comparative method, take for granted that this implies showing relations between phenomena. Thus one may demonstrate the extent to which religious precepts uphold or challenge values promulgated by the state or hypothesize correlations between new technologies and changing senses of the self. That taken-for-granted status is built into the way scholarly narratives are organized. Most of the time it is indistinguishable from the perception that relations inhere in the object of inquiry, and the observer is drawing them out. The commitment of twentieth-century anthropology to holistic concepts of “society” and “culture” presented the world with what were above all sets of relations. People’s actions, and their shared understandings, were to be described (analyzed, theorized) in the context of the diverse relations in which they were enmeshed. Anthropologists continue to show the logical or functional relations between entities they abstract, such as religion or the state, and create distinct fields of inquiry by showing the relational nexus of phenomena, such as gender understood as gender relations. They take it as self-evident that everywhere people, too, are drawn into relations with the things, beings, and entities that form their environment. Above all, the specific capacity of persons to relate to one another is taken as a fundamental truth of human existence. Social life is what goes on between them.

However, the Latin term *relatio*, from which “relation” came into English via Old French, did not connote that state of betweenness, and therein lies a tale—a veritable history about what gets to be articulated. Classically, *relatio* referred to what was carried back (to someone) as in a reply or report; indeed, it was a substantive for a motion (as in a proposal) or narration (creating a story). Medieval philosophers used *relatio* alongside *ad aliquid*, a concrete inclination “towards something,” a disposition, directionality, order (Brower 2015). They drew from Aristotle’s disquisition on categories: the idea that such an inclination was a property (or “accident”) inherent in one entity in the way it pointed toward another.⁵ Their reflections addressed common linguistic differences, as in the differentiation of absolute and relative terms, the latter arising from the comparison of things. An attendant concern about the way things bore on one another through, say, correspondence or disposition (“real relations”), with respect to the role of their own intellectual activity through, say, comparison (“re-

lations of reason”), continued to bother European thinkers into early modern times. As for an articulation of how entities — such as intervals — might lie between other entities, Brower argues that it was less a matter of conceptualization (it would seem that the vernacular had no problem with the idea) than a matter of how relations could be represented in a formal system.⁶ In any event, “relations between” was a relative latecomer to formal exposition. That this might have anything to do with the scientific revolution is a matter of speculation.⁷ But possibly an emerging sense of a world that rested on explaining discrete phenomena by reference to the forces, logics, or structures that held them together had found in relations a new concept, or bundle of concepts, in an old term.

This position was not uncontested. If this is a development traceable in English, there were early modern continental thinkers who took relations in a different direction. Descombes (2014) rehearses Gottfried Leibniz’s specific objections to the definition of relations proposed in 1690 by the English philosopher Locke.

Apropos the ideas that people form of relations, there were two parts to Locke’s proposition. His assertion that the nature of relation “consists in the referring, or comparing two things, one to another; from which comparison, one or both comes to be denominated,” rested on another, namely that there “can be no relation, but betwixt two things, considered as two things. There must always be in relation two ideas, or things, either in themselves really separate, or considered as distinct, and then a ground or occasion for their comparison” (1690: bk. 2, ch. 25, § 5 and 6 [Nidditch 1975: 321, hereafter 1690: 2, 25, § 5 and 6; 321]). The German thinker’s famous riposte suggests that everything participates in a turning toward another: “There is no term which is so absolute or so detached that it does not involve relations and is not such that a complete analysis of it would lead to other things and indeed to all other things. Consequently we can say that ‘relative terms’ *explicitly* indicate the relationship which they contain” (from Leibniz, written in 1704; Descombes [2014: 204] reproduces his emphasis).⁸ Caught up in a debate about the real and the unreal — or mental — status of phenomena as these thinkers were, Descombes spells out the implications of their arguments for two visions of social life: the empiricist view that social relations are exterior to individuals, and the idealist view that social relations are constitutive of individuals. The part of Locke’s thesis relevant here — the suggestion that, as a mental exercise of comparison, relations are external to phenomena — diverges from that of his German commentator, which denies that there is any wholly extrinsic denomination because of the “real,” in the above sense, connections among all things. One may start a

description with a thing as though other things were extrinsic, but “complete analysis” will always reveal its relations with its surrounding milieu.

Although a distinction between external and internal relations was to have a very mixed future in philosophy, it has sometimes been taken in anthropology to reflect a truth about the priority to be given to the already-existing and thus discrete nature of entities, not in essence affected by their relations, as against the view that it is only through relations that entities come into being. These tenets become visible, for instance, in the way anthropologists organize the frameworks of their accounts and thus decide what they think needs expounding. From the perspective of modern anthropology, both positions can stimulate a stance of criticality.

First, “some descriptions of a thing by its [external] relations with its surrounding milieu have a real scope, [in] that they allow us to know the reality of that thing” (Descombes 2014: 204–205). Putting things into context — seeing the larger picture, showing the implications, effects, and outfalls (such as unintended consequences) between actions, events, structures, assumptions, and so forth — was always the aim of the traditional ethnographic monograph. Thus the reality of Zande witchcraft was to be grasped through a relational nexus that included princely politics, how kin are connected, and the logic of cause and effect (Evans-Pritchard [1937] 1950).⁹ Here, too, lies the force of imagining merographic connections (M. Strathern 1992), a phrase that formalizes what is commonplace in English usage: the fact that nothing is simply part of a whole insofar as another view, another perspective, may redescribe it as part of something else. Religion and state (say) may be shown to relate to each other in this or that respect, while the analytical discreteness of each is retained by the fact that either may also be related to quite distinct segments of social life, as when mystical belief (or population statistics) is regarded as part of the one and not the other. Second, assuming relations are already everywhere furnishes anthropological discourse with a vocabulary by which to challenge the kinds of essentialist categorizations that imply the discreteness of phenomena. Lucien Lévy-Bruhl’s concept of participation has drawn Sahlins’s (2013: 33–34) attention: we take it for granted “that beings are given beforehand and afterwards participate in this or that relation; whereas, for Lévy-Bruhl, participations are already necessary for beings to be given and exist.”¹⁰ The political philosopher Ollman ([1971] 1976: 26) suggests that Karl Marx entertained a theory of “internal relations”: things function because of their spatiotemporal ties with other things, and to conceive of things as relations interiorizes this interdependence.¹¹

Descombes summarizes his own view of the problematizations here by ob-

serving that a theory of internal relations is untenable if it is presented as pertaining “between” individual entities: internal relations can link only relative beings as the parts of a whole.¹² It goes without saying that sensitivity to these conceptual usages underlines the interest anthropologists have shown, though all too rarely, in other vernacular counterparts to relations (notably, Corsín Jiménez and Willerslev 2007).

Conceptual Fields

Relations occupy conceptual fields along with other nouns, such as “terms” or “connections,” whether applied to the apprehension of already identifiable phenomena being brought into (external) relations with one another or to phenomena (internally) constituted by relations. A relation-between imagined as composed of terms and relations—the relation only works with reference to something other, the “terms” it links—can be differentiated twice over. Thus, within the term, the conception of an entity’s self-referential “identity” becomes modified when that entity is thought of “in respect to” another. This happens in the course of ethnographic application (for instance whether the magic one is thinking about refers to witchcraft or to oracles, all three substantives being summoned in the title of Evans-Pritchard’s monograph). Within the relation, there may be reason to distinguish relation from relationship, or relation from connection, as we shall see in a moment.

These maneuvers, including imagining alternatives to the terms-plus-relation model, with its idiom of relations-between, have been deployed with critical intent. Recently translated works of Descola ([2005] 2013) and Viveiros de Castro ([2009] 2014) are exemplary here. Considering identification and relationship as fundamental axes of individual and collective behavior, Descola develops an intriguing theoretical possibility latent in the interplay between terms and relations: the very manner in which specific cosmologies privilege the one over the other. He thus offers a wide-ranging, “combinatory analysis of the modes of relations between existing entities” ([2005] 2013: xviii), which is how he explicitly introduces his emphasis on external relations among beings or things; his criticism of earlier models remains largely implicit. On the other hand, Viveiros de Castro deliberately writes against a formula that depends exclusively on “a connection or conjunction of terms.”¹³ Adopting Gilles Deleuze’s vocabulary, he states ([2009] 2014: 170) “that the future of the master concept of anthropology—relation—depends on how much attention the discipline will end up lending to the concepts of difference and multiplicity, becoming and disjunctive synthesis.” These alternative coordinates for

thinking about relations explicitly challenge the presumption that the primary values to which relations lead are those of positive association, let alone binding ties or attachments.

They also challenge any seeming singularity of the concept. In an example to which we later return, relations are differentiated from “relationships.” Moutu (2013) wishes to get away from an obsession with epistemological understandings of relations, insofar as, in the case of persons, they occlude the ontological character of relationships. A writer’s relational practices (such as connection, association, resemblance, comparison) do not touch on the necessity and transcendence that, in his words, give relationships the character of an infinite being.¹⁴ Thus there is nothing contingent, and everything necessary, about the way the Melanesian Iatmul pair older and younger brother together; insofar as each is also the other in another form, it is their *relationship* that (in his terms) transcends both the externality of their relating and their identification as similar beings. Such relating never ceases; this is partly because of its processual nature, which in some senses anticipates an observation from Pina-Cabral (below).

In other hands, it may seem equally crucial to split relation from “connection.” (Here, differentiating epistemic relations from interpersonal relationships drops from view.) Although, following eighteenth-century English usage, anthropologists (author included, and in this book) often use “connection” as a synonym for “relation,” the distinction yields further critical purchase.¹⁵ Feldman (2011) argues for a difference between relations and connections as methodological constructs in the study of global processes. Unconnected actors (not in direct communication with one another) may nonetheless be related though “indirect social relations,” mediated through some “variety of abstract mechanism,” such as the surveillance systems, detention centers, and statistical operations that track a migrant’s path (390). In other words, relations have an effect on — and pose problems for — actors far beyond the scope of their connections. Imagining an extraterrestrial perspective on the world, one invoking the potential of cross-world communication, invites inquiry into a different discrimination between connection and relation. Pondering instead how people can mistake connection for relation, Battaglia (2005: 26) contrasts relations with the envisioning of information networks so dense that they cover for the “work of relationality,” singular acts of connection being fantasized as instances of social exchange. In her rendering, social relations and the work they entail are prematurely (like cart before horse) attributed to contact or encounter.

This phrase “social relations” is found frequently in twentieth-century British social anthropology. Sometimes it is used to distinguish relations of

sociability (the tenor of interactions, transactions, obligations between persons) from relations of an institutional or systemic kind (economic, political, gender relations, as when Douglas [1970: xxv] talks of “relating” witchcraft beliefs to dominant aspects of social structure). On other occasions it summons the totality of social life, whether it is encompassed by the concept of society or, shorn of certain connotations of society, rendered as sociality. Such relations may be imagined in the first place as relations between persons, human implied. A seminal text is Radcliffe-Brown’s 1940 address on social structure.

Radcliffe-Brown ([1940] 1952: 188–204) famously defined social structure as a network of actually existing relations. Thus he was at pains to differentiate a nonsocial entity, such as the “individual,” from the entity that was (analytically speaking) a node in this network, the “person.” In his vocabulary every human being was both: at once a “biological organism” and “a complex of social relationships.” The person was a unit of social structure. A structural point of view, he said, requires studying how social phenomena such as religion or government have direct and indirect relations to social structure, here understood as “relations between persons and groups of persons.” Pointing to kinship, an area anthropologists most readily cite as exemplifying internal relations, Radcliffe-Brown asserted that kinship structures consist of numbers of dyadic relations “as between a father and son, or a mother’s brother and his sister’s son.”¹⁶ These were the building blocks of society. His emphasis on the dyad, through which he focused on an interplay between two genealogical positions, puzzled later anthropologists for its privileging of genealogical thinking. Apropos kinship dyads, Bateson ([1936] 1958) had already introduced temporality in demonstrating the capacity of the dyad to substitute its junior for its senior entity, in ritual and across linear time. And Wagner (1977) would point to specific instances of analogic reckoning in which relational units might iterate other like units in different contexts without requiring an ego at their core.¹⁷ Perhaps Radcliffe-Brown’s intervention can be seen as clarifying a construction of persons as the terms to a relation.

Viewing social relations as the building blocks of society offered a critical purchase against what in retrospect seemed the random reporting of diverse customs, as exemplified in early twentieth-century accounts. Particular practices could be put into wider contexts, such contexts invariably consisting of the way relations were organized, a procedure that had long accompanied the analysis of kin terminologies. In mid-twentieth-century anthropology, this assumption about organization (“structure”) fed the ability to correlate numerous dimensions of social life. Goody (1962) offered an extended example from West Africa with respect to descent group formation, inheritance, and funeral

practices. West African mortuary institutions were concerned with the reallocation of rights and duties, after death, precisely insofar as a social person was defined through the mutual expectations that constituted his or her relationships.

Finding correlations between institutions within a society was accompanied by cross-cultural comparison between societies. Under the rubric of the latter, it was possible to compare institutions such as matriliney or witchcraft in terms of their local social configurations. Here, the notion of “relations between” at once facilitated the comparison of discrete phenomena, invariably along the axes of their similarities and dissimilarities, and produced as objects of study, “societies” and “cultures” in this mold, subsequently to be criticized in turn for the very presumption of discreteness. Comparison across discrete contexts — disjunctive comparison (Lazar 2012; see Gingrich and Fox 2002) — emerged as a later anthropological strategy. In any event, comparisons were leveraged against apparently arbitrary evaluations of what was or was not significant as an object of study.¹⁸ (Any comparative move creates the potential of a critical outcome, insofar as bringing social or cultural phenomena into conjunction with one another shifts the observer’s perspective.) As we heard, comparison was elemental in Locke’s definition of a relation; for the medieval philosophers *comparatio* had apparently been more or less synonymous with *relatio*.

Needless to say, a reformulation of relations came to Lévi-Strauss’s ([1945] 1963) assistance in his notable quarrel with Radcliffe-Brown, beginning in 1945. Take, for example, the visualization of descent groups. What to Radcliffe-Brownians may have appeared the interdependence of genealogically discrete kin groups upon one another, through marriage alliance and other relations, from a Lévi-Straussian perspective would have appeared like a description of external relations (not his term). Lévi-Strauss’s own folding of affinity within the fundamental atom of kinship was instead a way of showing how such alliances were also presupposed (internally) by the total organization of relations. “Analysis can never consider the terms only but must, beyond the terms, apprehend their interrelations” (Lévi-Strauss [1973] 1978: 83). The whole is given before the parts, so one must begin with the whole, that is, with the relations among the parts.¹⁹

It is entirely possible to insist on linkages and the associational quality of the lives of collectives without explicit attention to the concept of relations; thus Latourian (2005) networks can intensify what is “social” at the expense of the “relational.”²⁰ Indeed the ethnographic record affords numerous idioms for imagining the entailments or enrollments of all kinds of entities in one another’s circumstances. Of course, the observer may gather these up as species of

relations, regardless of whether a vernacular counterpart exists, just as anthropologists use the terms “culture” or “system” to describe social configurations that actors conceive otherwise or do not conceive at all. It then becomes a theoretical choice, if not a spectrum of possible combinations, to decide whether relations are articulated in all but name or are being articulated through the anthropologist’s discerning apparatus. For where anthropologists do take it as a master concept — as in those English contexts where the invocation of relations is an invocation of the facility to “bring together” entities of any order — demonstrating relations is seen as probing beyond what is immediately accessible to observation. To reveal the relational dimension of this or that can also be empirical criticism of those cosmologies that cannot comprehend or else devalue the way phenomena entail one another.

Some Evaluations

It is no surprise that scholars in general, whose business is the narrational art of relating, deliberately pursue epistemological (or logical) relations; for anthropologists who are also ethnographers, this can appear consonant with a value placed on social relations in particular, echoed in their engagement with persons as interlocutors. A disciplinary disposition to uncover the significance of relations is thereby broader than the controversial use of cross-cultural ethnography to point up the identitarian bias built into the (Anglophone) anthropologist’s native language. Emphasized by some present-day anthropologists more than others, exposing relationality is frequently understood as confronting assumptions about the intrinsic nature or self-identity of things. Controversy ensues when showing up such a bias is criticized in turn for the implication, from a “Western” perspective, that relations — including social relations — flourish in other, invariably “non-Western,” places more heartily than at home.

When anthropologists talk about relations, it is persons who most often come first to mind, that is, beings inevitably enmeshed in a relational world, although these days persons may be other than human. This holds irrespective of whether, in any specific social configuration, people take relations as already there or else as endlessly needing to be created, repaired, or disavowed. In whatever manner people assume they are parts of the lives of others, they also put in relational work to uphold, deny, or reconfigure their relations with one another. It is this transformative, or transcendental, nature of interpersonal relations that leads Pina-Cabral (2017: 175–176), in his general address on the topic, to suggest that interpersonal relations are a bad analogy for the more general condition of being-in-relation. Rather, the former offer a special case to the extent that they are inevitably constituted through interaction and recog-

nition, by contrast with relations that cannot grow in this way (his examples are sun and moon, fork and dish). With a faint echo of arguments in medieval philosophy about relations of reason and real relations, Pina-Cabral's criticism offers a perspective on vernacular usage.

In English, "relation" and its pair "relative" are also colloquial terms for kin. Idiomatically, this supports a tendency of relation to connote connection and attachment before it also embraces disconnection or detachment, just as familial ties are normatively imbued with positive rather than negative affect.²¹ A cultural commentator might wonder about the extent to which such values bear on anthropological work practices, notably in the positive sense of accomplishment with which relations can be demonstrated; to accumulate relations—as in putting entities and beings of all kinds into contexts—is interpreted as an incremental activity. The commentator might also underscore the tendency of the English phrase "kin relations," so prevalent in anthropological discourse, to elide the analytical conceptualization of relations with the reciprocals or reflexivity implied in interaction between kinspersons. Inevitably, different argumentative positions emphasize relations as lying between kinsfolk as discrete persons, or as pointing to their mutual self-definition, or as some mix of the two. However, rather than regretting the apparent discord, or wishing to tidy it away, I suggest that such theoretical heterogeneity may strengthen rather than weaken the force of the concept. Any of these positions can be a source of critical thinking.

One argument for holding on to anthropologists' strong vocabulary of relations is that it joins the few languages we have, from the life sciences and elsewhere, for bringing home the lamentable blindness that has led to the present ecological mess. I refer to the limitations of what we are prepared to connect or countenance as relevant in the chains of being that link us all, as well as to the assumption that in an (ecological) context relations invariably signify interdependence. Yet that does not mean we can rest with present formulations of relating. Appeals to relations may reinforce rather than dispatch the underlying presumption of similarity between terms, as in terms to a relation. This may be highly relevant to activist dimensions of politics, whether remedial or revolutionary. For relations so conceived fail to challenge a prevailing orthodoxy in political action, namely the requirement that it proceed through demonstrating similarity or convergence of purpose ("common grounds," "joint interests") when parties reach decisions together. So conceived, this requirement cannot deal with those social expectations, to which of all disciplines anthropology has specialist access, namely those based on the collective work of difference and division (as we shall have occasion to note). "The relation," Haraway (2003:

24) observes, “is the smallest unit of analysis, and the relation is about significant otherness at every scale.” Her conception of what heterogeneous relating entails is political in tenor.

A remark attributed to Bateson is that one cannot not relate.²² Recent critical writing challenges how relationality, in a social or interpersonal sense, appears to suffuse anthropological accounts. Two examples serve.²³ Candea and colleagues (2015a) take up the positive affect attributed to relations as inevitably implying the desirability of close ties between people or mutuality of engagement. The work seeks to reevaluate detachment and disconnection in social life, analyzing strategies of separation and distancing—relations from another point of view—for their political and ethical interest. In a different vein, Holbraad and Pedersen (2017: ch. 6) ask what comes after the relation. They suggest that by intensifying it beyond recognition the anthropologist can develop examples of apparently “non-relational” ethnographic moments to sketch what a “post-relational” shift might look like. In the course of this, they uncover a renewed vernacular or indigenous (in their examples, Christian) interest in the individual, a connection-cutting entity, one that holds out the analytical potential of modifying the concept of relation itself. In becoming applicable to an introspective self-relation, it is no longer “owned by” social relations but is turned into something it was not before. A thread that continues to run through these usages is the overtly critical edge that being explicit about relations brings to debate.

A Critical Enterprise?

The accessibility of information, these days on hand from every side with such largesse, runs in hand with new forms of social accessibility—they are called social media, after all. An immediacy in people’s interactions with one another is the virtue and allure of these instruments. Yet there is a long-standing position in social science, not least in anthropology, that appeals to the very opposite of immediacy. For all that it sounds similar, the notion of social mediation raises questions about the (social) relations entailed in particular events, and in turn about the role of (social) relations in anthropology’s development of its critical capacity.

I speak of criticism both with respect to the scholarly exercise of scrutiny, including self-scrutiny and what is often called critique, and with respect to how such exercises may inform and be informed by political ends, even where such ends are not their primary goal. This is not to enter into debate over the politics of criticism (e.g., Bessire and Bond 2014). Rather, when we come to an appraisal at the end of the book, I shall suggest that the division Hage (2015: 84)

would propose for (radical) political thought, between an “anti”-politics as a desire to oppose what exists and an “alter”-politics as a desire to create alternatives, may be folded into the primarily intellectual exercise of critical thought (albeit suspending his notion of what being radical entails). Exposition may go down anti or alter paths. This will underline with reference to anthropology what he shows of the social sciences as a whole, namely (and see Holbraad and Pedersen 2017: 288) that there is more than one critical mode. Other pluralities are already familiar. Consider how relations may appear either as a property of the regime being investigated or as a modeling that presupposes the relations at issue, which renders them attributes of the model. The outcome is an oscillation familiar in expository practice, and accommodations between viewpoints of this kind propelled much of twentieth-century comparative anthropology. Distinct positions turned out to be porous to one another: cultural particularities prone to echoing anthropologists’ assumptions and their models prone to absorbing diverse cultural insights. At the same time, the oscillation underwrote a capacity for social criticism insofar as it made visible the mediating effects of specification or description itself, as through ethnographic example. This is the point at which (anthropological) practitioners become aware of their interpretive interventions.

If only by how it is known, nothing registered in thought or action is immediate in the sense of unmediated. The conditions of knowledge proliferate infinitely, and the portions anthropology examines never offer any claim to comprehensiveness. Yet it would be a pity if the self-evident nature of mediation renders it less than interesting. The discipline’s capacity for social criticism is bound up with making known the mediating effects of the relations, thus identified, through which people live their lives. This is in no small part a matter of exposition. Anthropologists use varying epithets for relations to demarcate theoretical interests (politico-economic, ethnic, aesthetic, ecological, material) or analytic ones (moral, interpersonal, hierarchical, inclusive, cognitive). The term “relation” can qualify other terms or be implied in their joining, such as “property relation,” “gender relations,” or (relations between) nature and nurture. And then there are the relational connotations of method and practice, such as interpretation or comparison. Specifying the relation in question has expositional consequences.

Recognizing the work of mediation is as trivial and as powerful as describing relations. I return to Feldman (2011: 379), who would define (social) relations as themselves mediated by third parties or intervening agents of all kinds, by contrast with the “direct, immediate contact between people” he discerns in connections, a distinction that works forcefully for his material but depends

on a specific reading of immediacy. Immediacy, argues Gershon (2010: 98–100, in a critique of Bolter and Grusin [1999]), has been claimed as one of the poles of a range along which communicational media are evaluated, the other being hypermediation. The first pole might have an explicit and often positive value, even though, as soon as someone deliberates upon which medium — texting or instant messaging, say — is best for a particular action, the visibility of the (transformative) mediator is already apparent. Her own observation is that people attend to different media depending on the context of their interactions. So it is the evaluation that needs scrutiny, the primacy put on enjoying or refusing an access that appears unmediated. This aspect of social media ideology is seemingly of a piece with that of zero-contract hours as a kind of unimpeded access to labor, instantly summonable convenience services and politicians' ability to tweet "the people," no less than with that of a scholar's illusion that description bypasses analysis or theory. To ask what relations have to be in place to mobilize the value put on such access turns relations into a tool of criticism.

Openness is part of their working potential. In his conceptualization of assemblages, Rabinow (2003, 2011) points to this openness with respect to a world already taken as given.²⁴ Assemblages, identifiable in problematizations of the forms and values of individual and collective existence (see Collier and Ong 2005: 4; Laidlaw 2014: 118), are made evident through new combinations of entities. Thus synthetic biology generates assemblages of organic entities as they are brought into the world. Things happen that did not happen before. "While [an entity's] properties are given and may be denumerable as a closed list, its capacities are not given . . . since there is no way to tell in advance in what way a given entity may affect or be affected by innumerable other entities" (DeLanda 2006: 10, quoted by Rabinow [2011: 123]). In Rabinow's (2011: 123) words: "Assemblages are composed of preexisting things that, when brought into relations with other preexisting things, open up different capacities not inherent in the original things but only come into existence in the relations established in the assemblage. . . . Thus an assemblage brings together entities in the world into a proximity in which they establish relations among and between themselves while remaining external to each other and thereby retain their original properties to a degree." Entities expose features previously unknown, then, as functions of relations with others, so that these features can never be exclusively properties of the entities themselves; relations open up the capacities of properties in unexpected ways and capacities come into existence through new relations.

Needless to say, the mediating effects of relations are supported by everyday expectations of modern scholarly (and academic) discourse: judging evi-

dence, asking questions, uncovering assumptions, in short, creating problems. Problematizing issues expands the course of inquiry; it also widens what is demanded of expository skill. For identifying a problem brings up potentially countless remediations, opening the subject up to the relations that hold it in place and inevitably substituting new relations thereby.²⁵ It often takes the form of delegation from the study to the issue in hand (Salmon 2017). The challenge of relations is precisely how to turn a means of study into an object of study, in other words, how to also provide for them a critical account.

An Introduction to the Book

The reader might have expected something like this stance from an Anglophone anthropologist. Several of the strands encountered here will subsequently recur in the following pages, if only because of the characteristic versatility of relations and the manner in which they infuse and invigorate almost anything English speakers might wish to describe. To reiterate the observation in the preface, there may or may not be anything particularly “English” about such usage, while they are equally a particularity *of* English usage. To keep true to how such usages capture writer and reader alike, it is necessary to at once emphasize diverse inflections and indicate their inevitable presence as a condition of possibility for exposition itself. The compulsion of expository relations joins with habitual assumptions about the connected or interfolded nature of existence.

The reality of relations is, in these several senses, never in doubt. At the end of the book I intend to recapture such a sense of reality by focusing on a thread running through anthropological exposition, namely, the critical potential that lies in making relations explicit. The six intervening chapters, however, also have aspirations of their own.

These can be expressed in terms now generally recognizable in anthropology (Riles 2006): by what means may relations be made into an ethnographic object? This is the point of being interested not in how the concept of relation should be defined but in how it is deployed. Accordingly, various references to anthropological works do not just carry this or that argument forward but also afford exemplars of particular usages. Since an exposition must engage substantive materials of some kind, I set up two narratives, both principal concerns of the discipline, although hardly exclusive to it. As I shortly explain, one narrative expounds changing notions of kinship, the other the lively art of comparison, and each has its own denouement. Finally the work as a whole could be read from a standpoint neither within nor outside anthropology, although it is

prompted by an argument from elsewhere. This must be expounded first, as it is not part of the central narrative.

Intervention

In her elucidation of Niels Bohr's revolutionary descriptions of the nature of matter and light, Barad offers a formula for comprehending reports of phenomena: "Apparatuses do not simply detect differences that are already in place; rather they contribute to the production and reconfiguring of difference" (2007: 232). It follows that phenomena are not in this sense mediated through the instruments of observation; rather, they have no separate existence.²⁶ Bohr's experiments showed this: whether atomic entities such as electrons behaved as — appeared as — particles (a matter of position) or as waves (a matter of momentum) depended on the apparatus that was being used. Physicists had been preoccupied with the particle-wave duo. Like the oft-quoted riposte made by New Caledonians to the idea that Christianity had brought them the spirit ("We already knew the spirit existed. . . . What you've brought us is the body" [Leenhardt (1947) 1979: 164]), with his attention to apparatus Bohr seems to have brought them the body.

Under her flagship concept of "agential realism," Barad takes this forward to rework the very notion of phenomenon. "I suggest that Bohr's notion of a phenomenon be understood ontologically. In particular, I take the primary ontological unit to be phenomena, rather than independent objects with inherent boundaries and properties. In my agential realist elaboration, phenomena do not merely mark the epistemological inseparability of 'observer' and 'observed'; rather, phenomena are the ontological inseparability of intra-acting agencies" (Barad 2007: 333, emphasis omitted). Ontological entanglements, as she calls them, are primitive relations without preexisting relata. It is through intra-action that the boundaries and properties of phenomena become determinate and particular articulations of the world become meaningful. So "apparatuses are specific material configurations . . . of the world that play a role in the production of phenomena, . . . [apparatuses being] discursive practices . . . that are the material conditions for making meaning" (2007: 335). Material-discursive practices, causal intra-actions, do not imply human-based notions; indeed, she proposes these phrases in order to leave behind the notion of "concept" as too linguistic and not material enough in its connotations.

But I have work for the concept. I retain the notion precisely for its place as a device through which people organize their thoughts and give accounts of a world populated by other thinkers and speakers. Indeed, it is illuminating to envisage *the concept* as a piece of apparatus. Let me elaborate. Barad (2007:

340 ff.) explicitly distances her position from that of traditional epistemology entailing a conscious, knowing subject and its constructs (a figure prominent in the narrative of modernity that follows), and I do not retain the notion of concept to gainsay this. Indeed I would keep in mind her argument that, insofar as people are part of the world's ongoing (re)configurations, knowing must be treated as a part of being.²⁷ Prompted by but not in correlation with her model, I hazard that making an ethnographic object conjures up an anthropological entity to which something like her notion of phenomenon applies.²⁸ Thus the object will appear only in the presence of a specifying apparatus implying located intra-actions, as an "analytical context," to be introduced in a moment, might be. The notions produced through Barad's own conceptualizations gesture toward the special interest of relation with respect to *its* conceptualization. We might say it is at once a phenomenon produced by an apparatus (the concept), and works itself as a second-order apparatus, its own specifications producing phenomena of a particular kind (ideas linked in a narrative, for example); as the latter, it is as specific as Bohr's machine. Where she positions Bohr's innovations as the precursor for a social and philosophical analysis that can be amplified decades later, relations, as at once phenomenon and apparatus, have had a centuries-long history; they also bring forth a unique challenge to organizing an argument about them.

Outline

To organize an account of a concept—and an expository concept at that—as an ethnographic concern, it may be helpful to reverse certain customary orderings. This is said less to advertise a change in mode of writing than to invite the reader to take the substantive narratives that weave their way through the book in a special way. While composed of materials drawn from numerous situations in place and time, these are not being put into the position of an ethnographic base. Rather, their position is akin to an analytical framework: it is these very materials that specify the kind of relation at issue in this or that circumstance.

Those areas of the anthropological enterprise that practitioners call ethnographic are often staged to bring to the imagination assumptions and actions, including word usages, as though analysis were an outcome of them rather than also being a precursor. Yet it is widely appreciated that analytical frameworks (method and theorizing implied) invariably contextualize what gets reported in the first place—we can call them analytical contexts. So I am proposing to start at this end, and turn inside-out the usual relationship between concrete reports of social life and an otherwise abstract concept itself frequently presented as an analytic. Finding it in any event impossible to contemplate a single

analytical field in which the relation's coordinates might be computed, even within the narrow range of anthropological usage, of which in turn I bite off the smallest slice, I instead focus on some of the relation's multiple happenings (and becomings) as they appear in this or that particular situation, text, or utterance. It is these latter that will govern or control the relation's appearance "analytically." Hopefully the relation will then emerge "ethnographically."

It would be impossible to gather the material at the same time: those situations, texts, and utterances need to be already described. I have taken material directly from a set of (my own) recent essays to yield a range of (albeit idiosyncratic) analytical contexts. In one regard, however, I have drawn on my previous depiction of anthropology's relation (M. Strathern 2005) as itself an analytic, and that shows in the duo of topics running as narratives through the six chapters. Kinship and comparison are iconic instances of the combined interpersonal and epistemic dimensions of anthropology's relation.

The first chapter, starting with relations at their most intractable, at once diffuse and highly abstract, turns to a habitual mode of concretization through the evocation of kin relations. It explores the descriptive deployment of "relations" or "relatives" as terms for kin, and the literalness with which the English language, by contrast with most of its European counterparts, has tied the notions together. The texts of certain early modern writers hint at particular conditions under which the very vacuousness of the implied concept might have acquired something of a social value. At the same time as old concepts of relation were being reinvented (extended, re-formed) for new circumstances, another concept was being refashioned: identity. Certain conceptualizations of personal identity and of reproductive substance appeared to implicate each other, expository language entwining the two, for instance, in the identity of lineal succession and the lineality of enduring identity.

In modern parlance, comparison becomes a specific kind of relation, rather than an alternative generic to relations as certain medieval philosophers may have used it. It presumes similarities and differences between phenomena whose own identity is prior to, in the sense of independent of, their being compared. Long embedded in the English language, the term "comparison" seems to have retained these contours, especially the emphasis on similitude or likeness. Chapter 2 follows some of the journeyings of this particular relation with respect, first, to certain vernacular usages as they apply to persons (such as comparisons between friends and kin) and the propositional recognition implied, and, second, to how the art of comparison has contributed to the self-consciousness with which anthropologists set about their work.

These two chapters compose the first part of the book. Connotations of

relation (or relations) are thus historicized and culturalized, but at this point their organizing role in exposition is taken for granted. Part II emphasizes the work that the concept does when conscious appeal is made to it. Relations start bending and buckling under the expositional labor, the author making it obvious that — as well as reporting on others' usages — she, too, is putting relations to work. These chapters traverse similar grounds to those in part I, adding to a substantive narrative about knowledge-making and kin-making. Chapter 3 develops the self-consciousness or explicitness with which interpersonal connections are pursued. Its concerns include the interventionist nature of description and how that is then turned on relations, as in disputes over the apparently elemental definition (of relations) as a matter of comparing two things to one another. With an attempt from critical theory to summon a minimal account, minimalism being seemingly inferred from its counter-pole of expansion, it becomes obvious that any description of relations implies an intervention insofar as their further (expansive) specification is entailed.

The discussion of comparison dwelled on the notional duo, similarity and difference, at the heart of vernacular English understandings of relations. Chapter 4 redescribes these concepts through a selection of materials that invites the reader to reflect on the connotation of similarity in English, mindful of the way it slips into ideas of connection or correspondence, and through negation their opposites. Dissimilarity is thus the absence of similarity. Where it applies, the duo redescribed as similarity and dissimilarity releases the term “difference” for other usages. Perhaps most evident in this chapter, I am authorially positioning diverse materials as a kind of analytical frame, and the subsequent contextualization of the relations at issue is reflected in my own (expositional) usages.

Part III gives freer rein to certain inferences that suggest themselves, relations at this point including highly speculative ones. The reflective tenor of part II is thus followed by a mood closer to dramatization. This highlights certain expository moments in the formation of modern sociality. The crux is that, by contrast with many other cosmological regimes, the diminished status of kinship relations in naturalist cosmology (after Descola) remains perplexing. Chapter 5 dramatizes a philosophical contribution to the occlusion of such relations. The principal *dramatis personae* are Locke and Hume, and the plot is simple. Imagine a moment when a specific something did not happen: one might be able to record its aftereffects. And one can be pretty certain that the event in question did not start with Locke or end with Hume; it had been and went on not-happening. Suitably theatrical characters in respect of the popularity of their works, I have them play out on a small stage a specific failure of comparison; what was no doubt thoroughly conventional to philosophical dis-

putation nonetheless closed certain directions down. The failure is underlined by a third figure, the botanist-painter Merian, with a seemingly alternative stance. The chapter has already rehearsed some of the issues of identity raised earlier, and she is a reminder that there was never only one view, that we can obviously recover quite divergent echoes from the past, and that the occlusion of kinship went hand-in-hand with the occlusion of women in certain kinds of publics. On the last observation, the recovery work that has been done over recent years, and in diverse disciplines (for which the historian Davis must stand as exemplar), is a reaction not least to women's invisibility apropos so many of the semipublic associations that encouraged scientific endeavor.

Drama continues in chapter 6, this time in terms of an inference drawn from some of the substantive materials on interpersonal relations. By now it is hoped that (the concept of) "interpersonal relations" will be carrying particular weight. The inference offers a response to Euro-American imaginings about the foreshortening of kin relations, both as social focus and theoretical object. In some respects counterintuitive (hence the need for drama), the response is a sober-enough suggestion about the conceptual limits of the phenomenon anthropological convention puts under the rubric of kinship. This play within a play engages with the role of such materials in understanding the relation, ethnographically speaking. It also assists further exploration of the carrying capacity of relations, what they bring with them, anticipating a return to the issue of their critical potential in the conclusions.

Despite everything that gets turned around in anthropological understandings, the relation persists. Indeed moderns might make the stronger claim that it is inevitably there at moments of knowledge-making. It is a constant ally in the formulation of understandings, although its users are not always aware of the directions it edges them toward. The issue for social criticism is to know what can be done with this particular impetus.

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The Compulsion of Relations • 21

Notes

INTRODUCTIONS: THE COMPULSION OF RELATIONS

- 1 See Hirsch and Strathern (2004). The late Dr. Kalinoe OBE became Papua New Guinea's secretary for justice and attorney general. (He granted me permission to quote from his remarks.)
- 2 Pondering an Amerindian concept of the concept, Viveiros de Castro (e.g., [2009] 2014: 80) has challenged Euro-American anthropologists and philosophers in their endorsement of particular vectors of thought. We may wish to be aware how in this or that milieu concepts behave as, for instance, that of the imagined totality "society," for which Rio (2007: 2) finds a personified counterpart on the Melanesian island of Ambrym. The anthropomorphism (we know concepts are agents, but talk of behavior makes them sound like actors) implies some distance from the interests of those who postulate that concepts must be purified, defined, and given particular remits in order to aid investigation. The benefits of such precision are evident. Here the pursuit is after another kind of precision, namely attending to the circumstances under which concepts channel the course of exposition.
- 3 Duplex comes from a discussion (M. Strathern 2005) concerned with the persistence of divergent thinking summoned by relationality. There I dwelled on diverse modes, including "science's relation" (based on natural and cultural relations, as in the combination of discovery and invention) and "anthropology's relation" (epistemic and interpersonal relations, as combined in the concept of social relations), both usages belonging to what can be broadly called a naturalist cosmology.
- 4 Gell had already foreshortened the question to social relationships: "relationships between participants in social systems of various kinds" (1998: 4), with a strong sense of the social interactions implied. He had in mind extending the force of such relations in the form of "persons" to (the agency) of art objects. See Haraway ([1984] 1989: 55): "The concept of social relations must include the entire complex of interactions among people; objects, including books, buildings, and rocks; and animals" (cited in Noble 2016: 93).

- 5 For a general anthropological commentary, see Allen (2000). While Aristotle spoke of similarities and resemblances, and deployed comparison and analogies (Lloyd 1966), apparently these moves did not involve the notion of a third entity to which two entities under comparison (say) are jointly attached, as would be implied by the “dyadic or two place property, *being-similar-to*” (Brower 2015: 2, original emphasis). On the contrary, their similitude is explained by a pair of monadic properties or accidents inhering in each entity.
- 6 Although in medieval times the prepositions “betwixt” and “between” were well used in the vernacular, and there are fifteenth- and sixteenth-century usages of both “relations between” and “comparisons between,” their Latin counterpart was a rare novelty in scholastic philosophizing on relations (Henninger 1989). The discursive lift-off there — to borrow a phrase from Withington (2010) — of relations as relations-between-entities apparently came later. (Gasché [1999] expatiates on the trouble that the notion of “between” gave Martin Heidegger.) Locke sometimes talked of relations betwixt or between but generally deployed phrases that seem to the modern reader unnecessarily circumlocutionary (examples are given in M. Strathern 2016).
- 7 As the apogee of a naturalist cosmology (see below) where divisions between entities are presented as a matter of “spontaneous self-evidence” (Descola [2005] 2013: 199). Gasché (1999: 160) cites the role played by Leibniz in displacing pre-Enlightenment philosophizing on the very scope of exposition: when “the rule of a sovereign entity — God — is replaced by the rule of evident truth . . . [it is] the mind’s representation of facts,” rooted in the principle of sufficient reason, that comes into focus. Human knowledge becomes a principal problematic. Gasché is not here making an argument about relations, but perhaps allows us to. Is that displacement not accompanied by an investment in their expository power? In her general account of the Enlightenment, the historian Outram (1995: 48) represents some of the questions of the time in terms of relational issues, such as “the relationship of man to nature.”
- 8 All terms lead to other terms, he is saying, but relative terms show this explicitly (e.g., “weak” and “strong,” each implying the other). Leibniz’s overall argument was consonant with his objection to Isaac Newton’s idea of space as something in itself, within which other objects move; for Leibniz, space was simply the “order” (a synonym at the time for “relation”), in which celestial bodies move in respect to one another.
- 9 Evans-Pritchard’s (1962: 28) formal position explicitly drew on humanist, that is, pre-Enlightenment, notions of ordering. His declaration is worth remarking for the way it brings together the epistemic and interpersonal (see note 3): “Human societies . . . are seen as systems only because social life must have a pattern of some kind, inasmuch as man, being a reasonable creature, has to live in world in which his relations with those around him are ordered and intelligible.”
- 10 Sahlins is paraphrasing Leenhardt ([1947] 1979), who was also drawn to comment on the notion of participation. Faubion (2001: 2, 11, emphasis omitted) gives this a kinship cast in referring to kinship’s specific (though not unique) “constitution of intersubjectivity, of organized alterity,” through which the self is “a subject through its relations to others . . . [just as] others identify the self through their relation to it.”
- 11 “The relation is the irreducible minimum for all units in Marx’s conception of social

reality”; thus “the relation between capital and labor is treated . . . as a function of capital itself” — capital is a (social) relation (Ollman [1971] 1976: 14, 13). Ollman is noting Marx’s dual usage: relation as internal to a factor (such as capital) and as a connection between factors.

- 12 It is not just that there is disagreement about the relative force of external or internal relations, but that a thinker’s inclination on the matter colors the connotation of the terms. Those of an empiricist persuasion might speak of internal relations, as between “husband” and “wife,” where each individual is seemingly dependent on the other. However, an internal relation in an idealist and/or holistic account implies a partition of a whole, as in the perception of marital partners as part of the whole entity “marriage.” Descombes ([1996] 2014: 199) himself asserts that there can be no internal relation between individuals: “The very language in which we are invited to posit this internal relationship indicates that it is rather a connection that is exterior to the reality of both parties since it is, as we have just said, ‘between them.’”
- 13 The full passage reads: “Multiplicity is a system defined by a modality of relational synthesis different from a connection or conjunction of terms. Deleuze calls it a disjunctive synthesis or inclusive disjunction, a relational mode that does not have similarity or identity as its (formal or final) cause, but divergence or distance; another name for this relational mode is ‘becoming’” (Viveiros de Castro [2009] 2014: 112, emphasis omitted). Deleuze’s specific debt to Leibniz is noted.
- 14 Arriving at a concept of relationships as the ground of infinite being (2013: 170), he suggests that the Iatmul person embodies a pair of brothers, “an internal relation that orients the process of one forever becoming the other brother” (202). The “other brother,” he continues, is simultaneously external in a relational sense and the self-same brother with a similar internal configuration. (See further, chapter 4.)
- 15 As at moments in Locke’s work, for instance, and Ollman’s ([1971] 1976: 15).
- 16 See again Faubion (2001: 3): “The terms of kinship are inherently linking terms; . . . they render the self in and through its relation to certain others.” However, Radcliffe-Brown seems to have something more like external relations in mind (social structure as “actually existing relations” that “link together certain human beings” [(1940) 1952: 192]).
- 17 I am grateful to Debbora Battaglia for the relevance of these last two points here.
- 18 To offer one example, Frankenberg’s (1957) focus on the politics of a Welsh village sprang from then-burgeoning interests in African village politics, a comparative agenda carried through in his proposing a social anthropology for Britain (1982).
- 19 As Descombes’s ([1996] 2014: 157) discussion of Lévi-Strauss puts it, “Structural holism asks us to practice structural analysis as a form of holistic analysis, i.e., as a search for the relations that ground the system.” His own account develops the proposition that no social interaction takes place without a third term, that is, the taken-for-granted, instituted meanings of collective life. In gift exchange, the whole is given before its parts in that a “gift” is already following the conventions of “gift giving.”
- 20 In this work he is concerned to get rid of the misconception that there is any “relation” between “the material” and “the social world,” because the very division of them is an artifact (Latour 2005: 75–76), an exercise that also redefines the connota-

tions of “the social” (108–109). That said, the whole “actor network” enterprise may be understood by Anglophone commentators as intensely relational (e.g., Canda et al. 2015b: 16; Jensen and Winthereik 2013: 29; Walford 2017: 66).

- 21 The oppositional mode of connection/disconnection is not at all the same as the disjunctive synthesis noted above, the significance of which will become apparent in due course.
- 22 Wagner (2011: 161). Explicitness about either present or absent relations can indicate relational thinking; however, an enacted relation (anthropologist-speaking) emptied of engagement or attachment may be rendered as a “non-relation” in the English vernacular.
- 23 Both volumes point to a wave of twenty-first-century arguments about the limits of the relation as an anthropological analytic. With shifts in the connotations of relation, the terms around it also shift. Thus the individual person, as a logical concept always relationally constructed with respect to other concepts, may be newly identified as a relational configuration socially speaking, in which individualism is a knowing strategy (see, e.g., Hastrup 2002).
- 24 And thus already differentiated. Rabinow is experimenting with a toolkit of concepts to advance inquiry in the human sciences, with attention to “the ways that information is given narrative and conceptual form, and how this knowledge fits into a conduct of life” (2003: 2). Under changing conditions of narration, concepts must be subject to constant rethinking.
- 25 Drawing from the manner in which synthetic biology can change the functionality of cells through changing their constituent medium, Rabinow and Bennett (2008, 2012) speak of remediation.
- 26 She objects generally to the vocabulary of mediation (Barad 2007: 231). “Intra-action” supersedes the conventional “interaction,” which implies relations “between” preexisting entities.
- 27 “Knowing is a material practice, a specific engagement of the world where part of the world becomes differentially intelligible to another part of the world” (Barad 2007: 342). Difference is understood as meaningful, neither “meaning” nor “intelligibility” being human-based notions but matters of differential responsiveness (2007: 335). (Potential counterparts come to mind, such as Kohn 2013, but one could almost read this as a latter-day rewriting of Wagner 1986.)
- 28 In her view, the former would be a (representationalist) “reflection”; after Haraway, her preferred methodology is diffraction, a material entanglement (2007: 88) that she distances from analogy on the grounds that analogies presuppose already-differentiated elements. However, there are modes of anthropological cross-cultural comparison that deploy analogy precisely as a way of bringing diffraction into play: running sets of material-discursive practices through each other to produce differentials.

I. EXPERIMENTATIONS, ENGLISH AND OTHERWISE

- 1 See, for example, James (2003: 53–54), following Allen’s (2000: 91–99) exposition of the philosopher Charles Renouvier (Émile Durkheim’s “educator”). In Renouvier’s list of basic categories of conceptual organization or understanding, as they were de-